These Parallel Lives

by Woodentrain

Summary

Oliver always knew that he was gay. Always. It's made his life complicated, but he has only one regret- Elio. When a sudden change in his circumstances grants him a second chance to live a different life, will he be able to explain himself to Elio? Or is it already too late? Can he reconcile the parallel lives they've both lived for twenty years?

Notes

Please read the tags. Domestic violence, including towards children, is implied/referenced. Also if you consider blow jobs between 15-year-olds to be underage, then consider yourself warned for that.
1978- Closet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oliver was fifteen when the maid caught him in a linen closet with his cock in Justin Bradley's mouth. This, in itself, might not have been so bad. The interruption was a shame, of course, because Justin gave great head, and also somewhat irritating because Oliver had already sucked him off and Justin was returning the favour. Still- Oliver could have lived with missing out on that. But it all went to hell because Oliver's mother was hot on the maid's heels, barking out instructions.

"Victoria. Make up the second guest room for the senator and his wife, and then find-"

Silence.

Justin wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and made a hasty, wordless exit, going to rejoin the party downstairs, leaving Oliver to tuck himself back into his pants and deal with the consequences.

His mother addressed Victoria first. "You will speak of this to no-one. Do you understand? If I hear of anyone knowing of this, any gossip, even the faintest whisper, I will fire you so quickly you won't know what's hit you. Now go make up those beds."

The irony of her words made Oliver want to laugh. Everyone always knew what had hit them in this house, because it was always Oliver's father. Always.

"Yes, Mrs Williams."

"And then go downstairs and tell Mr Williams that Oliver has unfortunately developed a migraine and has gone to rest in his room."

"Of course."

Victoria took an armload of sheets and scurried off down the hallway. Oliver's mother turned her attention on him.

"To your room. Now. And stay there. Close the curtains. Remember you're sick."

"I'm not-"

"You are now. I'll deal with you tomorrow, when the guests are gone. Don't let me see you until then."

So Oliver stayed in his room. Since he had his own bathroom, there was no need to leave at all. Victoria brought him breakfast in the morning. She put the tray on his desk and didn't meet his eye. The moment she had told Oliver's father that he was sick in his room was the moment when she became complicit in keeping his secret. She couldn't tell anyone now, because if Oliver's father found out that she had known and not told him immediately, then he'd be livid. Victoria was a sensible enough girl to be terrified of Mr Williams, who certainly wasn't above hitting the staff when it suited him. Oliver often wondered why any of them stayed.

Other than that he saw nobody. It was almost lunch time before there was a knock on his door.
"Your sister is here to speak to you, Oliver. She's in your mother's sitting room, and would like to see you now."

Oliver didn't have to ask which sister, because he knew that only one of them would summon him like this. And he knew, immediately, that that was a bad sign, a really bad sign. If his mother had asked Susan to come over and speak to him, he was really in big trouble.

He knocked on the sitting room door and went in. Susan was sitting there, all high heels and lipstick and perfectly sculpted hair, perfectly intimidating. Oliver was determined not to succumb to her tactics, and decided that starting with confident impudence was a good defensive strategy.

He plastered on his most arrogant smile. "Hello, Susan. This is a lovely surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit? How are Steven and the children?"

"Sit down, Oliver. Don't get cocky with me. I'm here to talk about you."

"Well, I'm flattered. It's nice that somebody wants to talk about me, for once. I'm very well, thank you for asking."

Susan's exasperation was clear. "I don't have time for this nonsense. I have more important things to do. I've only come here because mom is too upset to deal with you herself. She's taken to her room and won't come out. She told dad she has a headache."

Oliver couldn't help but laugh at that. "She probably caught it from me. I had a migraine yesterday, haven't you heard?"

"Oh, I've heard all about yesterday. What were you thinking? Are you crazy?" she hissed, eyes filled with anger.

"I was thinking that it was some harmless fun."

"It wouldn't have been harmless if dad had found out. Do you have any idea what he'd do to you?"

Oliver scrubbed a hand through his hair, blond strands hanging messy over his eyes. He should get a haircut.

"Oliver! Are you even listening to me, Oliver? Honestly, I don't know what to do with you. You're a disgrace, you know that?"

Of course he knew that. He might as well tell her the truth, get it out there.

"I'm sorry, Susan. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I think I'm gay."

Her face betrayed no hint of emotion, as she tapped her perfectly manicured fingernails on the desk. "Well, I suggest you think again."

"I can't- I don't think it works like that. You think I wanted this?"

"I don't care how you think it works. I'll tell you how it works. You should know this already. You're going to find a nice girl, a nice Jewish girl, and you're going to marry her, and have lots of nice babies. What's difficult to understand about that?"

"What if I don't want to do that?"

"Nobody's asking if you want to do that. It's what's going to happen. And until then, you're going to keep your dick in your pants. You've done your experimenting, and now it's over. No more. Do
"You don't have to like it. You just have to understand what's expected of you. You may be the youngest, and you might think that dad doesn't much care what you do, but you're wrong. What you do still reflects on him, on this whole family."

"Oh, I think I understand that." Oliver did. He understood that all too well.

"Good. You may go. Though I suggest you stay in your room a for while longer, at least until the rest of the guests have left."

Oliver nodded and went back to his room.

Oliver was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling, when someone knocked on his door.

"Ollie? It's me. Can I come in?"

"I guess so."

Jessica sat on the edge of his bed and stroked his hair.

"What are you doing here, Jess?"

"I called mom, to catch up with her, and ask her how the party went. She started ranting and crying about you. I thought I should come and see if you're okay. What were you thinking, Ollie? Why would you do something like that in the house? I can’t believe you’d be so stupid."

Oliver adored Jessica. She was twelve years older than him, and had always loved to mother him. She was the one who held his hand and dried his tears when nobody else seemed to care. His father—well, he didn't care about little boys, or children at all. And his mother was too busy entertaining, being a perfect wife, trying to keep his father happy. She'd left Oliver's care to the nanny, who had looked after all of his siblings before him and was getting too old to deal with such a small child again.

"I- I don’t know why." He's come out to one sister today, he might as well make it two. "Jess, I don’t like girls. At all. I never have. I’m pretty sure I’m gay."

"Oh, Ollie. You're too young to know that. You might think so now, but it's probably just a phase. Let's hope so, because aside from that fact that you know it’s wrong, Susan was right- dad won’t let you be. So just don’t. If dad finds out there’ll be nothing I can do for you. Please, Ollie. For mom, for yourself, for all of us. Can you try just… not being gay?"

"I don’t think it works like that, Jess."

"You’ll never know if you don’t give it a try. Date a few girls. Sleep with them if you like, as long as you don't get them pregnant. I’m sure you’ll find you like it."

Oliver knows he looks skeptical.

"Ollie. I know you think you don't want to do that. But you can’t be like this." Her voice started to wobble, betraying the emotion behind it. "Dad just won't tolerate it. If he finds out that you’ve done those things with boys he will try to beat it out of you, and if that doesn’t work, he’ll send you away.
He must never find out. Oliver—she’s crying now—“you cannot let him find out. You cannot be locked up in an institution—because have no doubt, that is what will happen, and there will be nothing you or I can do to stop it”.

Oliver knew that this was true. Mostly his father took out his anger on his mother, but Oliver had been on the receiving end of his father’s temper on more than one occasion. When that happened his mother cried, and put ice packs on his face, and kept him off school until the bruises were gone.

Oliver swallowed a lump in his throat, determined not to cry. This whole episode had already brought his masculinity into question, and he didn’t want to add fuel to the fire. “What if I can’t stop this? What if—”

“Oliver, no. I don’t want to hear this. I love you, and I want to make this right, but you have to keep it to yourself. If you can’t stop this, you have to at least refrain from indulging while you’re under this roof, in this town. People talk, you know that. Victoria won’t, but other people’s staff might, if you get caught out again. When you go to college, when you’re far away from here, then things will be different. But I’m sure you’ll feel differently by then anyway.”

Oliver knew he would never feel different. Not once, ever, had he felt anything towards girls which was anything like what he felt about boys. But he stayed silent.

“In the meantime, date some girls. I understand now why you never have, but you should. Make sure dad can never suspect. I don’t care what you do or don’t do with them, but date them and make them think you want to be with them.”

Oliver nodded. There was nothing to say, after all.

“No more, Oliver. Tell me you understand how important this is. Please.”

He nods again.

None of this was particularly helpful advice, but Oliver listened, and it didn’t happen again. Oliver’s sisters had struck terror into him, and he hardly dared even look at boys again for a while. He dated girls, and kissed them, and it was mostly nice enough even though it didn’t make him feel anything. The girls liked him because he never pushed them for more. Of course, they thought that it was because he was a gentleman, that he respected them. No-one suspected that Oliver, the ever-smiling, all-American golden boy, just wasn’t interested.

He kept his promise to his sisters, at least until he learned to drive and his father bought him a car, which gave him a lot more freedom. He got a job, which was a small act of rebellion against his father, who didn’t want him to work—at least at first. He grudgingly accepted it, because he had to agree that it showed initiative and he thought it would probably be character building. Oliver loved not being dependant on his father for money.

Justin was still keen to spend time with him, and they spent many a pleasant evening driving out to somewhere secluded and fooling around in the back seat of Oliver’s car. They were careful to ignore each other in public, and they never risked meeting at home. Oliver liked him—a lot, actually—but they weren’t boyfriends, because that wasn’t really an option, and Oliver was careful not to develop any complicated feelings. Most importantly, he made sure his father would never find out.

Oliver’s father was by far the wealthiest and most influential man in their small town in Connecticut.
His father’s business, inherited from his father and his father’s father before him, had provided him with not just money, but power and influence, which extended well beyond their town and, indeed, well beyond the state. His parents’ parties were attended by politicians and judges and industrialists. There was talk of his father entering politics. Oliver privately thought that the last thing his father needed was more power.

Oliver was the fifth child, the youngest - an afterthought, perhaps, or an accident. His oldest brother James, named for their father, already well into his thirties and his father’s pride and joy, was preparing to take over the family business. The middle brother, Daniel, had also worked for him since leaving college. So although his father would have been happy, more than happy, for Oliver to work with him too, there was no real pressure for him to do so. As long as he stayed out of trouble, he was mostly left to his own devices, which suited him just fine.

So Oliver kept his head down, and worked hard at school, and brought pretty girls who had wealthy fathers to his parents' parties. His father was happy with him - or at least indifferent to him, which was really as happy as he ever seemed likely to be with anything Oliver did. At the start of his senior year in high school, his father summoned him to his study to talk about college.

"I presume you'll follow in your brothers' footsteps, and mine. Getting accepted won't be a problem, so you don't need to worry much about the applications, and-"

"I want to study classics. I want to go to Harvard," blurted Oliver. He shrank down in his seat, amazed by his own bravery and stupidity. He was aware that this discussion could go one of two ways, depending on his father's mood. His father might be angry at Oliver's insolence, or he might be indulgent to his youngest son. It was early in the day and the decanter of scotch was still on the mantel instead of on his desk, which was a good sign - he was probably sober, at least.

Nevertheless, Oliver was braced for an angry tirade, which might possibly end in violence, and he felt himself almost sag with relief when his father chuckled amiably. "You've always been a strange one, Oliver. Who would have thought? Well, I can see some advantages to having someone in the family with a more arts-based education. I can think of some people who are impressed by that sort of thing. If you're sure that's what you want, I'll see what I can do."

And so his father pulled some strings to get him into Harvard. Oliver was a little disappointed that he would never know whether he would have got in under his own merits, but the outcome was the same anyway, and in the fall of 1981 he left for college.

Chapter End Notes

This is going to get more interesting when Elio makes an appearance in the next chapter!
This may go a while between updates because this is a busy time of year for me. I'll post progress updates on my tumblr - you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
(If anyone is also reading Finding the Stars, don't worry! The final chapter is well on its way to being finished.)
Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio are back in B. together for the first time in twenty years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Being back in B. is strange, so strange, after all these years. The short visit he made with his family, which must have been, what- nine years ago now? Has it really been that long? Well, that doesn’t count because Elio wasn’t there, and without him it simply wasn’t the same place. Oliver loved being there of course- loved showing off his boys to the Perlmans- but it felt as though he was somewhere that looked and sounded and smelled just the same but was somehow fundamentally different. As, of course, it was, because it was always Elio who made this place what it is. So really? It’s almost twenty years since he was last here. Half a lifetime.

But now Oliver is back, and Elio’s here too.

Oliver feels the years fall away from them, as though the last time they were here together was just yesterday. But they’re both different people now. Elio is a little taller, a little broader in the shoulders, probably a little hairier if the two days’ worth of stubble is anything to go by. And Oliver, despite the fact that he still runs almost every day, knows that he’s far less toned, that his hair is shot through with grey, and his skin looks every bit of its 44 years. That, at least, is partly due to his privileged childhood- whole summers spent at the beach house in the Hamptons, back in a time when people let their children spend all day, every day out in the sun without worrying about sunscreen, because nobody really knew any better.

Different physically, then. But also different emotionally. It’s suddenly clear to Oliver, in a way it never has been before, that they were both just boys, scarcely more than children twenty years ago. Elio especially, of course, but himself too. They’re of a different generation now. Two men, sitting out on the terrace talking like the adults they are. The wine he’s sipping on while they wait for lunch to be served would have made him feel light and fuzzy twenty years ago, but will only serve to make him sleepy now. If they stay here and chat after lunch, he’ll struggle to stay awake.

But some things don’t change. The boys are still there- so close that in the silences Oliver can hear their whispers. They’re lurking just under the surface, waiting to be set free.

“You want to swim this afternoon? It’s probably going to get even hotter.”

Elio’s question snaps Oliver out of his reverie. He grins, happy about the reminder of how things used to be. “Oh, I shouldn’t. I didn’t bring swimming trunks, and I’m too old to strip down to my underwear and jump in the pool.”

Elio laughs. “You’re never too old for that- at least, I don’t intend on ever being too old for that. Remember that day when my dad drove us down the coast to meet that stuffy old colleague of his? I forget his name, now, but we suffered through the most awful lunch while the two of them discussed work. But then on way home we stopped off at that little bay, do you remember? Through some trees, set just back from the road. And we all stripped to our boxers and went swimming. Even
“That’s true. Of course I remember. But I’m not like your dad. He was remarkable in a way I couldn’t even pretend to be. It’s a no, I’m afraid.” Oliver’s smile is wry and he swirls his wine around in the glass. He doesn’t know why he’s suddenly strangely embarrassed about his body. Elio once knew it intimately, after all.

“Suit yourself, Cauboi.” Elio smiles back, and offers a cigarette packet to Oliver.

“Thanks, but I don’t any more. Those things’ll kill you, you know.”

Elio lights his own, and laughs again. “Everyone knows that. And I only smoke when I’m here in the summer. The rest of the year? Not at all.”

“Really? You can do that, then just stop when you go home? Quitting those things is hard. I couldn’t do it once a year. Don’t you want to just pick one up every time you have a bad day?”

“Oh, it’s not so hard. I just have one, maybe two a day. I let myself buy one packet, and once they’re gone they’re gone.”

“Huh. Well, in that case, I’m not only impressed by your willpower but honoured that you’ve offered to share. But I know myself. If I had one that would be it, I’d be hooked all over again. I’d be going to the duty free on the way home and taking home a carton of 400.”

“And your wife probably wouldn’t like that?” Elio’s almost smirking, but it’s gentle, teasing, free of malice. Oliver smiles back.

“She would not, no. Which is fair. I can’t say I blame her for that.”

This is a good opening. Elio has brought up the topic, after all. He should say something now. Elio. About my wife…

There’s a long silence, while Oliver tries to work up the nerve- but he somehow can’t bring himself to risk ruining such a beautiful day. It might well be ruined when he speaks- because he has no idea how Elio will react to what he has to say. Today is going so well and he’s just so happy, happier than he’s felt in a very long time. He had no idea that being back here could make him feel like this, and he knows he wants to hold on to it while he can.

So he remains silent. And then Annella comes out of the house to join them, so the conversation takes a different turn. The relief he feels as this reprieve makes him feel like a coward. He should have just said it.

He’ll have to do it later.

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It’s a good afternoon. The sun shines and makes the whole place seem untouched by time. On the surface so little has changed. But when Oliver looks more closely? Well, the trees in the orchard have grown, and there’s a bigger TV in the living room. And there’s wi-fi in the villa now, explains Elio as he hooks up Oliver's laptop so he can check for e-mails about his meeting tomorrow.

Annella lives here full time now, looked after by her sister who moved in after getting divorced. Oliver peeked around the door into the tiny bedroom where Elio slept during that summer twenty years ago, so he knows that it’s been redecorated and now has brightly coloured curtains and bunk beds for when Annella’s sister’s grandchildren come to stay.
Oliver’s mind keeps coming back to what he needs to tell Elio. He’s known for some time now that he would have to make this visit and have the conversation that he has, as yet, failed to start. The fact that he has to go to Menton is convenient, but it’s not really the reason why he’s here- it’s merely the reason why this visit is happening at this particular moment in time.

But now he’s here he just can’t do it. The bubble he finds himself in is so beautiful and already so fragile- he can feel its surface thinning with every moment- and he can’t bear to burst it by saying what he came here to say. The end of the bubble would spell the end of this small, quiet thing he can sense building between himself and Elio. A thing that never really went away, long dormant in both of them.

They talk. About work, of course. And the books they’ve read, the plays they’ve seen, the things they’ve learned. But there’s no escaping the sense that there are topics they’re avoiding. Elio doesn’t ask about Oliver’s family, beyond the obligatory questions about his children. It’s the polite, vague interest of someone who doesn’t have children of their own and who doesn’t share the desire parents seem to have to talk about their offspring to fill in gaps in the conversation. It’s strange to Oliver, because his existence has revolved around his children for seventeen years now, and the people who surround him in his everyday life are mostly parents, too. Apart from the people he works with, his friends are other fathers with children a similar age to his own. Oliver has to check himself to stop from instinctively bringing the focus back onto the boys. It’s refreshing and oddly liberating to be around someone who’s not interested in children, because sometimes it’s hard to remember that he himself has a life outside of being a parent.

Oliver doesn’t ask about Elio’s personal life. He tells himself that it’s none of his business, but he knows, really, that he simply doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t want to think about Elio existing outside of the here and now, doesn’t want to think about all the things that might mean.

As dusk falls, the stars come out and there’s something almost magical in the air.

They walk down to the shore and stand by the water’s edge. The sea is as flat as a millpond tonight, scarcely a wave apart from the tiny breakers at the water’s edge. The moon reflects on it, big and bright, almost yellow. The only sound is the soft shush of the pebbles as they’re pushed up the beach by the swash, and pulled down again by gravity in a soothing rhythm that makes Oliver breathe more freely.

“You’re sure you don’t want to swim? It’s not too late. I can run back up to the house and bring some towels. You know I won’t peek.” Elio’s teasing, eyes sparkling with mirth.

“No. Thank you. I don’t mind if you want to go swim, though. I’m an old man, I’d be happy to just sit and stare at the ocean.”

“Oh, I can swim every day. You’re only here tonight. I’d rather be here with you.” It’s the closest either of them have come to acknowledging that there’s something they still, just maybe, might mean to each other.

“Doesn’t mean we have to stay out of the water, though,” says Oliver, taking off his shoes and walking toward the sea.

Elio moves to copy him. “We can walk along the shore a little? But I think the tide’s coming in. Leave your shoes up there, unless you want to come back and find them wet.”

This, too, would be a good time to talk. With just the two of them and the ocean and the quiet of the night. For Oliver to say what he came here to say. But now he’s here, he wonders whether he should say it at all.
So they walk in silence, side-by-side. If they were much closer they’d be touching. If Oliver moved his left hand an inch or so, their hands would brush together. If he made a decisive move, they’d be holding hands, and wouldn’t that be wonderful?

It’s as though Elio can read his mind, because he leans towards Oliver and bumps his shoulder with his own, companionable, with a breathy laugh. “No, Oliver. Just- no.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” They keep walking.

Maybe Oliver won’t tell him after all. Maybe he’ll just keep this day locked safely away in its glowing, golden bubble of perfection.

It’s been better than anything Oliver dreamed it could be.

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But he can’t sleep. However much he wants to, and he does want to, more than he ever thought possible- Oliver simply can’t leave without saying what he came to say. He knocks on Elio’s door and waits for his sleepy “mmmm?” before entering. It’s a room he’s never seen before- formerly a guest room, he supposes. He stands just inside the doorway, unable to bring himself to go further.

“Oliver?” Elio rubs his eyes and props himself up on his elbows. “What’s wrong? What time is it?”

He looks confused- which makes sense, because Oliver just woke him up after all.

“Elio. I need to talk to you.”

“You do?” He yawns. “Does it have to be right now?”

“Um. Yes. If you don’t mind.”

Elio just looks at him, wide eyed and hair mussed from sleep in a way Oliver remembers all too well.

Oliver’s still standing in the doorway.

“Oh. Okay. Can we go downstairs?”

“Sure.” Oliver nods.

“You’ll have to give me a minute.” He hesitates. “I sleep naked.”

“Oh. Oh, sorry, I’ll—”

“Go make coffee, maybe? If this is important enough to discuss at…” Elio glances at the clock behind him, “4.18 AM, then it had best be done over coffee.”

So Oliver heads downstairs and puts the kettle on to boil. He doesn’t really know his way around the kitchen here at all, which is pretty shameful now that he stops to think about it. He lived here for six weeks- did he really never even make a cup of coffee in all that time? Was he really waited on hand and foot, without once pausing to think about it? He thinks about it now, because he thinks about things like that pretty often now. He’s finding that as he gets older his privilege weighs more heavily on his shoulders.

Elio soon appears in sweatpants and a t-shirt, barefoot and yawning as he attempts to get his hair to
lie flat. He gently brushes Oliver aside and motions toward the table. “Here. Let me.”

Oliver sits down and lets Elio take charge, until they’re sitting opposite one another with steaming mugs on the table in front of them.

“So. What’s on your mind?” He waits for a moment, and a flicker of concern passes over his face. “Should I be worried?”

“No. Um, no. I don’t think so.” There’s a long pause. Oliver breathes deeply and lets it out, but he’s still no closer to finding the words he needs. He looks at Elio as though to implore him to be the one to speak, but of course he can’t, because he doesn’t know what’s happening.

“Oliver? What’s wrong? I have to admit, you’re scaring me a little.”

“It’s just… I don’t know how to say this. How to explain it. What you’re going to think of it—me—when I’m done.”

“Oh… well now I’m really worried. Whatever it is, just say it.”

“Right. Okay. Well, um, my father died a little while ago.”

“I know. Everyone knows that James Williams died. It was in the news. I’m sorry for your loss. I know how awful it is to lose your father so suddenly.” He goes on, gentle and tentative. “But surely that’s not what you wanted to tell me?”

“Don’t be sorry. It’s no loss. The world’s a better place without him. My world, certainly, is much improved by the fact that that old bastard’s not in it any more. He wasn’t— I want to say he wasn’t a nice person, but that seems like such an understatement. He was… awful. Horrible.”

Elio’s eyes are wide. “I sort of knew you had issues with him, but… wow. I can’t imagine what things must have been like for you, to make you feel that way about the loss of a parent.”

“I’m sorry. It’s insensitive of me, given what you’ve been through. I know I had no right, no right to grieve for him, really, but I cried for a week when I heard your father died. I can’t imagine what it did to you and your mom.”

“We’re not here to talk about that now. Nor did you wake me up in the middle of the night because you wanted to tell me that your father died. So what is it? If you’ll forgive me for being blunt—let’s get to the point.”

“God. This is way harder than I thought it would be. Okay. I’m just going to say it.” He takes a deep breath and exhales, and it seems so loud in the quiet of the night. He still doesn’t speak.

“You’re still scaring me a bit. Just say it.”

“Elio— I’m gay.”

Elio looks at him, quizzical. “…and?”

“And nothing. I guess. I just…” Oliver shrugs. He’s unsure now, unsure about what’s supposed to happen next, unsure about why he decided to tell Elio in the first place. Why it seemed so important. It shouldn’t feel so strange—he’s come out to a lot of people over the past few months, and Elio, of all people, should have been easy.

“That’s it? That’s all? This is the big revelation you woke me up for?” Oliver nods, because it’s sort
of true, and waits for Elio to make the next move, simply because he doesn’t know what else to say.

There’s a sudden shift in the air between them as the perfect bubble of the day bursts, disappearing into nothingness as it finally evaporates, and Elio laughs, a peculiar bitterness to it. “Oh. I get it. It is supposed to be a big revelation. Am I supposed to be surprised? Because I, of all people, sort of suspected that you might be. I’ve suspected for twenty years. You know, a guy sticking his cock in your ass can be a clue that he’s gay.”

Oliver says nothing. He just looks at Elio and picks nervously at an uneven edge on his thumbnail.

“Is that not what you expected me to say, Oliver? Okay, okay. Just give me a moment. Let me try again.” Elio takes a sip of his coffee. Eyes wide in mock surprise, he spits it over the table in a cartoonish parody of shock, before his hand goes to cover his mouth. “Oh my god, Oliver. Are you kidding? I had no idea! This is… wow.” He’s shaking his head. “I can’t believe it. I did not see this coming. Thank you so much for telling me, I feel flattered that you-“

“Elio. Don’t be like this. Please.” Oliver cuts in, his irritation plain in his voice.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Oliver. Why are you telling me this? Why now?” Elio meets his eyes with a gaze that looks as though he’s trying to cut right into the darkest corners of his brain.

“I… I’m not sure, really. I wanted you to know. It’s complicated. And why now? Well, like I said, my father died. And that changes things.”

“I’m sorry, Oliver, but I still don’t understand. It doesn’t change anything for me. And- god, what about your wife? Does she know?”

"Yeah. She knows, Elio. My wife knows. She knew from the start, from before we even started dating."

"And she's okay with that? Why on earth did she marry you?"

"For the same reasons that I married her. Because it was a good decision for both of us. Because we loved each other. Still do. But probably not like you think.” And now here he is, finally about to get to the point. There’s no space left for thinking about it or time for taking yet another deep breath. The words spill out unchecked.

“Elio. My wife is gay, too.”

Elio’s jaw drops, and his whole body seems to visibly deflate as his brain catches up with Oliver’s words.

“Oh.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't be too hard on Elio. He's acting like a dick, but he's got his reasons.

I have agonised over the editing of this for way too long, so here it is. Let me know what you think!
This may start to update a bit more now that Finding the Stars is finished, but I'm not promising anything.

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
1981- Luck

Chapter Summary

Oliver goes to college and enjoys being free from his father's tyranny.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At college Oliver was happy, for the first time he could remember. Finally he was free from the constant tension of his home, where everyone lived under a dark cloud, walking on eggshells, wondering about when and why his father would snap and who would be next to face his anger.

The unpredictability was the worst thing. Sometimes he was jovial and relaxed and nothing seemed to bother him. But some seemingly tiny thing might put him in a bad mood. Something that happened at work. Something that happened at home. Or something that didn’t happen- like the time when a maid forgot the sugar bowl when she took his afternoon coffee to his study. On another day he might have smiled and said it wasn’t a problem, but it wasn’t one of those days. Oliver met her in the hallway, crying, nursing the wrist which had been sprained when he grabbed it, and carrying a tray covered in pieces of broken crockery.

She got a nice bonus in her pay packet that month, and the incident was never spoken of.

He was at his most unpredictable when he was drunk, but it wasn’t as simple as that. Oliver had read a lot of books, and he knew what an alcoholic parent was supposed to be like- in fiction, at least. Stories would have him believe that a man like his father should be mean and violent when drunk but pleasant and normal when sober, full of promises that whatever he’d done while drunk wouldn’t happen again. Oliver thought that you were only supposed to have to worry about being hurt or hit or screamed at when he was drunk. And, yes, drink generally made him meaner. Often he seemed to be more easily angered when drunk- but not necessarily. Staying away from him when he’d been drinking wasn’t enough to be safe. Some of his worst rages happened when he was completely sober, and sometimes he could be at kindest and most good-humoured when drunk.

Never knowing what to expect made things so much more difficult. But James wasn’t so much an abusive alcoholic as a generally awful man who happened to be an alcoholic too.

Things were especially difficult for Oliver because he had always been so eager to please. It probably came with the territory of having four older, accomplished siblings. He wanted badly to be noticed and do well, especially in his father’s eyes. And the more his father was displeased with him, the more desperately Oliver wanted to impress him. He craved the rare words of praise. Well done, son. Or once, just once, I’m proud of you. He knew he was an almost constant disappointment, but he lived for the words of approval that almost never came.

***

But college was different. For one thing, being gay at Harvard was a very different experience to being gay in high school in a small town. College gave Oliver the freedom he’d never had at home, and he did things he’d never have dared to do before. Homophobia was there and it was noticeable, sometimes very much so, but Harvard was a much more tolerant place than society in general. While
Oliver certainly didn’t shout his sexuality from the rooftops, neither did he have to hide it as carefully as he had done before.

Still. His father cast a long shadow, and Oliver was accustomed to fear. Whilst no longer secretive, as such, he was still very cautious.

He might have remained cautious, but fate sent him Simon. In Simon, Oliver had quickly found the sort of friend most freshmen only dreamed of finding in their roommate. Simon’s family visited often and Oliver was amazed to discover that there were whole families of people out there who were kind and patient and open-minded. Simon was just like them. In addition, he was exceptionally good at reading people. Oliver knew this, but he was still surprised and more than a little dismayed when, half way through their first semester, Simon brought up the subject of Oliver’s sexuality.

Simon was lounging on his bed, reading a magazine. “Oliver? Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. Whatever.” Oliver was barely paying attention, sitting at his desk with his back to Simon.

“Something kind of personal?”

“I guess. I mean- you can’t make me answer it.” Oliver still wasn’t worried, and still didn’t turn around from the notes he was reading.

“No. I can’t make you. And you know I wouldn’t make you anyway. It’s just- I’ve been wondering.” Oliver heard the rustle of the magazine being dropped to the bed. “Look- don’t be mad at me, I might be way off the mark here, but- Oliver, are you gay?”

Oliver froze. “What? I- why would you ask that?” He was relieved that he wasn’t facing Simon, because he knew his expression would be a dead giveaway.

“It’s just- this is going to sound so dumb, but- there’s something about you that reminds me of my uncle. My mom’s gay brother.”

Oliver laughed, though he knew it didn’t sound quite right. “That’s stupid. Is that all? That’s not very much to go on, to make assumptions about someone’s sexuality.”

“Yeah,” Simon’s voice was unusually gentle, “but if I wasn’t convinced before, I might be convinced now that I’ve asked outright and you haven’t denied it.”

Oliver felt himself flush. He still hadn’t turned around, but he felt Simon’s hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business anyway. I just- look, it’s okay, you know? I don’t mind. And I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Oliver took a deep breath. “Okay. Yes. I, um... yes. I suppose so.” As soon as he uttered the words, panic set in. “Fuck. I can’t believe I told you that. Please don’t tell anyone.”

Oliver finally turned around, and Simon sat back down on his bed, looking at him.

“Of course not. I mean- you’re not out, right?” Oliver shook his head. “I probably shouldn’t have asked, but I felt as though things are kind of awkward sometimes. When I get talking about girls. And I didn’t want you to feel weird about it, like you have to pretend.”

“Nobody knows. Well, I tried to tell my sisters, and my mom saw something, once, but- they all thought it was just a phase. And my dad can’t find out. Please. He just can’t.” Oliver took another deep breath, determined not to cry.
“Hey. Hey, it’s okay. It really is. Like I said- I don’t care if you’re gay, and I’m not going to tell anyone.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Though…” Simon looked at him slyly now. “I guess you’re not getting laid, right? We should get to work on that. I mean- there are plenty of gay guys around here.”

He must have registered Oliver’s unease, because he laughed. “And I’m not one of them. I’m not coming on to you. I’m just saying- you’re at college! You’re supposed to be experimenting, and finding yourself, and having fun. Anyway. Leave it all to me.”

So Oliver’s first experience of a gay club was with his straight roommate. “Simon? Are you sure about this? I’m not sure most straight guys would want to go to a gay club.”

“Well, no, probably not. I mean- I know I’m not exactly going to pick up a girl there. I’m coming along to offer moral support. I’m not scared of gay people, Oliver. I don’t think that hanging around gay men is going to somehow make me gay too. Not that being gay would be a bad thing. Well, it would, in some ways. It would be sort of scary. It can’t be easy. But you’d know all about that. Still, what’s the worst that could happen? If some guy hits on me I can just say I’m taken. Or whatever. Maybe I should just say I’m straight. Should I say that? But maybe they’d throw me out for being straight. Do they do that? Or they’d think I was just being weird and defensive. Nah, maybe I’ll stick with-“

Simon always babbles when he’s been drinking, so Oliver interrupted. “You’re talking too much. How many beers did you have, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter. C’mon, let’s go. Let’s go find you a pretty boy. Or, I don’t know, a big, hairy man? If that’s more your thing. Whatever you like. What are you looking for in a man, anyway?”

“Shut up, Simon.”

***

Oliver thanked his lucky stars, daily, for Simon. He knew that he was lucky to have someone who would even tolerate a gay roommate, let alone someone who was completely accepting. And finding someone comfortable enough in his own skin to accompany Oliver to gay bars and clubs was even less likely. Especially as Oliver, who was gay, wouldn’t have dared to go there himself.

He was tremendously lucky to have a friend like Simon. But then, perhaps, Oliver was due a bit of good luck- not that he saw it that way. Most people wouldn’t have, because it looked, from the outside, as though Oliver had had a charmed life. When he thought about his problems he found it hard to like himself, hard to see himself as anything other than a poor little rich boy, whinging at the unfairness of it all when other people had real problems to contend with.

But Oliver became more confident as time went on. At first the things he saw when Simon dragged him out to bars made him feel like a hopeless small-town boy, but he loved being around other people who were like him. He was eventually happy to go out on his own, to drink and dance (badly) and kiss, and sometimes, in dark corners, to do other things.

Oliver lost his virginity to a much older man who he met in a bar towards the end of his first year at college. He was attractive and sweet and he made Oliver laugh. When he invited Oliver back to his apartment, Oliver enthusiastically agreed. When he touched Oliver in a way that was new to him, when he pulled a condom out of the nightstand drawer, when he must have sensed some hesitation in
Oliver, he asked, breathless, “You’ve done this before?”


“You’re sure this is okay?”

Oliver nodded again. “Definitely.”

And it was. It wasn’t exactly how he’d thought it would feel, but it some ways it was better than he expected, and mostly he was just glad to have got his first time over and done with. Afterwards Oliver was lying in the dark, half-asleep and enjoying the sensation of fingers brushing his chest. “Oliver?” Quiet and tentative. “You could have told me it was your first time, you know.”

Oliver tensed. “Sorry. I know, I shouldn’t have lied, I just-”

“No need to apologise. You-“ he sighed. “You could have said. That’s all. You didn’t need to pretend it wasn’t. What did you think would happen?”

“I don’t know. I thought you’d... I don’t know.” Oliver thought for a moment. “Was it that obvious?”

“No, not really.” He laughed. “Well, yes, a little bit, a couple of times. But I don’t mean that it wasn’t good.” Then more serious. “I suppose you’re not twenty-four, either?”

“No. Sorry. I’m nineteen.”

“God. I wish you’d told me. I barely even know your name.”

“Does it matter? I didn’t want it to be a big deal. I mean, we met in a bar. I assumed you wanted something easy, something relatively… anonymous.”

“Well, yeah, I’m okay with that, if that’s what we both want. But I don’t only go to clubs for anonymous hook-ups. Sometimes that happens, but it can be more than that, you know. I’m not saying I wanted this to be the start of some sort of relationship, but there’s a difference between a one-night stand and an anonymous hook-up. You’re still here, almost asleep in my bed, for one thing. And you just don’t seem like the sort of guy who’d want his first time to be with a virtual stranger.”

“I don’t know. I just wanted- I don’t know. Are you mad at me?”

“No! Of course not. I sort of feel as though I should be, but I’m not. Look- I’m gonna go take a shower. Unless you want to?”

Oliver shook his head.

“But you’ll stay? I mean, you don’t have to, obviously. But you’re half asleep already, and-“

“Okay.” Oliver was relieved. Firstly that he didn’t have to sneak out of this almost-stranger’s apartment at two in the morning, and secondly because he could already feel sleep claiming him, silencing the confusion in his head. He was happy to be able to put off thinking about this for a few more hours.

***

It was light outside and the guy, whose name was Paul, was gone when Oliver woke in the morning. His watch told him that it was already past nine. He yawned, and was staring at the stripe
of sunlight on the ceiling when Paul came into the bedroom wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt, carrying a glass of water and a towel. “You’re awake! Good morning. I thought you might be thirsty. And maybe want a shower?”

Oliver took the glass. “Um. Yeah. Thanks.”

“C’mere. I’ll show you where the bathroom is.” When Oliver hesitated, he glanced around the room and picked up Oliver’s underwear from the floor at the end of the bed and handed them to him. Oliver wasn’t at all sure about the protocol in this situation, but settled for wiggling into his boxers half-under the sheet. He half expected Paul to be smirking at his shyness, but saw nothing of the sort on his face. Paul led him to the bathroom and explained how to deal with the temperamental temperature controls on the shower, and left Oliver alone in the bathroom to wash away the evidence of last night’s activities. He was still holding back from thinking about it too much.

“Hey. You want coffee? Or I have orange juice.”

“Oh. Coffee would be great. Thanks. I’ll just-“ Oliver gestured vaguely toward the bedroom door, before going to get dressed. Paul had opened a window to let in the already warm spring air but the tiny bedroom still smelled unmistakably of sweat and sex, which was a strange combination of nauseating and arousing.

Sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee in his hand, a question formed in his mind and it blurted itself out before Oliver had a chance to think about it.

“Are you being nice to me because you feel bad for me, because you think I’m a pathetic virgin boy who needs taking care of?”

It was stupid and insensitive and Oliver knows it right away, but Paul wasn’t fazed- in fact, he smiled. “No. For one thing, I’m pretty sure you’re not a virgin boy. And I’m being nice to you because I’m a nice guy, believe it or not. We slept together, you stayed over, did you think I’d just throw you out? I get it if you don’t want to be here, or if you don’t want to sit and talk. But is it so strange to offer you a shower and breakfast?”

“I don’t know. This is kind of new to me.”

“Look. I don’t expect anything from you. If this is too awkward, you can go. I won’t be offended.”

“No, it’s not that, I-“ Oliver’s throat felt tight, and he worried he might start to cry. He didn’t quite know why.

“Hey. You’re thinking too much. Here’s how this works. You meet someone and go back to their place and you know it’s a one night stand. Sometimes it might not even be that- it might just be sex and then you might leave right away. And there’s nothing wrong with either of those things. Sex is nothing to be ashamed of. Sometimes it might turn into something more, but usually not. Is this-“ he gestured between the two of them- “going to turn into something more? No. I’m too old for you, and you’re too young and inexperienced for me. I don’t mean any offense- last night was great- I just mean that I wouldn’t enter into a relationship with you. But if I see you in the club? I’ll come over and say hi, and we could chat for a few minutes, and I’ll buy you a drink if you want. And it wouldn’t mean I expect to sleep with you again.”

“Oh.”

“Look. Let’s have breakfast? I don’t have a lot of food in. I can do toast, or I can go out and get bagels, or…”
“Toast’s fine.”

Things were less awkward over breakfast. Oliver hadn’t realised how hungry he was, and hot buttery toast was exactly what he needed. Paul led the conversation and Oliver found himself laughing and remembering why he liked him in the first place.

All the same he didn’t linger. As Oliver tied his shoes, Paul said, “Here. My number. Give me a call if you want to go get a drink some time. Or if you just want someone to talk to about things. No expectations.”

Oliver didn’t think this was the time to remind him that Oliver wasn’t twenty-one yet. Not even close.

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Turn left out of the building. Subway’s two blocks away. You can’t miss it.”

“Okay. Thanks. Last night was- it was fun. It was good.”

“I thought so too.”

As he reached around Oliver to open the door, he took him by the shoulder to turn him around and kiss him, briefly, on the mouth. There was no heat in it, no desire, just a quiet, comforting affection.

Oliver was fine—until his thoughts caught up with him on the way back to his dorm. By the time he arrived, he was sure he was going to be sick.

He couldn’t believe what had happened. He was ashamed of what had happened and disgusted by what he’d done, and who he’d done it with.

But most of all? He was disgusted with himself for the fact that he’d enjoyed it and for the fact that he knew he’d do it again.

What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I just be normal?

***

During the next two years, there were others, and plenty of them. Oliver had resigned himself to the fact that his sexual encounters would have to be brief and devoid of meaning and that he would, eventually, have to marry a woman and pretend to be happy about it. He didn’t dare to date girls now, because he knew that they were unlikely to settle for what he was happy to offer. At some point he knew he would have to bite the bullet and sleep with a girl. Soon, maybe. But not yet.

But then he met Julie. In a gay bar, of all the unlikely places for him to meet a girl.

And yet.

“Do I know you? I feel as though I know you.” She was with a small group of girls, and while it really wasn’t that unusual for straight girls to hang out in gay bars, they didn’t usually strike up conversations with Oliver.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Yeah, I do! I have a class with you. Philology 101. You sit over on the side by the door, right? I’d never forget a face like yours.”
Oliver laughed. “Well, whether you remember my face or not, I’m afraid you’re not exactly my type.”

“No, and you’re not mine either.” Oliver must have looked surprised, because she laughed. “What, you didn’t expect a group of lesbians to hang out here?”

“No! No, it’s not that, it’s just—“

“I get it. I’m too pretty to be a lesbian? I hear that a lot. I have to admit I’m a little disappointed. You didn’t strike me as the type to make assumptions.”

“I wasn’t. You think I don’t get assumptions? Look at me. Talk about not fitting stereotypes. It’s just- you’re here talking to me. Not exactly the behaviour that’ll get you a girl.”

“I’m not looking for that tonight. Just here with some friends to dance and have fun, you know? And it’s nice not to be hit on by guys all the time. There are only so many ways you can say no thanks. It gets so boring.”

Before he knew it, Oliver was forgoing the causal hook-up he’d anticipated in exchange for sitting at a table with Julie and her friends, drinking, then dancing. It was a lot of fun, and although it didn’t end in sex it was still a good night. The best night he’d had for a long time, actually.

But it wasn’t a case of eyes meeting across a crowded room, an instantaneous spark, butterflies in his stomach. Of course not. As he went home he was smiling, but it never occurred to him- not even in his wildest dreams- that he had just met the woman he was going to marry.

***

As Oliver got to know Julie better, he found himself with two close friends who knew his secret. Life was good. And then? It got a whole lot better. He fell in love for the first time at the start of his junior year. Thomas was a friend from class, quiet and a little bit shy, and he was good looking in a nerdy sort of way that Oliver really liked. He was shorter than Oliver (just like pretty much everyone else he’d met since he hit puberty), and had jet-black hair and glasses. He was also openly gay.

Oliver, however, was not openly gay. He was quietly, secretly gay in dark corners of clubs and strangers’ apartments and in his own shameful, sordid mind.

So he would never have dared to make a move on Thomas. He didn’t want anyone else to know his secret, and he didn’t want to be with someone he knew- someone who might want a relationship Oliver just couldn’t let himself have.

But Thomas had no such qualms. One night they went out for drinks with some other students and somehow found themselves going back to Thomas’s apartment, just the two of them. Oliver shouldn’t have gone, really, because going back to a gay friend’s apartment was the way rumours started. But he was relaxed and fuzzy-headed and although found Thomas attractive, Oliver’s intentions were completely innocent.

They were sitting on the couch laughing and the room was spinning, just slightly, when Thomas put his drink down on the coffee table and, with no warning, turned to Oliver and kissed him.

After his initial shock, Oliver kissed him back. It was nice. It was a good kiss and it was really nice, actually, to kiss someone who he knew and already sort of cared about. Someone who wasn’t a stranger who he’d just met in a club.

A few minutes later, breathless and with his hands on Thomas’s waist, Oliver had to ask. “How did
“The way you look at me. Sometimes. Though I wasn’t completely sure. Let’s just say I had a strong hunch. And I figured if you weren’t, you’re a nice enough guy that you’d maybe be okay with me passing it off as something I did because I was drunk and stupid.”

“I’m glad you did it,” said Oliver, before pulling Thomas back into another kiss.

***

Being in a relationship made Oliver nervous, because he still lived in fear of his father finding out about him, and now suddenly he had so much more to lose. He was in love and he was happy- but constantly on edge, because he hated keeping everything a secret, but couldn’t bear the thought of other people knowing. Thomas sort of understood, even if Oliver’s anxiety frustrated him sometimes.

“I know you’re not ashamed of me, Oliver. I know that. But it’s hard, sometimes, when you’re so ashamed of yourself and so scared of being found out. It would be good, to go out for dinner together occasionally, just the two of us. I’m not saying we should sit there and hold hands across a table, just… spending time together out of your apartment would be nice. Don’t you think you’re being a bit, well, paranoid?”

Oliver knew he wasn’t. He’d tried to explain to Thomas about his father, but he had to admit that it all probably sounded a little wild and exaggerated.

His saviour, this time, came in the form of Julie, one afternoon while they were supposed to be studying but were actually drinking coffee in a cosy little coffee shop where they often met to procrastinate.

“Hey, Oliver, you’re Jewish, right?”

“Yeah, of course.” He automatically reached for the Star of David hanging on a thin chain around his neck and twirled it between his fingers. “I mean, in theory. I can’t pretend to be very devout.”

“Yeah. Me neither. Look- I have a weird favour to ask. My grandmother makes a really big deal out of Hanukkah, gets caterers in and has all the family together for a big party. And I need a date. Or a pretend date, at least. Preferably a good-looking Jewish boy.” She raised her eyebrows suggestively. “I can make it worth your while.”

“Julie, I don’t mind pretending to be your date, but I don’t need anything in return. Certainly not, um…”

She laughed. “Oh, god, Oliver, I didn’t mean that. I just meant if you ever needed me to do the same, I could. Get your parents off your back and all that.”

The advantages of this suddenly dawned on him. “Oh. Oh, I can see that that could be mutually beneficial.”

“Right? So what do you say?”

Oliver said yes, of course.

Oliver made a great boyfriend. He looked good and he was polite and educated. He came from an impressive, wealthy, Jewish family.
So somehow, Oliver found himself part of a heterosexual couple. Heterosexual, but without any of the sex. He and Julie were physically affectionate when in public, because that’s what people expected from a new young couple. They held hands a lot, and they went to parties and made out in corners where they pretended they didn’t expect to get caught.

Julie’s parents were pleased. Oliver’s parents were pleased. Even Thomas, who had been dubious about the arrangement to start with, was happy, because Oliver finally felt safe and was able to let go of his worries about their relationship being found out. The fact that Oliver had to kiss someone else from time to time seemed like a small price to pay for everyone’s happiness.

As far as outsiders were concerned, he was in a relationship. With a girl, who he loved.

As far as Oliver was concerned, he was in a relationship. With a boy, who he loved.

For a while, things were easy.

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Oliver never dreamed that his father might get wind of Thomas, but somehow he did. Alarm bells should have started ringing on the evening when Thomas appeared at Oliver’s apartment, clutching a piece of paper and close to tears.

“Oliver, I don’t know what to do.” Oliver took the paper from his hands, stomach turning as he read. 

We regret to inform you that your offer to study for a PhD at New York University has been revoked as a result of unsatisfactory academic references.

It’s there in black and white. Oliver waves the letter. “This is bullshit, Thomas. Didn’t Dr Hall write your reference? He loves you. It was him who told you to apply in the first place.”

“I asked him and he said he didn’t know, he said he gave me a great reference. He called them, he actually called them while I was there, as soon as he saw the letter, and asked them what happened, but they said it was confidential. They told him that they could give no further information and not to call again.”

“They can’t do this! They can’t just change their minds and-“

“They can, Oliver. They can and they have.”

If it was me, thought Oliver, I’d get my dad to sort this out. It didn’t occur to him at the time that if his father had to power to fix something like this, then he must have the power to have caused it in the first place.

But all became clear when he was summoned to his father’s Boston office later that week. It wasn’t unusual for his father to ask to see him when he came to town to work, so Oliver didn’t worry about it.

But his father wasted no time making his point.

“Oliver. Sit down. A problem has come to my attention.” He shuffled through some papers as though this was a business problem, but it’s not. “You have a friend. Thomas Marshall.” He looked up at Oliver, who put on his best poker face as he nodded.

“Yeah. I know him. He’s in some of my classes.”

“Rumours have reached me. About the sort of man he is, and about- well. I hope for your sake there’s no truth in them, because I will not tolerate such things. When you go to Columbia next year,
this *Thomas* will not be moving to New York. And in the meantime you won’t speak to him again. Is that clear?”

Oliver sat still, thoughts trying to catch up with this father’s words. He had no idea how word of himself and Thomas could have reached his father. “Yes, sir. I understand. But look, I-“

His father stood up, towering over Oliver at the other side of the desk. “Look, *nothing*. Nothing, do you hear me? I don’t care who this Thomas is or what he does or who he does it with, so long as you’re having *nothing* to do with it and your name is not associated with him.”

Oliver nodded before standing up and walking toward the door. He needed to get out of there and was worried he might give himself away if he stayed any longer. But he couldn’t resist defending himself just a little. “He’s just-“

Then there was a fist and a wall and a ringing in his ears. His brother must have heard the crack of his head against the wall from outside the office because the door burst open.

“Dad? Is everything alright? I-“

Oliver felt something warm and wet trickle down his face. The familiar smell of blood.

“This doesn’t concern you, James.”

“Well, no, perhaps not- but dad-“ his voice was a quiet hiss. “You can’t do things like this. Not here. If nothing else, there’s going to be blood on the carpet.” He stood by Oliver and took him by the chin, tilting his head to the side to get a better look at the cut along his temple. “This is going to need stitches. Give me your car keys, Oliver, I’ll take you to the emergency room.”

Oliver fumbled in his pocket. He knew that James would be much more sympathetic when the two of them were alone, although he had no intention of explaining exactly what had happened.

Oliver’s father had other ideas. “No, James. Get back to work. Oliver can deal with this on his own. Go. Both of you. Let me hear no more of this, or the consequences will be severe.”

Oliver turned to leave and didn’t say goodbye to his father. Out in the lobby, James sent his secretary to find something to stop the bleeding. “I don’t want to know what you’ve done this time, Oliver. You know better than to make him mad. Here.” The secretary had returned with a towel, and James handed it to Oliver. “Go get yourself sorted out. I’ll call to check in on you this evening.”

Oliver drove himself to the hospital, with the towel pressed to the side of his head, and told the nurse he got into a fight in a bar. She raised her eyebrows in question but wrote it down anyway. It would undoubtedly have been a more believable excuse has it been eleven at night instead of in the morning.

Oliver got six stitches and then went home to break up with Thomas.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think? Poor Oliver. I can’t help but make him sad.

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at
natures-cunning-ways.
“Your wife’s gay.”

Oliver nods and waits. The quiet of the room suddenly feels oppressive.

“So this was- you both knew from the start? Since before we- you and me-”

Elio’s vulnerability is seeping through the cracks of his angry façade, and to see it there, after all these years, is unexpected. So Oliver just nods again. Because there’s not really anything to say.

“So your- your *marriage*- was a sham all along?”

“That’s not how I’d put it, but I suppose some people would see it as such.” Oliver finds he’s strangely defensive about his marriage. That’s not how he feels about it himself, and he doesn’t like the fact that people, that *Elio*, might see it like that- that people might feel they have a right to judge something which isn’t any of their business. He forces himself to look at Elio.

“Well, it wasn’t a marriage for the reasons why most people marry, that’s for sure. What would you call it? A *marriage of convenience*? Is that more palatable to you?” Elio’s hand, next to his coffee cup, is shaking. Whether with nerves or anger, Oliver doesn’t know.

“Things aren’t that simple, Elio. There are lots of reasons why people get married. Lots of people don’t marry for love. Not everyone has that luxury. A lot of people marry someone their parents wanted them to marry. Or they marry for- for stability, or money, or children, or, yes, convenience in one form or another. Is that so wrong?” Then, quieter. “A lot of people settle for second best. You know?”

“Oh. I suppose you were each other’s second best?”

“In some ways, perhaps. I knew, as soon as I realised I was gay, that some aspects of my life would have to be about second bests. And our marriage was a good solution. We’ve been happy together. We have the children. But things aren’t the same as they were back then. This isn’t the eighties any more. And my father’s gone, so…”

"Oh god, I forgot about the children. Your kids? What about them? I’m not even going to ask where you got those kids of yours from. Are they even yours? Are they hers? What- how does that even-" Elio, eyes wide, shakes his head rapidly as though trying to dislodge the confusion.

Oliver can’t hide his exasperation. "God, Elio, you know none of what you just said makes sense? How do you think we got them? The same way anyone gets kids."

A shadow of something crosses Elio’s face, but there’s no time to think about that now, because he
continues with his tirade.

"You lied to me. Twenty years, Oliver. You lied to me. You let me think that you were in love with her. You left me, and you lied to me, and you- what are you doing here, anyway? Why are you telling me this now?" There's no mistaking the hurt. It's written so clearly on Elio's face, and in the way his body slumps in his seat.

Oliver doesn't know what he expected to happen, but it wasn't this. Elio is hurt, and he's angry. Oliver has never seen him angry before. "I... don't know. I just thought you should know."

It sounds like a weak excuse, even to Oliver.

"Why, though? What did you expect me to do with this knowledge? I suppose you thought poor Elio, he's been waiting for me for twenty years, he'll be over the moon to hear this? Did you expect me to be thrilled, to just- I don't know- invite you straight back into my bed?"

*Into my life, into my heart.*

But Oliver means it when he says "No! That's not what I meant at all. I don't want- I don't expect anything."

"Then why, Oliver? What do either of us have to gain from this?"

"I thought I owed you the truth."

Elio's laugh is bitter. "You owed me the truth twenty years ago. When I needed to hear it. It's too late now. The only person this helps now is you. Does it help ease your guilty conscience? From the burden of twenty years of lies?"

"No. It makes me feel pretty crappy, actually."

"Well, what did you expect?"

"Honestly? I don't know. I just knew I had to tell you. I'm sorry. For everything." Not that he has any idea, right now, of exactly what *everything* might encompass.

"I- I don't even know how to begin processing all of this right now. Why didn't you say anything earlier today? This morning, or..."

"I don't know. I meant to, I did, but then everything was so good and I didn’t want to ruin it. I was just so happy to be here with you. I’ve missed you, Elio."

That might be a step too far, but Elio doesn’t seem to register it- because something else has occured to him. His voice is small as he asks, "Did my dad know?"

Oliver wants to lie. It would be the kind thing to do, now, but Elio doesn't seem to register it- because something else has occured to him. His voice is small as he asks, "Did my dad know?"

"There were things he said. Questions he asked me, when I came back here with my family that time. And before. He and I used to talk on the phone, often. Neither of ever said the words, and he never explicitly asked the question, but I’m pretty sure he knew."

"He never told me. He never said anything."
Elio has been betrayed twice this evening, and Oliver can tell that this, his father’s, is the one that stings the most.

Everything about Elio screams angry as opposed to upset, but regardless of the cause there are quiet tears streaming down his face. He takes a breath and drops his face into his hands. Oliver wants nothing more than to rub his back or, even better, to fold him in his arms and rock him, like he did with his sons when they were small and hurt. He wants to shush him and tell him that he’s sorry and everything will be okay.

But he’s suddenly not sure that this can be fixed. He realises that he hadn’t thought any of this through.

Just when Oliver thought things couldn’t get much worse, they’re interrupted by a voice coming from the direction of the stairs. “Elio? Qu’est-ce qui ne va pas?”

Elio looks up, and shakes his head slowly, his face clouded with something like despair. “Oh, god, Oliver, now you’ve woken my mom. I really don’t need this right now. She was so settled tonight, and—” Annella appears in the doorway, barefoot and in a nightdress, and Elio rises from his seat.

Annella looks mildly surprised to see Oliver. “Oh, Oliver.” Oliver tries to smile, but it’s probably not very convincing. Annella turns her attention to Elio.

“What’s wrong, chérie? I heard voices.”

Elio hurriedly wipes his tears. “Nothing, maman. It's fine. Come on, let’s get you back to bed.”

He takes Annella by the elbow and says something softly to her in French. Oliver can’t catch it, and probably wouldn’t understand it even if he did. Annella looks back at him, clearly wanting to say something more, but Elio steers her firmly in the direction of the stairs.

He turns before disappearing through the doorway. “You should go back to bed, Oliver. You have an early start tomorrow. There’s nothing more to be said here.”

***

But Oliver doesn’t go to bed, not yet. He sits in the kitchen and thinks about how it all went so wrong. Not that there was exactly a way tonight could have gone right, of course. Despite what Elio said, Oliver wasn’t expecting to be welcomed back into his life with open arms.

The more he thinks about it, the more certain he is that things went wrong twenty years ago, when he wasn’t honest with Elio right from the start. But he still believes, no knows, that there was no other way. It’s a problem with no solution, always has been.

There were so many times he could have said something. So many chances. Right at the start, when the Perlmans asked him polite questions to get to know him better- he could have said then that there was a girl back home who he was probably going to marry. Put himself out of reach, and prevented anything from ever happening with Elio. Or maybe before things between them got too deep- he could have told Elio about the expectations he had to fulfil, and let him make an informed choice. Or at Christmas, when he came to visit and foolishly hoped Elio would fight for him. Or by letter- all those letters they wrote in the early months after their separation. Or when he saw Elio after his lecture and invited him to meet his wife. My wife, my friend, the mother of my children. The person I share my life with, but who will never be more than a friend to me. I want her to meet you so she can know the person I’ve talked about so much and loved for so long. So that tomorrow, when you’re gone again, there will be somebody else who remembers that you were here.
All missed opportunities, any of which would have been better merely by virtue of *not have just happened right now*—not leaving Oliver sitting here in the cool silence of the kitchen feeling as though his heart just got pulled out of his chest and stamped on.

Oliver eventually goes back to bed and sleeps fitfully, playing the night over and over in his head and wondering what he can say to Elio before he goes, how he can try to mend this at least a little.

Not that it matters, in the end. Because when his alarm goes off in the morning Elio is gone.

***

Oliver eats breakfast outdoors with Annella. So much is unchanged from twenty years ago, yet it’s so different. No Samuel, of course. And this morning, at least, no Elio. He wonders if Annella knows what’s happened to him. “Where’s Elio?”

“He’s not here?” She looks around, confused, and Oliver regrets having asked. He should have thought of this. “Oh. I suppose not. I’m sorry, Oliver, I don’t think Elio lives here anymore. Mafalda might know. Mafalda? Have you seen Elio?”

Mafalda is long retired. Breakfast is now served by Annella’s niece, who stays at the house and helps out. She’s accustomed to being called Mafalda, though, and takes it in her stride.

She answers in English, which Oliver knows is for his benefit. Despite her politeness, she shoots Oliver a look of dislike, to show her disapproval at the conversation she’s clearly just heard. “No, madam. But the car was gone early this morning. Perhaps he’s gone to town? No doubt he’ll be back later.”

“Oh yes. Of course.”

They make small talk. It’s strange with no Samuel and no Elio. But Oliver isn’t sure how much to share with Annella and what might be too bewildering. He knows his mere presence has thrown their fragile calm into disarray, but he opts for the truth.

“How is your wife, Oliver? Your children?”

His sons, at least, are an easy topic. “Oh, well, they’re hardly children any more. Alan, my eldest, is getting ready to go off to college. He can’t wait to get away from us, so he’s going all the way over to California, of all places. Who would have thought? And Ed is in high school. He’ll be a junior next year. He’s a good kid, but it’s not the easiest age, for him or for us.”

Annella smiles and nods. “And Julie? She didn’t want to come with you this time?”

“Oh. She’s fine. We’re, um, we’re getting divorced, actually.” He sees the concern on her face. “Don’t worry, though, it’s all extremely amicable. It’s a good decision for both of us. We’ve long known that we’re better as friends than partners, and it feels like it’s time, now, to separate.”

“Oh, Oliver, I’m sorry. You should talk to Elio about all that, he’s the expert on divorce.”

Even Oliver’s best poker face isn’t going to be enough to hide his astonishment at this revelation. “Elio’s *divorced*? Elio was *married*?” Oliver feels momentarily vindicated for the secrets he’s been keeping, because apparently Elio has been hiding surprises of his own. It doesn’t take long for the guilt to creep back in, though, as he quickly realises that Elio’s personal life has nothing to do with him. Elio didn’t owe him this information, not in the slightest.

Oliver never expected this, had no idea, none at all. Though why *wouldn’t* Elio be married? He’s
37, and has lived most of his life without Oliver in it. There are going to be things Oliver doesn’t know about. If it had been any other old friend, instead of Elio, Oliver would have asked about this sort of thing while they were catching up yesterday. But he was too afraid— because it was Elio, and because he was worried about what the answer might be, and because discussing that sort of thing might have led to questions about Julie. And then Oliver would have had to decide whether to lie, or to tell the truth before he was fully prepared to do so.

“He’s still married, technically, but not for long. He doesn’t like to talk about it much. They’ve been through a lot.” Annella puts down her coffee cup and fumbles for a cigarette. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I assumed he’d told you.”

“No, but it’s alright. I won’t mention it. Besides, I’m not sure I’ll see him again before I go. He might not be back.” Oliver wipes his sticky fingers on his napkin, thinking about whether he dares to ask. The fact that he might never get another chance means that he can’t help himself. “He’s married to… a woman?”

Because Oliver has often wondered. What Elio is, and whether he gives himself a label at all. Oliver knows that Elio’s been with both— that he himself overlapped with a relationship of sorts with Marzia. He always assumed, from the things Elio said as well as the things he did, that Elio was bi. But maybe he’s not. Or maybe he is, but mostly likes women. Or mostly men.

Oliver had wondered, early on in their time together, whether he was something of an experiment. A way for Elio to see whether he liked it. Elio’s actions after they first slept together confirmed that there was an element of truth to this idea. But whether Elio liked boys in general, or just Oliver, was something he was admittedly unsure of. Presumably he’s discovered the answer in the intervening years. Elio was only seventeen at the time, and just finding himself. A lot can change in twenty years.

For one thing— twenty years ago, the mere fact that Elio was married would have told Oliver that it was to a woman, because there was no other way. But now? There’s a possibility, in many parts of the world at least, that Elio has married a man.

Too late, it occurs to him that he may have just出了 Elio, and perhaps even himself in the process. He doesn’t know why that’s such a scary thought, because he doubts that Annella will judge him for being gay. Oliver has always known that Samuel knew— but he’s been under the impression that Annella didn’t know about him, and by extension, them. But maybe his question will fill in some gaps she’s always wondered about. Oliver knows that Elio had a difficult time after he left, and Annella must have had an inkling that something went on.

“Yes, to a woman. But they’ve had a difficult few years, and things just haven’t worked out. Elio struggles with relationships.”

Is that a criticism of Oliver? He has no idea. She looks at him intently, as though to gauge his reaction.

“But come. Let’s not talk of this, on such a beautiful morning.” The hand with her cigarette in it gestures all around them, as though to take in the splendour of the day. “Let’s talk about your work. Samuel was so proud of the things you did. He always said that he knew he had nothing to do with it, but he saw you, of all the guests we had, as a second son.”

Oliver feels himself tearing up. He knew this, because Samuel himself had told him. But to hear it from Annella, now that he’s gone, is a new sort of bittersweet.

“Nothing to do with my success? It wasn’t true. He had plenty to do with it. He was always a
mentor to me. To say he was like a second father wouldn’t be far from the truth. I miss him.”

So that’s what they talk about. They reminisce, and they do cry, both of them, just a little. But it’s worth it because Annella is more animated, more alive, than she’s been since Oliver arrived. And Oliver’s work has always been his passion - a strange passion borne, he sometimes thinks, out of a lack of any such feeling in his personal life.

When Annella’s niece comes out to clear the plates away, she listens to them for a moment and smiles at Oliver, nodding as though she’s happy with what she sees this time.

And it’s not long after breakfast that Oliver’s taxi arrives.

“Oliver, promise you’ll come back soon. We all miss you.”

“I’ll try. Can you- can you tell Elio I said goodbye?” And I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

“Of course, Oliver. I apologise that he’s not here to say goodbye himself. I don’t know what gets into that boy sometimes.”

“It’s fine. Really. I’m sorry I missed him.”

Oliver bends down to kiss her on the cheek, then gets into the taxi and closes the door. As the taxi drives away from the house, he doesn’t look back.

***

In the end, Oliver can’t face the hassle of taking the train, so he opts to take a taxi the whole way to Menton.

Oliver likes travelling, especially when he’s alone. He’s always been wealthy enough to travel in comfort, and he values the time to think - time when he doesn’t have to do anything in particular.

But the half-hour ride to Menton seems interminably long. He should probably have hired a car, because the concentration needed for driving would have provided a soothing distraction his thoughts. He’s both trying to think things through, and trying to avoid thinking altogether, which makes for a discomfiting combination, leaving him restless and uncomfortable in his skin.

His meeting that afternoon goes as well as can be expected. It’s all routine really, nothing terribly interesting. Most of his business was in Rome, and he’s spending just two nights in Menton before flying home from Nice. If he’s a little distracted, nobody notices.

So, nothing remarkable. Until he returns to his hotel after dinner on his second and final evening. By this time tomorrow he’ll be almost home, and he isn’t sure how he feels about that. It feels like he’s left something unfinished. He’s approaching the elevator, planning on an early night before a tiring day of travelling tomorrow, when he hears a voice he’d recognise anywhere.

“Oliver!” He turns around to see a familiar, dark-haired figure stand up from one of the overpadded armchairs on the lobby. Elio crosses to him at an almost-run, as though he’s worried Oliver might disappear.

“Elio? I- how- what are you doing here?”

This is nervous Elio, Elio when he’s unsure of the reaction he’s going to get, Elio when he’s a little worried about rejection. Oliver can tell he has to steel himself to meet Oliver’s eyes. “I just- I
wanted to say I'm sorry. About the other night. I'm- I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have behaved like that.”

“No. It’s fine, really. You had every right to act the way you did.”

“Are you busy? Can we talk?”

Oliver replies with a wry smile. “Sure. I’m not busy. Talking would be good. Well, maybe. Depending on what you have to say.” He knows that his lighthearted tone and almost-joke are a risk.

But Elio smiles back. Small, and somehow shy, but a smile nonetheless.

“I can’t promise good. But- it’ll clear the air. I hope.”

“I hope so too. So. You want to stay here? There’s a bar.” He waves a hand in the direction a door on the other side of the lobby. “Do you need to eat, or…”

“No, it’s okay. I ate dinner before I left home. I suppose you could say that coming here this evening was sort of a last-minute decision.”

They end up leaving the hotel and walking out to find somewhere to get a drink. They walk in silence, but it’s not awkward. The streets are quiet, as is the bar they find themselves in- probably because it’s a Tuesday night- and they find a table where they’re unlikely to be disturbed. It’s sort of tucked away in a corner, but still has a view of the sea.

Oliver swirls his wine in the glass, unsure about where to start. Elio seems content to gaze out of the window, so Oliver doesn’t interrupt him.

But eventually, with a sigh, he begins to talk. “Okay. Let me start. Right.” Elio pauses, eyes downcast. “God, I wish I wasn’t driving. I could really use a drink right now.”

“Hmm. I bet.” Oliver had two glasses of wine with dinner, so he’s already somewhat relaxed. He doesn’t envy Elio having to start this conversation sober.

“So. I’m glad you told me. I am. All of it. I still feel let down that you didn’t tell me before. I’m still mad about that. I honestly don’t know if I can forgive you for that, even though I know that your sexuality is none of anyone else’s business. Not even mine, despite… despite everything. And, truthfully, I do think that if you had told me at the time, things might have been easier for me. But that still doesn’t give me a right to have known. So- I was way out of line. I acted like a spoiled, stupid kid.” Oliver feels compelled to say something, but he senses that Elio’s not done yet. “Look- I know it’s just an excuse, but things are really tough for me at the moment. My divorce is turning out to be bitter and messy and awful.”

“Your mom mentioned it. So. I guess you’re married.”

A half-smile. “I guess so. For a while longer, at least. Until we can finish sorting things out and get the paperwork through, and…” He twirls a stray curl of hair between his fingers. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“I didn’t know, until your mom mentioned it. I think she felt a bit bad about it, actually. Like you might not have wanted me to know. You didn’t say. Your dad never-“

“Seems like he kept things from both of us.”
“Elio- he had every right not to tell me about your personal life, and you had every right to expect him not to. It’s none of my business. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I had no idea. And I know you don’t want to talk about it, but can I ask one question?” He has to know. Ever since his conversation with Annella, his brain keeps supplying him with images- a boy with dark, solemn eyes, or a girl with long, unruly curls. “You said it’s messy- is it because- are there kids involved? Do you have kids?”

Elio bite his lip and shakes his head. “No. No kids. Though it wasn’t for want of trying. Maybe if there’d been a kid, we wouldn’t be in is this mess. I’m sorry if this comes across as rude, but-” a sigh- “but this is exactly what I don’t want to talk about. The messiness, that’s just because of property, and jobs, and life in different countries, and a lot of bitterness on both sides.”

Oliver kicks himself for his tactlessness. Do you have kids is a common enough thing to ask a thirty-something married man, and it isn’t usually a sensitive question, but in this case it’s clear that Oliver has overstepped a boundary. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. This is all so new. I’m finding that divorce is more complicated than I thought- and I know that Julie and I have it easy, since we’re mutually very happy about the whole thing.”

Elio’s staring out of the window again. “Oh, well. Don’t worry about me. It’s not my first time around this particular block.”

Oliver doesn’t know what to say. He settles for, “I guess there’s a lot I don’t know about you.”

“I suppose so. It’s been twenty years, so it shouldn’t come as a surprise. My whole adult life. And let’s face it, there’s clearly a lot I don’t know about you.”

“Not so much, maybe. Everything you don’t know about me can be summed up by what I told you the other night.”

Elio turns back to Oliver. “Can I be frank, Oliver?”

“Always.”

“I don’t know where we go from here. If we’re supposed to go anywhere, that is. I don’t know what you want from this, from me. What this is. I don’t know what I want. I know I was happy to see you, the other day. I enjoyed your company. But I don’t know whether I can trust myself, or whether all of this is just because I’m in such a… a raw place right now.”

“Me neither. Maybe I should try to… to tell you some things? I don’t mean that I want to justify what I did, because I know I can’t, but… there are things I’d like to say, if you’re happy to listen.”

Elio nods. “Go ahead.”

“So.” Where to start? ”I always knew I was gay. Always. I’ve never had even the slightest doubt. But my father- well, everyone’s heard of my father. I’m sure you know he had rather… right wing views. He didn’t like gay people. Or black people. Or poor people. He didn’t much like me, I don’t think, even though he didn’t know that I was gay. But if he’d known, he wouldn’t have just let it go. He wouldn’t even have just disinherited me, or disowned me. It would have shamed him, and he would have wanted to punish me and change me, cure me. And he was, well, powerful. And influential. If he had said I was… unwell perhaps? I’m not sure exactly how he would have explained it. But people would have believed him.

“He use to drink. He was violent. He hit my mom, all the time. When I was nine, he pushed me down the stairs and broke my arm. We were all afraid of him. He- this is going to sound like I’m
making excuses, but-“ Oliver flips back the hair above his temple. “This scar. Nobody ever sees it, really, but… you asked about it once. It was early evening, and we were lying in your bed. You were playing with my hair. And I told you I banged it on a wall. Which is true, but not the whole story. This is what my dad did when he found out that one of my close friends was gay. I was twenty-two, so I was a grown man, but I was really scared. I know it sounds stupid, to be scared of your own father, but I was. Right up until he died.”

“A close friend?” That’s the part Elio asks him about, because of course Elio sees right through him.

“A boyfriend, of sorts, I suppose. Well, a boyfriend in everything but name. I don’t think I ever dared give it a name. It was never going to be anything like that, because of- well. Because of all the things I just said, about my father. He would never have tolerated it, and if I’d ever had any doubts, if I’d ever thought that I might be able to make things work with a man, then this-” he swipes a finger along the scar before letting his hair fall back- “confirmed how he felt.”

“And… other scars?”

“Visible ones? No. You would have known about them. He hasn’t laid a hand on me since before you and I were together. But growing up like that leaves plenty of scars you can’t see.”

Elio winces a little. “I’m sorry, Oliver.”

“Don’t be. Can I tell you about how I ended up married?” Elio nods. “Julie was gay. I met her at college, and we ‘dated’ so nobody would know about either of us. Being openly gay wasn’t an option for her any more than it was for me, although her reasons are her own. It made perfect sense.

“When I came to Italy, Julie and I had been properly playing at being ‘together.’ off and on, for two years, and we’d ‘dated’ more casually for years before that. We were twenty-four, and starting to run out of excuses as to why we weren’t getting married and starting a family, like people are supposed to do. When I came back from Italy I was… different. There were things I couldn’t hide as well as I had always done before. People asked questions. It seemed like it was time for me to make a commitment to Julie, before things fell apart.

“And it wasn’t a bad thing. Honestly? We each had an emptiness the other could never fill, but we were happy together. We both loved the idea of marriage, and what life as part of a married couple could offer. So many benefits- we both wanted children, first of all, but other things, too- trust, companionship, constancy, and acceptance from our families which neither of us could ever have had if we’d lived out of the closet. I loved her, and I loved her deeply. Not romantically, and definitely not sexually, but love all the same.”

“Did you… were there men? While you were married?”

“Oh, certainly. We both had lovers. There was never any agreement to be faithful from that point of view.”

“Lovers, or lovers?”

“For her? Both. She has a long term… partner, I suppose. For want of a better term. For me? Perhaps just the first sort. There have been men I cared about, but love? No, I don’t think so.”

There’s something close to pity written on Elio’s face.

“No, Elio, don’t look at me like that. I’ve had a good life. I really have. I can honestly say I’ve been very happily married..”
Oliver takes a deep breath in, and lets it out. “And now my father’s gone. I can start over, I guess. I’m only 44 after all- there’s time, at least I hope so. I feel stupid for letting fear of him rule so much of my life for so long, but I don’t really have regrets about it. I suppose I regret that things had to be the way they were- but I don’t regret the choices I made, or the things I did, because I honestly don’t believe there were any better options.”

“Do you regret us?”

“Do I regret what we did? No. God, no. But I regret all the things we could have been. And I especially regret that you got hurt. That I got hurt. Though if I had the chance, I’d do it all over again.” He pauses to think. “Perhaps this time I’d be honest with you from the start. But I don’t know if that would have been a good thing, in the end. The right thing, in a lot of ways, but maybe not a good thing.”

“I don’t know either. I mean- it wouldn’t have changed anything.” He looks to Oliver for confirmation.

“No. It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

“Well then.”

There’s another silence, comfortable, while they both sip on their drinks and admire the lights reflected on the water outside. Oliver still has things to say, but he’s not sure whether they should be saved for another time- so he’s hesitant when he asks, “Do you want to talk about… us?” He doesn’t know whether he wants to, really, but he feels as though he should offer.

“Yes. Because we never did, and we should have done. But also no. This is all- it’s a lot, Oliver. And I don’t think I’m ready for that right now. Much as a part of me would like to, I don’t think we’ll ever be more than friends. I don’t think I could go there again. I don’t think I want that, and even if we did want to, I’m not sure how we would. There’s so much history- which I know is strange, because it was such a short time, but…” Elio shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders in uncertainty before he continues.

“I don’t know how much there is to be gained by opening up old wounds. But I would really like… to see you again? As friends, maybe, eventually. Maybe that’s what we should always have been.”

Oliver agrees. “We would have been great friends, wouldn’t we?”

“I think so. In a different life, maybe. Or perhaps, still, in this one. In time.” Elio’s smile is warm and open.

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Elio walks Oliver back to his hotel, and they pause outside the door.

“I’m planning on spending the rest of the summer in Italy. I’ll probably stay until Christmas, actually. I’m taking some time off from work. I need some space from my soon-to-be-ex-wife. Hoping the house sale will go through soon, so I can think about where to live. Take some time to just enjoy being Elio, 38, disastrous love life, twice divorced. See what that’s like. But perhaps we can meet when I’m back in the States? Which I think I will be in the New Year. Somewhere. Likely not too far from you. And in the meantime we can email, right?”

“Of course.” Oliver still doesn’t know what he hoped for from this visit, but this seems like a good outcome, all things considered.
They look at each other, both unsure about how this evening is supposed to end. They both move in to hug goodbye at the same time, both in the same direction, almost bumping. They laugh, slightly awkward, but then Elio takes hold of Oliver’s forearms and leans in to kiss his cheek, before wrapping his arms around Oliver’s back. There’s fondness in it, but they both keep a careful distance between their bodies.

Elio steps back. “Okay. Well, have a safe journey tomorrow. And stay in touch.”

“I will. You too. Until later, then.”

Elio nods and walks away, leaving Oliver standing on the pavement in the light spilling out of the hotel lobby. He presses his fingers to the cheek where Elio kissed him, and watches as he disappears around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

I have proof read this on my phone so if there are more typos etc than usual it's because of that. It's not fun.

You are probably thinking 'so this only updated a week ago, what happened? Is this the shape of things to come?' Well, no. I'm on holiday for a fortnight now so I guess it'll be at least 3 weeks.

Totally off topic but- I was adding a tag for talking (because there's a lot of talking in this) and in the list of suggestions there were the following: talking Pokemon, talking trees, talking vagina, talking penis. Suddenly this story seems very boring in comparison!

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
Chapter Summary

Oliver moves to New York for graduate school. His 'relationship' with Julie continues, and he goes to Italy.

Chapter Notes

I know it's been 5 weeks and a day since the last update. In my defence I was away for two of those, and then it was back to school for the kids and back to work for me, which is always a big adjustment after a whole summer off!

And also- good god but writing this has been a slog. I am not especially happy with it- I feel as though it's missing something, or... I don't know. But if I overwork it anymore it will just turn into rubbery pastry, so here goes.

Oliver and Thomas had had big plans. They’d planned to go to grad school in New York, get an apartment together and be ‘roommates’- or at least, to be roommates as far as the rest of the world was concerned. After the incident with Oliver’s father, that was no longer going to happen. Besides, he and Thomas were no longer… well, not whatever it was that they once were. Not anything, actually, having severed all ties. Oliver felt stupid for ever having considered that he’d be able to have such a thing.

He’d never forget how hurt Thomas had been when Oliver had returned from the hospital, his head freshly stitched up after his encounter with his father. The way Thomas had looked at Oliver when he’d explained why they couldn’t see each other again. It was a testament to their trust and the depth of the bond they’d shared that Oliver dared tell Thomas exactly what had happened. Oliver felt as though Thomas deserved honestly in the midst of all the shit.

There was a lot of anger that afternoon, but Thomas didn’t beg him to stay, didn’t tell him they could find a way to make things work, because what would be the point? He’d seen first hand the lengths Oliver’s father would go to when he didn’t get what he wanted. In the space of a week, Oliver’s father had taken away Thomas’s chance of studying for his doctorate in New York, and split Oliver’s head- his own son’s head- open against a wall.

Oliver knew all this, but it didn’t stop him from feeling guilty as hell.

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They had one final talk two weeks later when Oliver went to Thomas’ apartment to collect some things he’d left there. A sweater. A bundle of course notes. A few cassettes.

“I’m sorry, Thomas. I’m really sorry. This is all my fault. I feel like-“

Thomas cut him off. “Stop right there. This isn’t your fault. The only person to blame for this is
your father. He’s crazy, you know that? He’s a scary guy, and I know you’d told me bits about it before, but I didn’t really get it before now. You have nothing to feel guilty about.”

Oliver nodded, although he didn’t believe it. He sat at the kitchen table while Thomas made coffee. Thomas sighed. “I still love you, Oliver, and I wish things were different, but I can see why you had to end this. And I’m so hurt and so angry about it all, but you know what the worst thing is? The fear I can see in your eyes when you talk about him. I’m scared for you. For what it will do to you if you have to live a lie for your whole life. And for what he will do to you if you don’t. Or can’t. I don’t know what the answer is, but you can’t live your life like that. Maybe you should run away to Europe or something. Get a long way away from him.”

“I don’t know the answer either. But I’ll be okay.”

Thomas looked at him in mild disbelief. “You think it’s that simple? You’ll just be okay?”

“Yes, really. I’ll be fine. But what about you? Did you work out what you’re going to do now?”

“I’m going home. Well, going to California, so I’ll be close to my family at least. I’m going to do my PhD at Stanford. It’s where my dad went, and Dr Hall put in a good word for me, so it’s all sorted out. It’s not what we planned, what I planned, but it’ll be good.”

“That’s great. I’m happy you’ve got it all worked out.”

“I have. But I’m still going to worry about you, Oliver. He can hurt you again. Probably worse, next time.”

Oliver didn’t doubt it, but he had no idea what he could do about it.

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His experience with Thomas made Oliver much more careful. Because while Oliver had found a lot of happiness by being in a relationship, albeit a clandestine one, he wasn’t sure it had been worth it. It had ended with him getting hurt in more ways than one and he didn’t want to feel that again. He didn’t want to get another fist to his face. He didn’t want to get his heart broken. He didn’t want to disappoint his father. And he didn’t want someone else he cared about to get hurt. It was better not to care about anyone in the first place.

So he was careful. Although truthfully, he’d been careful when he was with Thomas, and it hadn’t worked- because he’d been almost, sort of, not-really-caught-at-all, and that had been enough. So now he was careful to make sure there was never even the slightest whisper of a rumour for his father to pick up on. He couldn’t entirely curb his desires, but he could make sure that he didn’t get caught.

Julie was his salvation during his time in New York. Outside of their fake relationship they had become close friends. She’d been there for him when he broke up with Thomas, when he’d cried bitter tears for the thing he’d lost and all the things he’d never have. She faced a similar set of struggles, so she understood him in a way nobody else did, and when Oliver moved away they still talked on the phone almost daily.

They were both under ever-increasing pressure from their families. Oliver was convinced that the cover provided by his ‘relationship’ with Julie was the only thing stopping his father from knowing the truth of his relationship with Thomas. And Julie’s parents? They’d had big plans for her- plans which they’d hoped would involve marriage to the son of a particular family friend. Julie wasn’t keen. “It’s not just that I’m a lesbian, Oliver, it’s the fact that he’s awful. I can’t stand him. He has
the most terrible, old-fashioned attitudes. I don’t think I could even pretend to like him. I mean… I’ve resigned myself to the fact that I’m going to have to marry a guy, eventually. And that I’ll have to learn to like it. I do want kids, someday, so I suppose that having sex with a man is a given. Which isn’t disgusting, or anything- it’s just weird. But I was hoping it would be someone I liked, someone nice, someone who’s at least a friend. You know?”

“I do know. And there’s always you and me, Julie.” It wasn’t the first time they’d discussed this.

“I know,” she sighed, then paused. “Do you think it might come to that?”

“Who knows?” Oliver, for one, didn’t know. While it had been something they’d discussed, and it had crossed his mind that people might expect he and Julie to get married in time, it had never really occurred to him as something they might actually do.

Oliver was a well-educated, good-looking boy from a wealthy, and more importantly, Jewish family and Julie’s parents were very happy to accept him as an alternative to the man they’d hoped their daughter would marry. But they did express concerns that Oliver was “unwilling to commit,” and suggested that maybe Julie should move on from him and reconsider the man they’d picked out for her in the first place.

So it made sense from both of their perspectives for things between them to become more serious- as far as outsiders were concerned at least. In the past they’d been dating, nothing serious, when presented to one another’s families. But now it seemed prudent to take things up a notch. So I’ve known Julie for a while, we’re dating, she’s nice, became this is Julie, my girlfriend. Yeah, we’ve been together for a couple of years now, it’s pretty serious.

As part of their new, more serious relationship status, Julie visited Oliver in New York most weekends. Some weekends she and Oliver each did their own things, but other times they spent most of their time together- visiting museums and galleries or going to the theatre.

It was in New York that Julie met Laura. Laura was, like Julie, a grade school teacher, which meant they found plenty to talk about from the start, and things developed from there. Julie’s visits to see Oliver soon became visits to see Laura. Oliver was happy for her. After a year she and Laura moved in together, which was a perfect arrangement for all concerned. Oliver’s parents were happy that things with Julie were serious enough for her to have moved to New York to be closer to him. Julie’s parents were convinced that she was head-over-heels in love with Oliver, and couldn’t bear to be parted from him. They assumed that a proposal was now just around the corner. And Julie got to live with her lover in the guise of roommates, while arousing no suspicion about it because she had a serious boyfriend in Oliver.

Neither of their families made any secret of the fact that they were increasingly keen for Oliver and Julie to marry. So every few months the two of them would argue, or 'hit a rough patch’, or even, on two occasions, break up for a while in order to convince people that they were serious about each other but not quite ready for marriage.

Oliver was very good at convincing people.

Susan approached him once, at a family dinner during one of his breaks from Julie. Oliver was a grown man now, not an insecure teenager, but he still found his eldest sister no less intimidating.

“You don’t seem keen to commit to her, Oliver. Is there some sort of problem? I thought you were over the issues you had in the past? That had better not be what’s stopping you from-“

He knew exactly what she was referring to. “No! God, no. It’s nothing like that. It’s just…” we
fight, sometimes. Argue. Julie’s feisty, you know? She knows her mind and isn’t afraid to say so.”

Susan looks grudgingly impressed. “Hmm. A strong woman is probably what a man like you needs.”

Oliver had a good idea of what she meant by that, but refused to give her the satisfaction of asking.

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Oliver hadn’t dared to have anything approaching a relationship again, and honestly? He wasn’t sure he ever would. Even though Julie was the perfect cover, there was no point in starting something which could never go anywhere and which would only result in getting hurt.

The arrangement he had with Julie living nearby with Laura had been working well for over a year when Oliver found that he was going to be spending his summer in Italy. Julie and Laura would be away for part of the summer, as they were planning to spend three weeks travelling around Europe. Julie’s parents were happy- they thought that she was going away with a friend as a last summer of freedom. They took it as a sign that she and Oliver would finally be getting engaged.

They discussed their plans together. Oliver showed her details of the trip he was taking to Sicily as soon as the semester ended, and helped her and Laura to put together their itinerary of cities to visit.

Oliver ran a finger over the map spread out on the table, until it settled close to the centre of Italy. “I suppose the only city I’ll really see is Rome. I have to spend a few days there with my publisher before I come home. Will you and Laura go to Rome?”

“I don’t think we’ll have time. We probably won’t make it as far as Italy, and even if we do, Florence and Venice are at the top of our list.”

And for the second half of his summer, Oliver was going to stay in northern Italy with a professor and his family in their villa. Oliver showed Julie the letters from Samuel Perlman. “It’s pretty exciting. A lot of people apply for this internship. I’m amazed that I got chosen.”

“I didn’t even know you’d applied for this.”

“I didn’t tell anyone. Didn’t want my dad to catch wind of it and try to pull strings to get me in. If I got chosen I wanted it to be for myself, not because of something my dad said. And besides- I don’t think professor Perlman is the sort of person who would have been impressed.”

Julie picked up the envelope from the coffee table to put the letter back. Two photographs fell out. A large, rambling old house with the sea in the background. A mansion, really. “Ooh. Nice. They must be loaded. Though not as loaded as you are.”

Oliver rolled his eyes. The fact that Oliver mostly lived like a poor student, despite his father’s wealth, was a source of constant amusement for Julie. “Ha ha, very funny.”

She put the picture of the house down and looked at the second one. A man, middle aged with a beard and glasses. The picture-perfect professor. His wife, petite and a little younger. And between them, barely reaching their shoulders, a dark haired child with shoulder length curls.

“So this is him?” She pointed at the professor.

“Yup. And his wife and kid. His son.”

Julie squinted at the picture. “Cute. You’re sure it’s a son? It could be a girl.”
“Didn’t you read the letter? It talks about their son. Elio.”

“Elio? Is that European or is it just pretentious?”

“Probably both.”

“How old is he?”

“It doesn’t say. What do you think? Twelve? Thirteen?”

Julie held the photo closer. “I’d be surprised if he was thirteen. I’d have guessed more like eleven.”

“Hmm. Maybe. I hope he’s not too annoying. I mean- he’s an only child, he lives in that mansion, he’s probably spoiled rotten and completely insufferable. And you’ve seen me with my nieces and nephews- I’m not good with kids and I don’t really like them much.”

“I wouldn’t worry. I shouldn’t think you’ll have a lot to do with him. You’re going there a professor’s assistant, not a nanny to his kid. Right?”

“True. Between finishing my book and working with the professor, I suppose I won’t have much time for socialising or bonding with the family.”

***

Summer came around fast, and before he knew it Oliver was leaving for Italy. Julie winked at him as his taxi arrived to take him to the airport. “Have a great time, Oliver. I expect you to tell me all about the pretty Italian boys when you get home.”

“I don’t know if I’ll have time for boys. Or if I’d dare. I don’t know what attitude the people there will have towards homosexuality, but it’s probably not good. It’s a Catholic country, for one thing. It’ll probably be safer to keep all of that well hidden. But we’ll see. I have to go, but I’ll call you before you go on vacation. And write. And call you again when you get home.”

“Don’t worry about writing to me. Just concentrate on getting your work finished and having an amazing time. Oh- and be careful, won’t you?”

“I’m always careful. Don’t worry.”

She stood on tiptoes to hug him tight. “I’m gonna miss you.”

“You too.” A peck on the lips before he turned to leave.

***

“Oliver! How are you?” Julie’s voice crackled over the international line. “Having fun?”

“Oh, god, yes. It’s wonderful. It’s all food and wine, art and literature, history and music. I don’t want to come home. Professor Perlman is just… he knows things, you know? Thinks about things. And he knows all these- these amazing people. I mean- my father always had rich, educated people around, but not people like this. I think I’m in love with this place.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about coming home for five weeks yet. So you’re settled in happily? Sounds like you’ve met a lot of people?”

“Yeah. Too many people, maybe. It’s hard to keep track.”
“And are the family okay? They’re looking after you, making you feel welcome?” Julie sounds a little concerned, although it’s really not necessary.

“Oh, yeah, definitely. They’re great.”

“And the kid’s not too annoying?”

“Huh? Oh, Elio. Turns out he’s not a kid after all, not really. He’s almost eighteen.” Oliver smiled as he remembers the interaction, on his first day.

_The subject had come up when Elio had showed Oliver to his bedroom. Elio’s bedroom, now Oliver’s. For a while, at least. “So you’re Elio? You’re bigger than your picture.” He must be almost six feet tall. And he’s definitely a lot older than eleven._

“What picture? Oh, yeah.” Understanding dawned and Elio laughed, breathy and musical. “Dad sent you that photo, right? I know the one you mean. It’s an old one. I think it was taken, um… probably four years ago? Don’t tell him I said this, but I know he still sends copies of that one because he was a lot thinner back then and had less grey hair.”

Oliver had laughed at that, and-

Julie brought him back to the present. “Well, seventeen can still be really annoying. I mean- you’ve met my brother.”

Oliver couldn’t help but chuckle. “Yes. Elio is extremely annoying. And also not. But I think he hates me.”

“Of course he doesn’t. Nobody hates you. Literally nobody. You’re lovely. He’s just being a grumpy teenager, no doubt. And he’s also an only child. He’s probably not used to having to share his parents’ attention with someone else.”

***

He called her again the day before she was due to fly to Paris. “Julie? Hi. I guess you’re pretty busy, so I won’t keep you, but I just wanted to call to say I hope you have a great trip.”

“Thanks! How are you?”

“Good. Busy. The book’s coming along well. The book, and also my tan. That’s coming along really well, in fact. There’s a lot of sun and a lot of time spent outside.”

“And have you made any friends? And I don’t mean all the intellectual types you told me about before.”

“Oh, well, sort of. There’s a little girl who lives next door. We talk a lot. And there are a lot of young people around, from the town. They hang out here a lot, or we all go to the beach.”

“Sounds fun. And what about Elio? Are you getting along any better with him?”

“What do you mean?” Oliver was confused.

“You said you thought he hated you.”

“Um.” Oliver thought for a moment. “I don’t know. He’s… we run together, and swim together. Sometimes we talk, and sometimes we… don’t. For days. And I- I don’t know, I…” Oliver’s voice trailed off into silence, a silence that spoke volumes.
“Oh god. You have a crush on him, don’t you? Don’t lie to me, Oliver. I know you too well.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s complicated. Nothing’s happened.”

“Not yet. Do you think he likes you too?”

“Sometimes I think so, but it’s hard to tell. He’s difficult to read. Besides, it’s probably best if
nothing happens. He’s the professor’s son, after all. He’s so young. And I’m only here for a few
weeks. It’s not like it could become anything, not really.”

“True. But a few weeks is plenty long enough to enjoy yourself.”

His silence was, again, all too easily interpreted be Julie, who knew him so well.

“Oh. Oh. Oliver. This is more than a crush, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it. To think about it. There’s no point. Anyway- I’m
pretty sure he likes girls.”

“Well, that might be a problem. But just because he’s into girls doesn’t mean he’s not into boys.”
Julie stopped to think for a moment. “Look- I don’t have any advice, really. Just- be careful. Don’t
get hurt. Don’t hurt him.”

***

“Oliver? I’m just calling to say we’re back safely.”

“That’s great, Julie. Did you have a good time?” Oliver was genuinely happy to speak to her. It
wasn’t often they went three weeks without talking.

“Great, thanks. I’ll tell you all about it when you get home. Listen, Oliver, this might sound weird
but- are you okay? Your letters were… a little odd. They didn’t sound like you.”

Oliver thought for a moment, pushing his hair back from his forehead. It was getting too long, and
kept falling into his eyes. He’d need to get it cut when he got home- before going back to work, at
least. “Yeah, I’m okay. I’m just tired. Things have been really busy. I mean- there’s only a week
left now until I come home. The book’s pretty much done. Going to Rome in a few days to see the
publisher there.”

“Great! Oh, I wish I could see it.”

“Rome, or my book?”

“Rome, you dummy. I read one chapter of your book and that was enough. That book is boring as
hell. I don’t know what fascinates you so about all that fusty old nonsense.”

“You’re mean, Julie. That book is my life’s work. I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“Life’s work? Oliver, you’re only 24!” She laughed, and Oliver felt a wave of affection for her as
she continued. “I just tell it like it is. And talking of telling- you hinted about the situation with Elio
in your letters. What’s happening with you and him?”

Oliver’s response was taciturn. “Um. Things have happened. I’ll tell you more when I get home.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. Later, then. Look, I should go anyway. This call has probably
already cost me about twenty dollars. But promise me you’ll enjoy these last few days. Promise me
you’re not going to worry about the future.”

“Okay. I’ll see you next week.”

***

When Oliver got home, he was fine. He was cheerful and talkative and full of energy. After eating dinner with friends on the night he came home, Julie came back to his apartment. They talked about the places she and Laura had visited, and she showed him the photographs they’d already had developed. She asked him about his trip, the work he did, the town where he stayed, and of course—about Elio. Oliver wanted to talk and talk and talk about Elio, to never stop talking about him, so he was happy to tell her everything.

“So, spill the beans. I want to know everything. What was he like? Did he like your stupid book? Tell me about the sex!”

Oliver was genuinely a little scandalised. “Julie! You can’t ask that. God, sometimes I wish my best friend was a guy.”

“But I’m not, and I did ask. You don’t have to tell me. But women talk about these things, you know?”

“Okay, if you really want to know- it was… nice.”

Julie snorted. “Nice? Is that all you have to say?”

“You’ve never slept with a seventeen year old boy, Julie. They’re typically not great at sex.”

Julie flashed him a sly grin. “Men are terrible at sex anyway. So I’ve heard.”

“I’m not. Anyway. It was nice. It was good. It was very frequent and very… intimate. I have no complaints. Definitely not. But I’m not going into any more detail than that.”

They both laughed and the conversation moved on.

Oliver got on with his life. To outsiders he seemed content. Happy, even. He spoke enthusiastically about his time in Italy, and enjoyed being back at work. Everything seemed good.

Until Julie confronted him at the start of October.

“You are not okay, Oliver. You hide it so well, but I’ve known you for so long. I probably should have said something before now, but I thought it might work itself out on its own.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m doing great.”

“Bullshit. You know exactly what I’m talking about. I can read you like a book. Elio. You talk about him… I don’t know how to explain it. Too casually, maybe. You’re so nonchalant about the whole thing. It’s as if it’s easy for you to talk about it all because it didn’t mean anything. You don’t seem to care, but I know you do. You make it sound like a little summer fling because that’s your way of hiding just how much it meant to you.”

Oliver shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

Julie looked exasperated. “So you’re okay with all of this?”

“Yes. Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”
“Because you’ve never said the words but you were clearly in love with him. That doesn’t just go away because you tell yourself you don’t care, and that you’re not allowed to feel it any more. It won’t go away because you can’t bear to think about it. That’s not how it works.”

“It doesn’t matter whether I’m allowed to or not. There is no point in any of it. Nothing can come of it. There’s no point in dwelling on it.” Oliver could feel a tightness at the back of his throat, and a prickling behind his eyes.

“So you just don’t want to feel anything? You’re just going to keep talking about it all like it’s just some fun memory from a part of your life that’s over? A memory that doesn’t mean anything?”

“That’s all it is.” Oliver could feel himself getting angry. Angry at himself for being like this, and angry at Julie for seeing right through him, and angry at the world. “The thought of really sitting down and thinking about it, and feeling it all, is too much. I want to keep it all light and breezy because I’m hoping that if I do it for long enough, it will be the truth. It’s over, and it really, really hurts, and I don’t want to feel like that.”

“Maybe you need to feel like that. Maybe if you bottle things up inside, like you always do, then it will just get worse and worse until you explode. Are your letters to him like this, too? Pretending that it was nothing important? You write about the weather and your work, I suppose, and nothing about how you miss him and how you still feel?”

Oliver nodded miserably. “Because I don’t know what else to do. I don’t think either of us do.”

***

Their conversation, and acknowledging out loud what Elio had meant to him, had been a turning point, and not in a good way. Oliver started thinking about things he’d tried to ignore, and feeling things he’d pushed down, and after two more weeks, suddenly everything was just too much.

He just couldn’t do any of it any more. Just breathing was a struggle. He called in sick and went back to bed.

When he didn’t answer the phone, Julie came round to his apartment. Oliver didn’t want to talk, but she kept calling in every evening. On Saturday, she was there first thing in the morning. “Oliver? Baby. You have to get out of bed. It’s been almost a week since you got dressed. I’m worried about you.” Julie’s fingers were stroking his hair. “When did you last eat?”

“I don’t know. I can’t. I’m not hungry.”

“You’re going to have to, sooner or later. You have to go back to work soon, if nothing else. You can’t keep calling in sick. Just- please. Oliver, please. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I-”

Oliver sat up, worried that she was about to cry. “It’s not your fault. You were right. This would have happened sooner or later. I couldn’t have ignored it all for ever.”

So. Baby steps.

Oliver did go back to work, and slowly things became almost normal.

And he and Julie talked about marriage again. It was brought about by a lunch Oliver had had with his father.

“I met someone who said he’d met you in Italy. A guy from Chicago, an economist. Mounir’s his name.”
This could not be good news. Oliver tried desperately to look indifferent. “Mounir? The name sounds familiar, but there were a lot of people coming and going there. I don’t think I remember much about him.”

“Best you don’t. He’s a good economist, but I heard he’s queer. Lives with another man, if you’d believe it. The nerve of some people, flaunting their depravity like that. If I had my way, they’d all be shot.”

This didn’t surprise Oliver. It was nothing he hadn’t heard before, but it was the first time the subject had come up since the incident with Thomas, several years ago now. The way in which it was said cemented his certainty that his father had reacted the way he did about Thomas simply because he didn’t want Oliver mixing with, or associated with, someone who was gay. He never really thought that there had been anything going on between Oliver and Thomas. Oliver was certain that if his father had had any reason to suspect that they’d been more than friends, he would have taken much more drastic action.

Oliver hummed noncommittally, but inside he was terrified. He’d believed that there was no way word of Elio could ever reach his father, and this was far too close for comfort. There were plenty of other Americans who he’d met in Italy, around the Perlmans’ dinner table. Plenty of people who knew who he was, and who his father was. Plenty of people who might mention the close friendship Oliver had found with Elio. It all seemed so unlikely, still- and yet. He thought he’d been careful before, but it hadn’t been enough.

So it seemed like a prudent time to bring up the subject of marriage again.

“I want to talk about it, Julie. Why are we waiting? We’re going to do it sooner or later. We need to think about where this—“ he gestured between the two of them—“is going. My head of department says he thinks there’ll be a position for me at Yale which fits my area of study better. If I move out of the city, what will you do? If we want to maintain this smokescreen, you’ll have to come along, and if we both move out of the city it makes sense to do it as a married couple.”

“But you’re still so unhappy, Oliver. Better than before, but still unhappy. I’m definitely not ruling it out, but I’m not sure now is the right time.”

“I’m unhappy about something that can’t be fixed. We both know that. I mean- let’s say I tried to work something out with Elio. I move to Yale, maybe he goes to study there. We have a secret affair. It’s not like we’d ever be able to live together or anything. I risk being found out and fired. I risk my father finding out and all that comes with that. It’s a risk for him, too. That’s not an option.

“I don’t want to pressure him. He’s only seventeen, after all. Nobody wants to go through college having a secret affair with a professor the whole time. That’s not what college is about. And besides, how do I really know what this is? It was six weeks. Can you really fall in love in six weeks? What if it was just infatuation on his part? What if it just felt so intense, so important, because it was so short? Maybe if we’d had a bit longer it would’ve all burned out all by itself. I can’t base my life around that, and I can’t ask him to either.”

Julie clearly didn’t believe him. “So now you’re saying you’re not even sure whether you were in love with him?”

“No, I’m not saying that. It was real at the time, and it’s real now. But- how do you know? How do you know it’s the sort of love that’s meant to go on, to be something more?”

She bit her bottom lip as she thought. “You don’t know that. I think that’s where you have to take a leap of faith. And you have to be prepared to put in the work. But you know it was something
special, right?”

“It doesn’t matter. No amount of work is going to make this work out, and you know why. It all comes back to my father again, and—” he scrubbed a hand over his face. “That situation isn’t going to change any time soon. I just don’t know what to do. Sometimes I wish I’d never met Elio at all.”

“Have you talked to him about it? About what he wants, what he expects?”

“Not really. We’ve talked about other things, but not that, directly. And I’m scared that if I ask him, he’ll ask for something I can all too easily give in to. That he’ll ask for an affair, be content with something secret, whatever we can have. And it’s not enough. I don’t want to see him committed to that. If I’m married, if I don’t give him an option, then it’ll be over and he’ll move on.”

“What about you, Oliver? When do you get to move on?”

“I’ve already moved on. There’s nowhere else to go but on. I’ve always known what I’d have to do, always known I wouldn’t get to have a life with someone I love like that. But you and me, Julie, we could have a good life together, couldn’t we?” He grasped her hand, small and slender, between his own. So much like Elio’s and yet utterly different.

“Yes, but, what’s in this for you? I worry about you, worry that you’re doing this for the wrong reasons, and that it’s too soon. I’m worried that you’re not going to happy.”

“And you are?”

“I’m- well, yes, probably. Pretty much. This is fine for me, Oliver. I get the best of both worlds. I get the stability of marriage to a husband who knows I’m also having a love affair with Laura on the side. What more could I hope for? And I’m not going to have to have sex with a man I’m not attracted to, other than in order to get pregnant. I’ll get to have pretty babies. Because I’m not attracted to you like that, but objectively I can look at you and see that you’re a gorgeous man and you’ll have the most beautiful babies. So it’s a good situation for me. It’s you I think we need to worry about.”

Oliver worried about himself too. And what might happen if he ever got found out. “I have to get married, and I have to do it soon. All of my siblings were married by their mid-twenties. My father won’t tolerate anything else. And if I don’t get married, then he will continue to watch me like a hawk, after what happened with Thomas. I’m sure that he doesn’t suspect I’m gay, but he watches the company I keep, which limits my freedom to indulge. There’s no way I can ever have a boyfriend, live with him, anything like that. You know that. But marrying you will bring me stability, too. And I might not want to sleep with you, but you’re my best friend and I do love you for that. There’s no way I can be with the person I’m in love with, but being with you will give me the cover I need to be what I am as much as I can. I cannot see any better way.”

Julie nodded. “Okay. I’ll think about it.”

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The week before Thanksgiving, Julie handed him a white envelope with his name on it in her loopy handwriting. “What’s this?” he said, turning it over between his fingers.

Julie looked strangely nervous, wearing an expression he couldn’t read. “It’s your Christmas present. I know it’s early, but…”

Oliver was becoming more and more confused. “Julie. We’re Jewish. We don’t do Christmas. And even if we did, it’s not for another month.”
“Just open it, Oliver.”

So he did. Folded inside was a stiff, white piece of paper. His name stared up at him, there in black and white.

A plane ticket to Milan.

Before he could take in what it was and what it meant, Julie started to talk.

“Look, don’t be mad. It’s just- Oliver. You have to go back. You have to talk to him, face-to-face. We keep talking about marriage, and I can’t go through with this unless you’re sure. I don’t mean-well, we both know what marriage would be for the two of us. I’m not saying that if we get married I expect it to be something else. I don’t, and that’s fine. I don’t want that. But I do want you to be sure, and I don’t think you are. I know you’re not. You need to see him again.”

Oliver’s brain had had time to go through a whole range of emotions- confusion, elation, hope, trepidation, regret.

“Julie, we’ve been through this. There’s no point. I can’t- there’s no way it could ever be anything. You know it can’t.”

“I’m not saying you should go there to sort things out, because I understand that you don’t see a way to do that. But you have to see him. Just go see him. If nothing else, if you’re determined to go ahead with this marriage, he deserves to hear it straight from you.”

Oliver knew that much was true. He’d been dreading telling Elio, although he’d assumed it was a conversation they’d have by letter or over the phone. That he wouldn’t have to see Elio’s face.

“I don’t know if I can do it, Julie. I was going to write to tell him. The thought of seeing him and the hurt of leaving, going through all that again... it scares me.”

“I understand that. And I know you might get hurt again, but you have to do this. You’re hurting now, aren’t you?”

Oliver nodded.

“Go. And when you come back, if you’re still determined, then we’ll talk about marriage.”

“Really?”

“Really. I promise. Just go.”

So he did.
2007- Interlude

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver argued in B, and reconciled in Menton. Now, several months later, they meet for coffee.
( Oliver’s stream of consciousness plus a whole lot of dialogue)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The email is short and to the point.

Oliver,

I’ll be in the states next month. Are you free to meet on the 8th?

Elio

No pleasantries, no how are you or hope you’re well- it’s borderline curt. Oliver is a little taken aback, honestly. Because Elio is good with words, and he normally uses a lot of them. His letters and, more recently, emails, are usually expressive and chatty and drily humorous.

Oliver checks his calendar and hits reply. Elio has set the tone for the conversation, so Oliver follows his lead.

I have plans in the evening, but lunch or afternoon could work.

Oliver doesn’t have plans, but for some unfathomable reason it seems important that Elio thinks he does. He wants Elio to think he’s the sort of person who has plans on a Saturday night a month in advance.

Messages go back and forth over the coming days and a time and a place are arranged to meet for coffee. Oliver wonders if his willingness to travel to New York smacks of desperation, especially given the fact that he’s supposed to have plans in the evening- plans which would, presumably, be closer to home. Maybe his imaginary plans should have been in New York. That would have been convenient. Oh, you’re going to be in New York? What a coincidence! I’m meeting a friend there for dinner. But of course, the plans can’t be in New York now- because it would be weird not to have mentioned it before.

What’s really weird is the fact that Oliver has fabricated all this nonsense in the first place.

Oliver is surprisingly nervous. He doesn’t know what this meeting is, or what it’s supposed to be. When they saw each other in the summer, a few months ago, they parted amicably- but only just. Is this supposed to be the start of the friendship they talked about aspiring to? It wouldn’t seem to be- the tone of Elio’s email didn’t exactly scream let’s meet up and rekindle a tentative friendship.

Not knowing what this is supposed to be makes it all the more difficult for Oliver to know what to wear. He’s not typically a man who gives his clothes much consideration, despite the fact that he is now Officially Gay and, according to Julie, that means he’s supposed to pay attention to things like
that. He doesn’t want to look like he’s trying too hard, or trying at all, actually. He’s just aiming to look like someone who’s going out to me a friend for a casual coffee on a Saturday afternoon. Jeans, then- and a shirt, plus a sweater, because it’s November and it’s cold out. Is it cold enough to need a hat? Will he look silly?

He is clearly overthinking this. First the make-believe evening plans, now the question of what to wear.

He calls Julie. She laughs at him and tells him he’s overthinking this- which he already knew. That’s why he called her in the first place. “Oliver. It’ll be fine. Just go, have coffee, talk to him. Do you still have that blue sweater? You know the one. Wear that. Ooh- or the black one is nice. Black goes with everything. Besides- you’re not trying to impress him. You’re just meeting a friend, right?”

But is he? He still doesn’t know what this is. He decides to treat this as he would a meeting with an old friend from college. Casual, yes, but he doesn’t want to look like he’s let himself go.

***

Elio’s already sitting in the corner of the coffee shop with an almost-empty mug in front of him. When Oliver walks through the door, Elio is engrossed in his laptop, chin propped on his left hand as he uses his right to scroll through whatever it is he’s reading.

“Hi.”

Elio looks up and smiles, wide and genuine. He snaps his laptop shut and reaches around the small table to move his bag from the chair opposite. Oliver sinks down into it, grateful to be out of the biting wind.

Elio moves to stand. “I was going to get another coffee. What can I get you?”

“Oh. Oh, no, wait, I’ll go, what do you-“ Oliver fumbles in his pocket, trying to extract his wallet from his slightly-too-tight jeans.

“It’s okay. Sit down. You can get the next one.”

Elio goes to the counter, leaving Oliver to take off his coat and scarf and drape them on the back of his chair. It looks as though Elio has been here for a while- as well as the laptop (sleek, expensive) there’s a pile of papers on the table, stacked beneath a black folder which Oliver really wants to peek at. Obviously he doesn’t. There’s also a grey scarf and, yes, a hat. Maybe it wouldn’t have looked stupid after all. Oliver can feel that his ears are red from the cold.

“So.” Elio’s back, standing over Oliver with two enormous mugs of coffee. He hands one to Oliver, who wraps his cold hands around it as Elio sits back down opposite. “How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. Things have been- still are- weird. It’s a lot of changes and a lot to get used to. But we’re getting settled down. The boys aren’t taking it as well as we’d hoped they might, but we’re working on it.”

“Mmm. Did they have any idea?”

“No. None at all. I think they’re still in shock. Alan says they feel as though their whole life was built around a lie.”

“I know a little bit about how that feels.”
Oliver feels a pang of guilt. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologising, Oliver.”

“Sorry. It’s just—” Elio rolls his eyes, and Oliver changes the subject. “So. What brings you over here?”

Elio gestures toward the pile of papers, now with his laptop balanced on top. “I have to see my lawyer, sign a few papers for the divorce, before it’s all finalised. But mostly because I have a couple of interviews lined up. I quit my job when the breakup was happening, but it’s time I got back to work. There are a couple of possibilities in Italy, actually, but I’d prefer to come back over here.”

“Oh. Where?”

“Well, you know. Close enough to here that it made sense to see if you wanted to meet.”

“Could you get your old job back?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But I’m not interested. I need to get away from there, go somewhere I’m not likely to bump into my ex-wife every time I go to the grocery store.”

That makes sense. Oliver’s happy when he bumps into his ex-wife at the grocery store (although when it happens it does mean his shopping trips become much longer than anticipated, because they always end up talking and usually going for coffee), but he knows that’s not normal for divorced couples.

“And where are you hoping to live?”

“It depends on where I take a job, but who knows? I mean- the house sale is going through, so there’ll be money from that, but it probably won’t go far if I want to live in the city. Not all of us just got left millions of dollars in their father’s will.”

So Elio knows. Of course he knows. It’s no secret that Oliver’s father’s death made him a very rich man. But. “I don’t have it any more.”

Elio laughs, disbelieving. “What do you mean? Did you buy yourself a yacht or something?”

“I got rid of it. I didn’t want his money. I did something with it that would have made him so mad. And it felt great.” Oliver grins. He can’t hide his glee. He doesn’t want to talk about it, but god. Those anonymous donations felt like such a fuck you to his father, who would have hated the charities Oliver had chosen to support with the obscene amount of money he’d been left.

Elio’s eyes widen. “Now you have to tell me. What did you do? Didn’t you at least want to keep it for your boys?”

“No. He left them more than enough anyway. Money is useful, but you can have too much of a good thing. They’ll both be multi-millionaires at twenty-one- they don’t need any more on top of that.”

Elio’s eyes widen. “So it’s true what the papers said. Millions of dollars. C’mon. Tell me.”

“It was a lot of money. Not as much as some people think, because most of his money stayed tied up in the business, and a lot went to my mom. Maybe I’ll tell you about it some day. But not now. It makes me sound like… I don’t know. It sounds like something someone would do just to make
themselves look good. Or for publicity. And I didn’t want it to be like that. A poor, spoiled little rich boy who gave away his daddy’s money because his daddy was mean to him. And he could do it because he didn’t need it, because he already has everything he could ever want. I didn’t do it to make myself look good, or to feel good about what a great person I am.”

“I won’t think that.”

“Good. Because it didn’t make me feel like a good person. It made me feel like a better person then him, but that’s not saying much. Mostly, though? I did it to spite him, and that’s why it felt so great.” He’s grinning again. He just can’t help it.

Elio laughs. “Look at you. This makes you so happy. And I’m guessing you did something philanthropic with it, so the reason doesn’t matter. The outcome is the same. Or-” Elio looks as though he’s just had a terrible realisation- “God, Oliver, did you burn it?”

Now it’s Oliver’s turn to laugh. “No! Though that would have been spectacular. I could’ve gotten it all in dollar bills and had a massive bonfire. We would have had a party, with champagne and fireworks to celebrate the old bastard’s death. Would you have come?”

“Would I have been invited?”

“Well, probably not. It would have been weird, after all these years, to invite you to a party to celebrate my father’s death.”

“An invitation to that would be weird at any time, really. And I’m not sure I would have come. It would probably have fallen right around the time when I was desperately trying to save my second failing marriage.”

“Oh, right.” Elio has brought up the subject of his marriage, so it seems like as good a time as any to ask. “So… you’ve been married. To two women.” Oliver knows it’s the coward’s way out, but he’s nervous about asking and concentrates on stirring his coffee so he doesn’t have to meet Elio’s eyes.

“No, well of course, I didn’t mean-“

Elio grins. “I know. And yes, I have. So…?”

“So. Nothing, really. I was just wondering. About you.”

“About me?” Elio looks puzzled for a moment, then raises his eyebrows. “Oh. Right. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe the question you want to ask isn’t the one about my marriages, which you already knew the answer to. What you meant to say was Elio, are you bisexual? Or was it just me?”

This is, of course, exactly what Oliver wants to know. Mostly because he’s curious, but also because it’s something that seems important. Elio’s called him out, so there’s no point in being coy about it now. He goes for directness in his answer, knowing that it’s not what Elio will expect.

“So. Nothing, really. I was just wondering. About you.”

“About me?” Elio looks puzzled for a moment, then raises his eyebrows. “Oh. Right. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe the question you want to ask isn’t the one about my marriages, which you already knew the answer to. What you meant to say was Elio, are you bisexual? Or was it just me?”

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“Suppose that’s what I asked. What would you say?” He bites back a smile. This is why he fell for Elio in the first place, all those years ago. The constant back-and-forth, the give and take, always seeing who could push the other further.

Elio smiles, taking the bait willingly and knowingly. “I’d say that’s a very forward question to ask of someone you hardly know. But I’d appreciate your honesty in saying what you meant, so I’d
answer honestly. Which would go something like: Yes, Oliver, I am. I’ve married two women, and I’ve loved other people of both sexes. In terms of number of people I’ve been with and time spent in relationships with them, women just about have an edge over men. But the relationships I’ve had with men have been more… intense.”

Oliver chooses for respond to the first point. “I will never hardly know you, Elio.”

“Perhaps.”

Oliver has lost the upper hand here, so in an attempt to regain it he goes for blunt and slightly inappropriate. "So, you're bi. What's that like?"

"It's a lot like being gay, but with more girls. So, you're gay, but you've been married to a woman for twenty years and had two children with her. What's that like?"

"Not as bad as you might think, actually. And you never answered my question."

"I did too."

"Not really."

"What do you think? I suppose you think it's nice to have double the choice. It's not that simple."

"I don't suppose it is. It's just- I've met a lot of straight people. And a good number of people who've gay. But I'm not sure I've ever come across someone who says they're bi".

"It's not a dirty word, Oliver." He sighs. "But a lot of people don't say much about it. I get what you mean, and I know you don't mean to offend. But it's been harder than you might think. I mean-straight? That's something people just assume. As long as you're with women, at least. As long as they don’t see any evidence to the contrary. Nobody ever stops to think you might be something other than straight. And gay? That's something people understand. They might think you're disgusting, or depraved, or diseased. They might not agree with it, but they get it. Instead of women, you like men. It's simple enough, at least. Maybe they think you’ve just got it backwards, because you’re a bit broken somehow. But liking both? That's hard for people to get their heads around.

“You know a friend said to me once, while I was in college- if you like both, why don't you just stick to girls? Wouldn't that be a lot easier?” Elio shakes his head as he contemplates the ridiculousness of such a question.

Oliver secretly thinks that the friend has a point. It wouldn’t have stopped him feeling the way he does about men, but his own life would have been simpler, happier, if he could just have loved a woman in the way he should have been able to. If he’d not been made the way he is. But he’s not going to tell Elio any of that. “What did you say?”

"What could I say? I asked him why he didn't leave his girlfriend, who cheated on him repeatedly, and stick to people who didn’t hurt him all the time. Asked him why he didn't just decide to not love her any more.”

Oliver just nods his head, slightly, and lets Elio go on.

“And then you get Why not make up your mind? Pick one! People think it’s about wanting the best of both worlds, double the dating pool and all that- but it’s not. And you end up getting the worst of both. A lot of gay people don't like it. They think that you're hiding, or lying to yourself, because you’re just too chicken to come all the way out of the closet. And a lot of women are freaked out by
it. You get all the shit associated with being gay, without the support and community that a lot of 'proper' gay men seem to find. And to top it all off? People assume you've had it easy."

“You seem pretty angry about it.” It’s clearly a subject Oliver shouldn’t have broached.

“Oh, fuck off. You're not my therapist, Oliver. And if you were, you’d know that I’m actually remarkably well-adjusted, and much more comfortable with my sexuality than I appear to be right now. Sometimes it sucks, but I don’t let bitterness about it rule my life. Besides, you're one to talk. I'm guessing you have plenty of anger of your own. But I bet you hide it really well. I bet nobody sees what’s beneath your skin.”

Elio definitely has the upper hand now. Or he would, if this hadn’t stopped being about who’s besting who.

Oliver feels the urge to apologise, though he couldn’t say why. He does know he shouldn’t do it. Instead he nods toward Elio’s empty cup. “You want another?”

***

Oliver hoped that the break in the conversation brought about by him going to get more coffee would act as a reset, take them back to something more normal. He returns with the drinks and two muffins, too- *pick one, I'm happy with either-* but after Elio thanks him, they fall into a strained silence while Elio picks at crumbs and chocolate chips. It stretches on and becomes increasingly awkward. When Elio speaks, it’s unexpected and raw in the quiet between them.

“This is- none of this is why I came here. I didn’t really want to see you to make small talk. Or to argue again. I wanted to say that- *you*…” There’s a long pause, and Oliver has to fight the urge to fill it, because he knows that Elio will say what he wants to say, given time. “It’s not that I haven’t thought about it. A lot.”

Oliver knows what he means.

“It’s practically all I’ve thought about since I saw you. And it’s… every time I come back to the same conclusion. It wouldn’t work. And I don’t just mean that it wouldn’t work now, because it’s too soon after my divorce, or- or your divorce, or whatever. I mean-“ Elio stops and thinks again. Oliver waits.

There’s resolve in Elio’s tone when he finally speaks. “I mean that it’s done, that it could never happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shit.” Elio scrunches up his nose and leans his head onto his hands, pressing his fingers to his forehead. “I could do with something stronger if we’re going to have this conversation. Which is silly, because I knew we would- at least, I intended to. I knew I should’ve suggested a bar.”

“Elio. Whatever you want to say, just say it. We don’t have to talk about it if- if you just want me to listen, to- to hear you out. Or whatever.”

“Okay.” Elio looks up again. “You know us. What we had. We both knew it’s something you’re only given once. And I don’t mean that you only find it with one person. I mean *you can only have it once.* If you let it go, or lose it, or don’t fight hard enough to keep it, you can’t get it back. You can’t come back to that same person twenty years later and think that you’re going to find it again. Because once it’s gone, it’s gone for good.”
Oliver would never, not in a million years, have suspected that this was what Elio was going to say.

“You don’t know that, Elio. You don’t know any of it for sure.”

“Well, I do know I couldn’t find it with anyone else. I tried and I tried, and I never came close. I’ve had some wonderful relationships, but there was always something missing.”

Oliver sees the moment when Elio realises that he’s given too much of himself away and starts to close off. “I shouldn’t have said all of that. It’s true, but- shit. I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

“You really think that’s true?” Oliver already knows what Elio’s answer will be, and suddenly realises that’s because he’s right. A part of him has always known it too.

Elio doesn’t answer. Not directly, anyway. “There just wouldn’t be any point, Oliver. We’d always be searching for something we could never have again. And how could we bear for it to be anything less?”

Oliver thinks he might cry. Too much thinking about things he’d long left buried and hadn’t expected to have to examine today. “I never said I expected anything. Wanted anything, even.”

“But you do. Of course you do.”

There’s no answer to that, but the silence this time is short. Elio starts to speak again.

“So let’s talk about practical reasons why it could never work.”

“Um. Okay?” This is an unexpected tangent from an already unexpected conversation.

“Oliver. When did you last go on a date?”

Oliver thinks. The answer is probably what Elio expects, but it’s embarrassing all the same.

“Does the night you and I went to see a movie in B. count as a date?”

Elio laughs, though not unkindly. “No, Oliver. That does not count as a date. Though it was a nice evening. Oh- and nothing you did with your wife counts as a date, either.”

“Well in that case… I think, maybe, 1984?”

“That’s-” Elio pauses, clearly doing the math. “That’s more than half a lifetime ago.”

“Does that matter?”

“Well, no. But it means you’re out of practice, and anyway- dating was different back then. You haven’t thought about dating since you split from your wife?”

“I suppose I have, in the abstract. But things have been complicated. And you’re right. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Oh, now that I can tell you. The internet, Oliver. There are websites for that. That’s how people meet people.”

“Have you?”

“Well, no. Not personally. It wasn’t really a thing before I met my almost-ex-wife.”
“And nobody since?”

“No. I’m not in that place yet. But given time? I’ll probably give it a try. Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“Look. You need to do things. You’ve just been Oliver, the married family man. You’re out now, but you haven’t lived it.”

“I need to live gay now? Do the whole gay scene thing? I think I’m a bit old for that.”

“Well, you’re not too old for that, but that’s not the point. Whatever you do, I think you need to date people. I think you need to learn how to be in a relationship. Not a hidden one, or a pretend one, or one with a two week expiry date. An actual relationship. You need to learn how to do that.”

Oliver just nods. He hadn’t given this much thought. He’d just assumed that he’d come out, and somehow… he doesn’t even know what he’d thought. It’s something he’s going to have to work out.

The silence that follows is comfortable, as they sip at drinks before eventually settling into conversation about books and other less loaded topics.

Elio seems reluctant when he says, “I have to go. I need to work on this interview stuff some more.” He stands up and starts packing his work into his bag.

***

Oliver has one final question, something he has to know, before they part ways. They’re standing outside the coffee shop when he asks, “So what now?”

“For you and me?”

Oliver nods. He doesn’t trust himself to speak, because if he does he’ll probably say something needy like can I see you again?

“I think we work on being friends. If you want that. If you want it to be something more, then it’s probably best if we don’t. Because it’s just going to hurt when we realise that it can’t happen- or at least, that it can’t be what we had before. That’s what I wanted to get clear before we go any further. Not just for you, but for me too. I needed to say the words and make it real. Because now you know, so neither of us will be wondering where we stand. Or hoping for something that’s not an option.”

Oliver certainly knows where he stands now. And Elio’s right- it probably did need to be said. Because it’s made Oliver think about things he didn’t even know he needed to think about. His mind is running in circles and much as he wants to hold onto these moments with Elio he needs to be alone to process it all.

It’s icy outside, and Oliver’s breath comes out in a cloud of smoke. He’s not sure how this goodbye is supposed to go. Is it a hugging situation? Or just a wave and a later?

Elio stops to adjust his bag on his shoulder, and Oliver’s not paying attention so he almost bumps into him. When Elio turns around they’re close, close enough for Oliver to smell a hint of cinnamon on Elio’s breath. They stay there, breathing quietly in the cold. Oliver wants, so desperately, to lean in and taste him. To see if the way he kisses is the same as it was twenty years ago. To see if it still
makes him feel the same as it did.

They breathe each other’s air a moment longer, and he knows that Elio’s thinking all the same things. *Once more, for old times’ sake?*

Elio wets his lips and breathes a little louder, then steps back. He shakes his head slightly before turning to walk away.

He doesn’t look back.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in a week? Is this the shape of things to come? (No. I seriously doubt it.) I sort of feel like I should sit on this one and post it at a more opportune moment. Space them out, because the next one could be goodness knows how long. But I can’t do it, so have it now. Not that anyone’s probably looking for reading material on a Friday night. But Friday night is when it's finished, so that's when you're getting it!
1987- Christmas

Chapter Summary

Having not seen Elio for 4 months, Oliver returns to spend Christmas in B.

Chapter Notes

It was impossible to do this chapter without lifting some dialogue straight from the book, since this story is more book-based than film-based and there were things that just wouldn't make sense without it. Sorry!

Oh wow, this was difficult. This visit is such a pivotal point in the book and I don't feel I've done it justice at all. Not going to overthink it too much, though, because I don't think we're supposed to know what really happened and what motivated them. So this is the interpretation that fits this particular story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver returned to B. two days before Christmas, with butterflies churning in his stomach as Manfredi turned the car onto the driveway leading to the house. Oliver hadn’t spoken Italian at all since returning home, but he and Manfredi had chatted easily, and Oliver had impressed himself with how quickly his command of the language had come back to him.

And then- there he was. There was the house. The day was sunny and bright, and Oliver could almost have believed that it was still summer; that nothing had changed. Yet little things gave away the fact that things weren’t the same at all. The low angle of the sun, a white glare in his eyes. The bare branches of the trees, giving him a completely different, uninterrupted view of the house. And, when he got indoors, the warm smell of wood smoke from the roaring fire in the living room.

There was nobody waiting outside to greet him, but Manfredi had told him to go through into the house. Oliver stood, tentative, by the living room door, not sure whether he should knock to announce his presence or just go in. Fortunately he was saved the trouble of deciding when Samuel turned and noticed him. “Oliver! You’re here! What are you standing there for? There’s no need to stand on ceremony, you’re practically family. Come here, come here.”

Oliver dropped his backpack and smiled as Samuel came over and wrapped him in a hug, patting his back in an affectionate, paternal way which was so completely unlike his own father. Annella quickly rose from her seat to follow, kissing him on both cheeks before holding him at arms’ length to remark on how well he looked.

“Oliver. We missed you. Samuel- go find Mafalda. She mustn’t have heard him arrive.” The professor nodded and walked briskly toward the kitchen, calling Mafalda’s name.

Which just left one person. Elio got up from where he’d been sitting, and then stood still, awkwardly, not knowing what to do. His hands worried the hem of his oversized jumper, and everything about him screamed nervous and unsure. Oliver looked at him, trying to be surreptitious,
trying not to stare. Still tall and a little too skinny. His hair, no longer summer-short, just begging for
Oliver’s fingers to tangle in it and feel the weight of those new curls between his fingers.

Annella stood back and cast a look between the two of them. “Elio! Aren’t you going to say
hello?” Her voice is mildly disapproving, as though to say you’re not a child. I shouldn’t have to
tell you to be polite to a guest.

Elio bit his lip and gave a small, uncertain smile. “Hi.”

Oliver knew his expression was very similar when he replied. “Hi.”

Followed by a pause. There were several things Oliver wanted to do. He could say it’s so good to
see you. I missed you. He could go over to Elio and wrap him in his arms. Or he could stay where
he was and hold his arms open, say come here, and wait for Elio to come to him. Fold him into an
embrace like lovers reunited. Because isn’t that what they are?

He could have whispered his own name into Elio’s ear. Because here I am, myself, complete, with
you.

Instead, he waited to see what Elio would do.

Nothing. Seconds passed, both of them waiting.

And then whatever moment had or had not been building between them was broken when Samuel
bustled back into the room, with Mafalda following, still drying her hands on her apron. In a flurry
of just-comprehensible Italian she admired Oliver, chastised him for not eating better, and promised
to feed him up.

***

That first, awkward encounter, set the tone for his visit.

He shouldn’t have been surprised, really, because their phone calls and letters had taken on a similar
mood as time had gone on. Although Elio’s letters still had occasional bursts of effusive happiness,
generally they had become more sterile and anonymous, as though he could have been just anybody
writing to just anybody else.

Oliver felt as though he’d missed some vital chance in those first few moments back in the house.
He should have let himself be honest. Should have just gone ahead and said exactly what he’d felt
the moment he saw Elio sitting there nervously in the corner. But what would have been the point?
Why had Oliver gone back there in the first place? What, exactly, was he hoping to achieve?

At first he was horribly jetlagged. With no routine or structure, nowhere he had to be and nothing he
had to do, he made the mistake of napping during the day, which left him unable to sleep at night.
His body clock was completely out of synch which made him groggy and incoherent.

His second night was Christmas Eve, and he lay in bed, restlessly tossing and turning. Eventually he
gave up on sleep and went out onto the balcony. The cool air and a cigarette might wake him up
properly, reset his body and brain so that he could start over again with trying to sleep.

But once out there he couldn’t help his thoughts drifting to Elio. Just through the other door. Right
there. Sleeping? Probably. Oliver knew that that Elio was a heavy sleeper. He remembered trying
to rouse him for a morning run after a late night spent making love.

Oliver found himself with his hand on the doorknob. Found that the door wasn’t locked. He opened
it silently and snuck in.

*If he wakes up, we’ll talk. If he doesn’t, I’ll just go back to bed.* It feels like leaving the decision up to fate. In a brave attempt to give fate a little push in the right direction, he whispered Elio’s name. Quietly, and then a little less so.

Nothing. Elio’s breathing was still deep and steady. Fast asleep.

Oliver went back out the same way he came in, closing the door quietly, and eventually fell into an uneasy sleep.

***

Christmas day was a happy affair. The Perlmans didn’t celebrate Christmas itself, but there was still a festive atmosphere in the house. For one thing they had a tall, elaborately decorated tree in the corner of the living room.

Samuel had caught Oliver eyeing it on his first day back in Italy. “It’s Mafalda’s, really. She and Manfredi, and Anchise, of course, are Catholics. In this house, all traditions and celebrations are welcome. And besides, you’ve studied the classics. You know as well as I do that traditions surrounding greenery in midwinter, everlasting life in the cold, dark parts of the year, predate the organised religions we know today. And why not? It makes a beautiful sort of sense, to celebrate light and life in the darkest days of the year. You don’t need to be any particular religion, or any at all, in fact, to appreciate that. Besides, it’s a pretty thing to have in the house.”

Oliver had been invited to spend most of Christmas day with Vimini and her family. Annella had encouraged him. “Go! You should go, Oliver. She would love to see you. They’ll have a big Christmas dinner, and you’ll have a wonderful time. We don’t do much on Christmas day, anyway. Mafalda and the others go to Mass in the morning and then to celebrate with family in town. Things will be quiet here.”

Oliver had bought a pile of books for Vimini and within it, almost as a joke, he’d included a copy of his own book. Hardbound and beautiful and signed, of course, by the author.

“I don’t expect you to read it. I just thought you might like to have it. Since I wrote a lot of it here, and all.”

She just smiled.

There was something enormously enjoyable about spending Christmas with a child, even a child who was so wise beyond her years. Oliver was grateful for the unexpected friendship he’d found with her.

And if she wanted to sit by the fire and talk about Elio, while her parents cleared away the dinner things, than that was okay. And not unexpected, because things between him and Elio were almost painfully awkward and Vimini always noticed things. She was quick to see the truth of it. “You missed him, didn’t you? Have you told him so?” Oliver shook his head, feeling as though he’d been chastised. “Has he told you how he missed you? Because he did.”

“I know that. But it’s not as simple as just saying it.”

“Why not? I think it is- or at least, it could be. If you wanted it to be.”

Oliver didn’t have an answer for that, so he just shrugged his shoulders.
“You should just hug him. You’d both feel better.”

Oliver laughed. “Of all the things I’ve ever heard you say, I think that’s the most childlike.”

“Only because it takes a child to see how simple things really are. When you grow up I think you lose the ability to know when something’s really quite straightforward.”

When he smiled at her, it wasn’t the condescending smile of an adult who believes that a child is sweet but naïve. Rather it was a smile that said I get why you would think that. It’s not unreasonable. But still- “I think you’re wrong.”

“Well. You won’t know unless you give it a try. What do you have to lose?”

Nothing.

But also, if the worst happened, if my father found out about how I feel? Everything. The people I care about, my freedom, myself.

***

He and Elio rode into town to the bookstore, Oliver’s hands freezing in the cool air because he hadn’t thought to pack gloves. About halfway to town they were riding side-by-side, saying little, when Elio offered to lend his. “Aren’t your hands cold?”

Oliver distinctly remembered a moment in the summer when his hands had been freezing from swimming in the sea and Elio, lying half-asleep in the sun, had looked enticingly warm. He’d squealed when Oliver slipped his hands under his shirt.

He could do it now, teasing. Are my hands cold? I’m not sure. What do you think? They would both laugh. Elio would bat his hands away, shrieking.

But they weren’t those summer people any more. So. “Oh. No, no. I’m fine.”

They had a pleasant chat with the bookseller but didn’t linger. The town was grey and empty, and most of the shops were closed down for the Christmas break, or, in some cases, for the whole of winter. It was a shame, because despite the cold Oliver could have been tempted by the prospect of gelato, simply for nostalgia’s sake.

Can you be nostalgic for something, a person, a place, a time that was mere months ago?

***

One warmer afternoon Oliver took another trip to town to call Julie from the post office. The Perlmans would have gladly let him use their phone but, although he knew they wouldn’t have deliberately eavesdropped, he really didn’t want to be overheard.

“Oliver! How are things going?”

“Fine, fine. Everyone is well. Lots of good food- it’s just as good as I remembered. And my book looks great, it’s-”

Julie chips in. “Oliver. Let me stop you right there. This isn’t what I wanted to hear. If you mention that book of yours one more time I swear I’ll-“

“Okay. Okay, sorry. So I, um… I haven’t talked to him.”
“Are you kidding me? Oliver, what’s wrong with you?”

“It’s hard. I don’t know what to say.”

“So the two of you haven’t…”

“No. Nothing.”

“Oh. Well, you still have a few more days. What do you want to say to him?”

“I don’t know.”

There’s a long, expensive silence, followed by a sigh from Julie’s end of the line.

“I thought you’d thought about this?”

He had. Agonised over it, in fact. How to tackle this… whatever it is. A break up, maybe? But then- can you break up when there’s nothing to break in the first place? Nothing with a name and a definition at least. So if there’s nothing to break, surely it’s easier to just say and do nothing? It seemed to be working just fine so far.

Or had he come here to tell Elio everything? Maybe to be together one last time?

He didn’t even know whether Elio had been hoping for anything like that. Or if Elio was being reticent because he didn’t want to have to confess that he’d moved on. Maybe he’d moved on and he didn’t want to make things awkward if Oliver was too needy.

But surely he could see how torn apart Oliver was feeling?

“I’ve thought about it a lot, but I still don’t know the answer.”

“Promise me you’ll work this out, Oliver. Promise me. There might not be another chance. Just promise me you’ll talk to him.”

“Promise. I’ll see you next week.”

“And I know it’s early but I’ll wish you a happy New Year, because we probably won’t talk again before then.”

“You too. Let’s make it a good one.”

***

That evening, Oliver talked to Samuel. Properly talked to him.

Not at first. There were plenty of lighter topics to begin with- lots to say about the work they both loved, for one thing. The second book Oliver had planned, Samuel’s research, and the classes they each taught. Annella drifted out of the room, bored.

Shortly after she left, the topic they’d been discussing was done, leaving them in silence apart from the crackling of the fire. Samuel looked at him, and Oliver felt the urge to squirm under the gaze he was sure could see right through him.

Then he spoke. “I hope you don’t mind me saying, but I can’t help but notice that things seem strange between you and Elio. The two of you were such good friends back in the summer. Is everything alright?”
Oliver swirled the ice around in the bottom of his almost-empty glass, whilst debating what to say.

“Things are different.”

“Well. Of course. We’re all different people to who we were in the summer. Different to the people we were yesterday or will be tomorrow. Change is one of life’s only certainties. So things will not be the same. Perhaps you have outgrown your friendship with Elio. Perhaps the reality of your life-your work, your book, your classes- has changed you. Made you feel conscious of how many things you have lived which he has yet to do. Or maybe you feel he has become distant. Maybe neither of you know what to say to the other, now that things are, as you said, different. But that’s not a reason to lose a good friend. Or whatever it is the two of you were.”

Oliver was torn. He wanted to continue the conversation, but at the same time could see no good in taking this line of discussion any further.

“It doesn’t really matter whether we were close or not. You’re right. We live in different worlds. You- you’ve heard of my father?”

The professor merely nods, once, as though to say yes of course, what of him?

“He wishes for me to get married. He will not tolerate me living as a bachelor for much longer. I’ve already displeased him by following the path I chose at college, though he did allow me that choice. But when it comes to my private life… well. Now I’ve got my doctorate he expects me to settle down, and he will make things intolerably unpleasant for me if things don’t go the way he expects. His words and actions have made that quite clear.”

Oliver didn’t want to go into more detail than that. What could be more shameful than to confess that he’s frightened of his own father? That he knows the way his father treats other people and yet does nothing to stop him? That his father isn’t proud of him, isn’t happy about what he does? That he’s not worthy of being loved even by the man who made him?

Samuel was calm as always. Oliver could see him listening, and then taking his time to think before responding. “I can’t pretend I haven’t heard things about your father, Oliver. Things that give me… concerns, shall we say? About your wellbeing, amongst other things. I’m not going to pry, but if there are things you want to say, I’m happy to listen and I hope you know you’ll find no judgement from me. In fact- if you ever want to talk, about anything, I’m always here.”

Oliver felt immense gratitude for the fact that Samuel didn’t qualify his offer with “I know you’re a grown man and can look after yourself but…” Because it felt like an acknowledgement of the fact that there are some things you can’t do by yourself, or shouldn’t have to- despite how old and self-sufficient you might get. That there are some things that Oliver can’t do by himself, and that’s somehow okay.

“So.” Samuel continued, “Your father and his expectations. Where does that leave you?”

“There’s a girl.” Oliver blurted out the words the moment Samuel finished his sentence.

“Ah.” Samuel merely nodded, smiled a little, and raised his eyebrows ever-so-slightly.

“And we- I think we’re going to- I’m going to ask her to marry me.” In a flash of certainty he knew it to be true.

“Well. That would be wonderful, wouldn’t it?”

“Um. Yeah.” Oliver was aware that this wasn’t the enthusiasm expected from a man who just
confessed his intentions to propose. He tried again. “Yes! Of course.” And he wasn’t entirely lying. Because of all the choices available to him, marriage to Julie would indeed be wonderful. He found himself smiling despite himself.

“I’m happy for you.” Samuel waited, again, for Oliver to continue. He didn’t say but what has this to do with you and Elio? Because there was no point in pretending that he didn’t know exactly what this had to do with them.

And Oliver did continue, eventually. “We were- um, we were talking about Elio.”

“We were.” Samuel lit a cigarette. He held the packet towards Oliver, who refused with a shake of his head. “Have you talked to him?”

Oliver shook his head again.

“You don’t need me to tell you that he deserves to hear it from you.” Oliver felt certain that it was the closest Samuel would ever get to acknowledging what he knew about Elio and himself.

“I know.”

At that moment Annella came through the door. “Samuel? Oliver? Would you like coffee? I was just going to make some.” She stopped. “Is everything alright? You both look terribly serious.”

Oliver took this as his cue to leave. “It’s fine. I was just about to go to bed, actually, so no. Thank you.”

Annela laughed and kissed him on both cheeks as he left to go upstairs. “You Americans, you always sleep so much. You need to have some more espresso and sit up and talk a bit longer.”

But Oliver didn’t need more caffeine, because there was no point in putting off talking to Elio for any longer. He went back to his room and paced for a moment, feeling shaky and sick to his stomach with apprehension. He put on a sweater in a vain attempt to feel warm and calm himself down.

And then he knocked on Elio’s door.

***

“Want to talk?”

Elio didn’t respond. He way lying in bed with the covers pulled up to his chin, his eyes wide and owlish in the low light of the lamp. He didn’t look as though he’d been sleeping, or even trying to. Oliver went over to the bed. One foot in front of the other. One step. Two, three. He sat down on the edge, keeping a careful distance between them.

There was no need for preamble. “I might be getting married in the spring.”

Elio looked puzzled. The way someone might look if a good friend had kept such a secret. We were such close friends, how could you never have mentioned this? Her? How could we have spent a whole summer together and you never once mentioned this thing, this person who’s so important in your life? Hence his response. “But you never said anything.”

And how could Oliver answer that? “Well, it’s been on and off for more than two years.”

Elio nodded and his face broke into a broad smile. “I think it’s wonderful news.”
There was a moment of quiet while Oliver searched his face. He appeared genuine, so much so that Oliver wondered if he’d imagined the whole thing. If Elio was keeping his distance simply because he didn’t want Oliver to think that what they had been to one another had meant something. But then- he saw something flash across Elio’s face. Understanding.

Oh, Elio.

“Do you mind?”

The genuine smile was gone, replaced with a grimace of badly-hidden misery when Elio replied, “You’re being silly.”

And Oliver knew he was being silly, but he just hadn’t known what else to say. Silly in so many ways. Stupid. Idiotic, even.

Silly, because of course I don’t mind. I don’t care what you do. You’re nothing to me.

No. Not that.

Silly, because of course I don’t mind. Why would I? How would I dare to mind when I know I have no right to do so? I have no claim over you.

Not that, either.

Silly, because of course I mind. Why would you even need to ask?

Silly to ask a question you know I cannot answer.

Silly to ask something that will only hurt us both to think about.

Oliver wondered whether he’d asked because giving Elio a chance to speak would ease his own conscience.

Or whether he just wished that Elio would speak, would say something. Would mind.

Is it better to speak or to die?

Speak now, Elio, or forever hold your peace.

***

When Elio did finally say something, it was with an air of finality. As though they both knew that Elio wouldn’t say that he minded, and Oliver wouldn’t push for a real answer, so they might as well just move on. So. “Will you be getting in bed now?”

“No. Not that.

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“No. Not that.

Silly, because of course I don’t mind.”

It was sort of true, because Oliver didn’t want to do just anything. He wanted to do everything. I want to do that thing that always made you giggle, even at the most inopportune moments. I want to do the things that made you squirm under my hands. I want to do that thing we did, once, that almost made you scream. I want to do the things that make you forget where you end and I begin and where I end and you begin. To make you forget your name, my name, until neither of us know who’s who any more and it doesn’t matter.

Or maybe just something, anything, to make you smile again.
Oliver slipped off his shoes and lay down on the bed beside Elio. Both on their sides, they looked at one another. Oliver knew that things, whatever this thing was or had been between them, had ended now. And knowing it, with this new certainty, hurt even more than he’d anticipated.

“How long do you think this will go on?” This treacherous, quiet pain already festering inside him.

“Not long, I hope.” Of course Elio would understand his question. There was never any doubt about that. One and the same, hurting the same. No more words needed. Nothing left to say.

So they simply lay there. Oliver looked and looked, aware that this would be the last chance he’d get to be with Elio like this. Breathing in near-perfect synchronicity, until Oliver leaned in and kissed him. A goodbye kiss, almost innocent—until Elio moved to deepen it and—

“I can’t do this.” Oliver pulled back sharply.

“I can.”

“Yes, but I can’t.”

Oliver saw anger and hurt written on Elio’s face. He had to give him at least a tiny bit of honesty. Only moments ago he said he didn’t want to do anything at all, but his resolve was broken and he could no longer pretend that was true.

“I’d love nothing better than to take your clothes off and at the very least hold you. But I can’t.”

I can’t, I can’t, I can’t. But never before had Oliver so desperately needed to feel someone’s skin against his own.

Elio’s arms moved around his head and gripped him, hard. “Then maybe you shouldn’t stay. They know about us.”

“I figured.” Because of course they knew, and of course he shouldn’t stay.

“How?”

“By the way your father spoke. You’re lucky. My father would have carted me off to a correctional facility.”

Elio didn’t respond.

They lay there for what might have been moments, might have been hours. Completely still.

Until Oliver pushed himself up from the bed, picked up his shoes in one hand and walked away, closing the door softly behind him.

***

That night drew a line under Oliver and Elio. Oliver was left in no doubt, the next day, that it was over, done, time to move on.

After leaving Elio’s bed he’d gone back to his room, buried his face in his pillow and cried. A lot. He’d woken up with sore, red eyes, a hoarse throat a damp pillow. Annella noticed his appearance, and he blamed it on an overindulgence in wine whilst chatting to Samuel the night before.

But that morning he felt strangely removed from the situation. He was mostly relieved that it was finished and they both knew where they stood. He’d done what he came here to do.
But he could feel the pain lurking beneath the surface, waiting for an opportune moment to dig in its claws and make itself felt.

***

During his final afternoon, he sat with the Perlmans to help them look through applications for their new summer guest. The sheaf of papers with tiny passport photographs attached only served to highlight the fact that Oliver’s time here was over, and that it was time for him to go and make way for someone new.

“Oliver! Sit, sit, sit. Take a look at these. One of these is going to be the new you. You have to help us choose- it’s the final rite of passage.” Samuel handed him a handful of sheets. Oliver glimpsed Elio sitting, silent and sulky, in a corner. Pretending to read a book. When his father mentioned a new Oliver, he looked visibly distressed- at least, visible to Oliver because he knew what he was looking for.

Oliver looked at the applications, conscious of Elio’s eyes on him as he scanned the text without taking any of it in. Which of these will sleep in your bed this summer, with or without you in it? Will he replace me? Will you like him more, or better than me? Will you smile at him the way you did to me? Will he feel this way when he has to leave?

Oliver attempted to be of help with the selection process but, try as he might, his heart just wasn’t in it.

***

Oliver left that evening. He knew he’d never come back- not like this at least. To this place, maybe. But not as the same person.

“I wanted it to be you. I made sure they picked you,” confessed Elio as Oliver got ready to leave for the station.

And Oliver thought, I’m glad. I wanted it to be me too. And I wanted it to be you who chose me. But the words never made it out of his mouth. He swallowed them back and replaced them with a half-hearted, watery smile as Manfredi appeared, car keys in his hand, to take him away.

Done. Time to get back to his real life.

Chapter End Notes

This (relatively) speedy update is almost entirely fuelled by the comments you left on the last couple of chapters. Thank you so much! You may be thinking that we're settling nicely into a weekly update schedule. Well, that would be great, but it's not going to happen. There definitely won't be anything next week because I have Important Stuff to do before the London Film Festival.
2008- Single

Chapter Summary

Dogs, dating and drinking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oliver is not good at living alone. He’s never really done it before, never needed to. He can cook well enough, because he had to cook for himself at college and it’s not exactly hard to follow a recipe or just throw a few things into a pan. But keeping a place clean and tidy? He’s not so good at that. Growing up, Oliver was used to having people to tidy up after him. And he wasn’t the type to take advantage, but it was just taken for granted and it does mean that he’s not as self-sufficient as he might have been. At college, he didn’t really care- nobody expects students to keep their rooms tidy, so it didn’t matter. And during his marriage they had maids to take care of that sort of thing, at his father’s insistence. James Williams didn’t consider it appropriate for a woman married to his son to do her own housework.

When Julie comes around she pesters him to get someone to come in and clean. She eats at his place at least once a week, and he goes round to her place too. Her place which is, or was, their marital home. Neither she nor Oliver especially wanted to live there after the divorce but it made sense for one of them to stay so that the boys could have the continuity of their childhood home at a time when everything they thought they knew was falling apart. So Julie still lives there- just her and the boys. It wouldn’t be right, she says, for her to live with Laura in that house, with the boys still at home, so soon after everything.

Sometimes the boys come with her for dinner, or sometimes she brings Laura, but most often it’s just the two of them. Although they never wanted to be married in the first place, they lived together for twenty years and miss each other. They both enjoy spending time together alone- they’ve been through too much together not to.

Oliver’s lonely, sometimes. He lived with Julie for most of his adult life, which was a lot like having your best friend as a roommate. They shared a bed, and although they didn’t have sex, or want to do so, he’s used to sleeping with someone warm next to him.

Sometimes- more often than he cares to admit, actually- he thinks about asking if he can move back in with her and the boys. He’s come close to asking the question a couple of times, but always chickened out at the last moment.

Maybe he should get a dog. A large, fluffy dog.

He needs advice about this, so he does what he always does in these situations and calls Julie.

She answers on the second ring, meaning that she’s probably in the kitchen. “Julie. It’s me. Listen- I’m thinking about getting a dog.” He paces restlessly around the room before settling by the window, looking out and thinking about whether a dog would like running around in his yard.

“Oh. Really?” She sounds a little distracted. “I didn’t think you liked dogs. What sort of dog?”
“Um. I’m not sure yet. Maybe one of those big brown ones? Or a nice grey one? One with a lot of fur.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line, apart from the sound of the radio in the background. He doesn’t have to be able to see her to know that Julie is leaning on the kitchen counter, rolling her eyes at him.

“Oliver. Sweetheart. Do you even know anything about dogs? I don’t think you’ve thought this through. I mean- I’m sorry to criticise, but we both know your place is a mess as it is. The last thing you want is dog hair everywhere. And you’ve been working away more and more. What would you do with the dog then?”

“Could I… take it with me?” Oliver is starting to realise that he has no idea about the realities of pet ownership.

“Well, no, Oliver. Probably not. You’d have to get someone to take care of it, or-”

Now that he thinks about it, he’s been to an awful lot of conferences and he’s never once seen someone take a dog there. But there are ways around that. “You could take care of it for me. Or the boys?”

“No, Oliver. I’m not going to take care of your dog when you go away. The ‘big, brown one with a lot of fur’. Look. I have to go. I’m in the middle of making dinner.”

“Oh, of course. Sorry. Hey, listen, do you want to come round tomorrow?”

“I can’t. Look, Oliver. We’ll talk about this when I see you on Friday. Have a good think about it. Plenty of people get a pet because they’re lonely, and that’s fine.” Oliver’s not going to argue with that. It’s something they’ve discussed plenty of times before. “Walking a dog can be a great way to meet people, for one thing. But I’m not sure if it’s the right thing for you. It’s a big responsibility. I think you need a man, not a dog.”

That’s probably true, but you can’t just go down to the pound and adopt yourself a boyfriend.

“I- okay. Yeah, I’ll see you on Friday.”

“Great. Love you, Oliver. See you on Friday.”

***

It’s a bright evening in March. The days are starting to lengthen and Oliver’s feeling pretty decent, all things considered. He never did get a dog. Julie’s coming round for dinner. She brings takeout, dropping the bag unceremoniously on the kitchen counter. They’ve missed their weekly dinner dates at his place for the last few weeks with one thing and another- first Oliver had an evening lecture to give, then Ed was in a play at school, and last week Julie and Laura went to a friend’s baby shower.

Oliver gets glasses out of the cupboard while Julie finds plates and forks. “Wine?”

“Yes please.” She turns around to see Oliver pouring red wine into glasses, from a half-empty bottle on the counter, draining it before putting it in a corner where several others already reside.

“Oliver? When did you last put your bottles out for recycling?”

“Oh, yeah, I need to do that. They get collected tomorrow.”
“How many weeks has it been since you last remembered?”

“How many weeks has it been since you last remembered?”

“None. I did it last week. I’m organised now. Look how tidy the house is.” It’s true. He’s slowly getting better at looking after himself. “I always remember to put out the trash.”

Julie’s stopped looking for forks now. Instead she’s leaning against the counter, looking at Oliver quizzically. “This is a week’s worth of empty bottles? Have you had a party or something?”

“No, of course not. Besides, you know I’d have invited you.”

“Jeez, Oliver. That’s a lot of wine. You’ve drunk 4 bottles of red wine in the last week? Plus this one was half empty?”

“Well, I usually have a glass or two in an evening, after work.” Oliver has his back to her, fumbling in a drawer, looking for a spoon.

“Yeah, but… there’s a glass or two and… Oliver, we’re talking one hell of a large glass or two. Aren’t you worried about this?” As he turns to look at her she waves a hand toward the offending bottles, which are staring at him judgementally from the counter.

“Should I be?”

“Um, well, sweetheart, I think so. Maybe. A little bit, at least. Do you always drink this much?”

Oliver thinks about it. “Well, I suppose so. But it’s no big deal. It’s not a lot, really.”

“Oliver.” She’s close to him, and pushes her hand back through his hair before resting it at the back of his head. He leans back, ever so slightly, into her touch. “Your dad drank. Doesn’t this worry you?”

He twists away from her sharply. “I’m not my dad. What are you saying? My dad used to get drunk and hit people. I don’t do that. I’d never do that. You know I would never do that. I’m not even getting drunk, just having a glass or two.”

Julie’s exasperation is obvious. “I’m not saying I think you’re going to hurt people, Oliver. But I’m saying that if this is normal for you now, if you think that this isn’t something to worry about, then you might have a problem. How long will a bottle last you?”

Oliver thinks for a moment. “I suppose… well, if I opened a bottle tonight, I wouldn’t drink it all.”

“I should hope not! But tomorrow? And don’t lie to me. You’re looking at me as if you’re going to lie to me. I’ll know if you’re lying, Oliver.”

“I’d finish it tomorrow and probably start on another.” He’d definitely start another.

“This is- this is a really bad habit, Oliver. I don’t worry about you being violent or anything, but there’s more than one way to be an alcoholic.”

“Now you think I’m an alcoholic?”

“I- I don’t know. I think you might have a problem. Or be developing one, at the very least. Call it what you like, this is not normal.”

“I don’t have a problem.” Oliver’s not angry, but he’s very irritated and he has to make an effort not to show it.
“So stop. See if you can do it. Be sober for the next week, and then we’ll talk about it again.”

“See if I can do it? Of course I can. But maybe I don’t want to. I just- look- it helps me relax, that’s all.”

Julie’s expression is incredulous. “Are you even listening to yourself?”

She takes the glasses he’d poured for them and tips the contents down the sink.

“No more, Oliver. You’re done with wine- at least, you’re done with drinking it when you’re alone. That’s it. You hear me?” She knows her way around his kitchen, and opens the cupboard where he keeps wine. There are three more bottles there, unopened. “And I’ll be taking these with me. Or we can pour them down the drain too. It’s up to you.”

A part of him wants to tell her off. To say I’m not a kid, Julie, stop telling me what to do! But it’s not as though she’s ever been a bossy, nagging wife- in fact, he can scarcely think of another time when she’s told him what to do. So he should probably listen to her now, even though it’s none of her business. What if she’s right? whispers a niggling voice in his head. And besides, how hard can it be to have a week without drinking?

“Take them with you, then. Or tip them away. I don’t care.” It’s past time to change the subject, so he does. “Come on, we should eat, or the food’ll be cold. I’ll get us some water. Why don’t you go take the plates through and pick out a movie?”

So she does, and they while away a pleasant couple of hours eating and sort of watching the movie, all the while laughing at how terrible it is.

“Well, that was a waste of time. I don’t think that’s one I’ll be in a hurry to watch again,” he says afterward, laughing as he stacks up the empty plates to take to the kitchen.

Julie follows him with a bag of empty containers. “I should get going. Can I help you clean up first?”

“No, it’s okay. You go. I’ll see you on Saturday?”

“Yup.” She picks up the bottles of wine. “Don’t forget to take out the trash.”

“I won’t.” He smiles.

Julie looks at him, serious again. “Oliver. You drink because you’re bored and you’re lonely. We need to get you dating. Did you get started with that website we talked about? Two people I work with met their husbands that way.”

Oliver sighs. “I started setting up the profile thing, and answered a ton of questions, but… I don’t know. I haven’t finished it. I’m still not sure I want to. That I’m ready for that.”

“Ready for that?! What are you waiting for? Oliver, when did you last have sex?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Maybe not, but I know you’ll tell me anyway. Don’t make me nag you. You know there’s no point in holding out on me.” She’s not wrong. They tell each other everything.

“Okay, okay. I suppose…” he thinks about it. “Well, it was before we got divorced. But after my dad died.”
“So that’s… god, Oliver, that’s almost a year?! Nothing at all in that time? Not even a quick blow job or…?”

“No, Julie. Not even a blow job. It’s not a big deal.”

“No, but we really need to get you laid. Like, really. This is a matter of urgency. When I come over next week we’re going to go over your dating profile. In the meantime, you should write a list of good things about yourself. Imagine you’re someone else. Sit down and write all the nice things they’d say about Oliver.”

“That sounds ridiculous, but okay. If you insist.”

She holds him a bit longer and tighter than usual before she leaves. “There’s some guy out there who would be really lucky to date you, you know. And you deserve to have someone. I hate seeing you alone. Sometimes I look at you like this and I think that this whole… this whole thing we did, might have been a huge mistake.”

“I don’t think that. No regrets from me. I’ll be okay. Really.”

He’s pretty sure it’s true. Of course he’ll be okay.

***

Julie is true to her word, grabbing his laptop after dinner the following week. “So. Show me what you’ve got so far for your online dating profile.”

He scrolls slowly through it, then points at an empty box. “I haven’t done this bit. I don’t know what to say. I’ve made a few notes, I just need to, sort of, write it up? I did what you said. I wrote a list of good things someone might say about me.” He hands her a piece of paper, and she proceeds to read it out.

“Good things someone might say about Oliver:

Has nice hair. And plenty of it, still, and it’s not going grey yet. Well, that’s mostly true. But you are going grey.” She ruffles his hair affectionately. “It’s just that the blond hides it.”

Oliver rolls his eyes. “Gee, thanks, Julie. You’re so encouraging.”

“Okay, okay. What else? Has plenty of money but is not a dick about it

Writes books, which is sort of cool I suppose, even if nobody reads them unless they have because they’re on the reading list for college

Is a good kisser. Well, I may not like men, but even I know that one’s definitely true.” She grins.

“And good in bed, though a little out of practice

Is still in good shape because he plays tennis and swims and sometimes still runs

Has tenure but doesn’t dress like a stuffy professor

Is a decent cook

Is a nice person”

“Awww. Yeah, you are a nice person. I was lucky to have you for twenty years, and some man is
going to be very lucky to have you. Hang on, though, what’s this bit? Bad points? Wait, why did you write the bad points? You’re supposed to find a date, not put people off.”

“It just seemed like a good idea. To give me an idea of things I need to work on. Things that might put people off.”

Julie laughed. “Okay, well, let’s take a look. Bad things someone might say about Oliver:

*His books are boring.* Well, yes to that.”

He narrows his eyes at her, which only makes her laugh before she continues.

*Has lived in the closet for his whole adult life
Hangs around with his ex-wife all the time, ‘cause they’re still best friends
Some might say he drinks too much”*  

There’s a pause before she reads out the final point.

*“Is still a bit in love with someone he knew twenty years ago.”*

It’s not pity in her eyes, because she wouldn’t do that to him, but it’s something close, and she’s quiet when she asks him, “Is that- is that last one true? How did I not know that?”

“It’s just- yeah. Maybe. I keep thinking about it. Since I saw him last summer.”

“I knew you still felt something for him. That it never really went away. But you talked about him less and less over time, and I… I didn’t know it was still like that. Did you talk to him about it?”

Oliver shakes his head. “When I saw him before Christmas he made it clear that that’s off the table. Not that I told him, or asked him, but… it’s not an option.”

“Do you think it might be an option if you said something?”

“He was pretty insistent.”

“I’m sorry. Is that what you mean when you say you’re not ready to date?”

“I don’t know, really. It probably has something to do with it. But mostly I think I’m kind of worried because I don’t quite know what I’m doing. Or what to expect. Julie, listen, I have no idea how to date someone.”

“Then it’s a good job you’ve got me to help. For one thing, you’re not doing yourself any favours by making a list of bad things about yourself. You don’t seem to think that you’re much of a catch. That’s not true. What about all the other good things about you?”

“She laughs, and it’s a sound he loves more than he could ever say. “Oh, now you’re just fishing for compliments. How about the fact that you’re sweet, and funny, and kind. Like the fact that you’re still as gorgeous at 45 as you were at 25. Like the fact that you’re fierce, that you protect the people you love. Like the fact that you’ve devoted twenty years of your life to making this marriage work, despite the fact that we weren’t attracted to each other and weren’t in love. And you’ve made the best of it and built a wonderful life together. Like the fact that you’re an amazing dad.”
“Julie. I don’t think that’s something potential dates want to know. I’m not looking to procreate again with another lesbian fake-wife.”

“I know, I know, that’s not what I’m saying. Look. Just- don’t sell yourself short. Remember what an amazing person you are. You deserve to be happy. You’ve spent too much of your life worrying about other people. Think about yourself for once.” She turns the laptop back towards herself. “Come on, let’s get this profile set up.”

***

In the end, Oliver dodges the bullet of online dating when Andrew asks him out.

Andrew doesn’t work at Yale but his field of research is similar to Oliver’s, and they’ve met many times for genuine academic reasons. Over the years they’ve slept together a handful of times, at conferences and, once, in a hotel after a stuffy ‘party’ thrown by Andrew’s head of faculty. Of course there was never any talk of it being anything more.

But.

Oliver’s just finished giving a lecture and is heading back to his office when he bumps into Andrew walking down the corridor.

“Andrew! It’s been a long time.” Two years, probably. Maybe even more. Oliver is genuinely pleased to see him. “How are you?”

They chat for a while, and it turns out that Andrew is working on a project with one of Oliver’s colleagues.

“So I’m going to be spending time here pretty regularly for a while. And I hear you’re free and single now? You want to go get dinner some time? Or just a drink, if you’d rather?”

“What, you mean- a date?”

Andrew gives him an indulgent smile. He doesn’t know the details, but Oliver has talked to him about the general situation with himself and Julie. And he is, therefore, aware of just what Oliver’s divorce means. “Yes, Oliver. A date. If you want to. Or not. It’s up to you. But yes, a date would be good.”

“Um. Sure! Yeah, okay.”

So they set up a date for the following week, and Oliver enjoys himself more than he thought he would. A lot of the nervousness he’d expected to feel is calmed by the fact that this is someone he already knows. They talk, and they laugh, and they flirt, and at the end of the evening Andrew suggests they go back to the hotel where he’s staying.

Oliver isn’t sure what he’s supposed to do. Of course it had occurred to him that the night might end this way. It’s not like they haven’t slept together before, and Oliver does want to do it again. But he’s strangely unsure.

Sometimes it’s best to lay all your cards on the table, so he does. “I feel really stupid. I don’t know why I’m hesitating. We’ve done it before, and I feel as though I’m behaving like some shy teenager who wants to take things slow. And I shouldn’t be. I don’t want that. It’s just- it’s weird, but it feels different to do this after a date. More… I don’t know.” Oliver shrugs. He knows he’s ruined the moment.
“It’s okay. I get it. It’s different because it might lead to something else? Something other than just a fuck? That was never an option for us before. Or for you in general, I guess.”

Oliver nods, because Andrew’s right. That’s exactly what this is.

Andrew places his hands on Oliver’s shoulders, leans in and kisses him on the cheek. “Maybe some other time? That’s- if you want to do this again? I know I’d like to.”

Oliver does want to do it again. “Yeah. When will you be in town again? You could come round to my place, I could make dinner?” His words may leave some ambiguity, but his tone makes it clear that this is an invitation to more than just dinner.

So that’s what happens, the following week. Andrew brings a nice bottle of wine, and they eat dinner. Then they finish the wine on Oliver’s couch, in between making out. And then they go to bed.

***

As summer approaches, Oliver’s happier than he has been in a very long time. He and Andrew have quickly become a couple. When Andrew has to work at the university he stays at Oliver’s place now, instead of in a hotel. And when Andrew’s at home near Boston for a while, Oliver goes to spend the weekend. If they’re both really busy for a week or two then they might just meet for dinner one evening, somewhere in between. They don’t talk about what they will do when Andrew’s project at Yale ends and he no longer needs to visit every week or two. Sometimes during the drive to Boston Oliver takes note of the towns he passes through, thinks could we live here? Would we want to? Wherever they chose, they’d both face a long commute. And Oliver really doesn’t want to move away from the boys, from Julie- even if it was just an hour’s drive away.

Oliver is torn. On the one hand, he hates being alone. He doesn’t cope well with it. He was lonely and often miserable.

But on the other hand, for twenty years he had to live with Julie. And while that wasn’t a bad thing, it wasn’t Oliver’s choice. So from that point of view, living alone holds a certain appeal to him. He values his solitude and independence. Does he want to live with someone else?

As he so often does at the strangest of moments, he thinks about Elio. With a pang he’s reminded of Elio’s words, all those years ago, the day they first kissed. No one likes being alone. But I’ve learned how to live with it.

They’re both divorced now- or at least, Oliver presumes Elio is divorced by now. It’s yet another strange parallel between their lives.

Oliver wishes that Elio would come along and tell him what to do, tell him how to navigate this peculiar new life of his.

He wonders how Elio’s doing. Do you still feel alone, Elio? Have you learned even better, after all these years, how to live with it?

Can you tell me how?

Chapter End Notes
So Oliver's turned a bit helpless in a lot of ways, apparently. I didn't see it coming but here we are.
I'm sorry that Elio is absent. He was in the second half of the chapter but that got... postponed. That'll be chapter 10. A lot of it is written, though, so hooray for that.
There's another chapter to come before that, though- which isn't written. Do you hear wedding bells? 'Cause I do...
(Ooh an unintentional pun!)
1988- Spring

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Julie make a decision which sets a course for the rest of their lives.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite what he’d told Elio, Oliver wasn’t going to be getting married in the spring. Perhaps not ever, because January came and went and he didn’t speak to Julie once. He hadn’t returned her calls, or responded to the messages she’d left on his answering machine. He’d ignored the buzzer when she’d come to his apartment. She’d left notes at his office, which he hadn’t replied to. He half expected to walk out of a lecture one day and find her loitering outside, but fortunately she took the hint and didn’t go that far.

Oliver wouldn’t have known what to say. That was the problem. Julie probably thought he was mad with her. It would be a reasonable assumption, given his avoidance of her, but it wasn’t true. Oliver wasn’t mad with her. He was mad with the world for being the way it was, and mad with himself for feeling like this in the first place, and mad with Elio just for existing- because surely things would be much easier for Oliver right now if there had never been an Elio.

But he wasn’t mad with Julie. He just didn’t know what to say to her.

In the end she’d called Simon, who came round to Oliver’s apartment with pizza and beer on a Friday night. It wasn’t long before he turned the conversation to Julie.

Oliver glared at the slice of pizza in his hand, picking at it half-heartedly. “You know I don’t like olives. Why would you do this to me? A good friend would never try to make me eat olives.”

“You're obviously been speaking to her, so you can tell her that I’m fine.”

Good question. Not one that Oliver could easily answer. He tried to change the subject again. “Don’t talk with your mouth full. Do you have no manners?”
Simon just raised his eyebrows and wrapped a stubborn string of cheese around his already greasy finger before popping it into his mouth.

“You’re no better than an animal, Si.” Oliver shook his head, knowing that Simon wasn’t going to let him avoid the topic for much longer. “Okay. Julie. I’m… I don’t know. At first I was angry with her. But then I realised I’m not really. Not with her, at least. But after I realised that, I needed some time to think about where we go from here. So I was trying to figure things out and then I left it so long that I don’t know what to say to her. I mean- she did the right thing, I suppose. Made me do something I needed to do but wouldn’t have done myself.”

“What would you have done?”

A silence stretched between them, while Oliver thought about how to answer a question he didn’t really know the answer to. And the more he thought about it, the less he liked the answer he had. “Nothing, probably. I was just sort of waiting, hoping the whole thing would just somehow go away.”

“The whole thing? That’s what you’re calling it, calling him? We’re talking about the love of your life here, right? And that was your plan? You would have just let him find out that you were getting married… how? Through his dad, when you wrote to tell him the happy news? You weren’t even going to end things with him?” Simon’s face was incredulous and his tone was nothing short of scornful. But Oliver deserved that, and he needed a best friend he could trust to be honest with him, even when he didn’t like the truth.

“I know, Simon. It’s bad. I know. But I didn’t know what to say or how to say it. Plus, there was no thing with him. Not a thing with a name and a beginning and an end. We were never- we never said it was a relationship, or that we were- were boyfriends, or anything like that. There was no agreement for it to be ongoing. And besides- I never said he was the love of my life.”

“Well.” Simon shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t know what to think about it all. It’s a mess. You’re a mess. But I do know that you need to talk to Julie. Tell her what you just told me. Call her. Tomorrow. Promise me.”

***

Oliver met Julie the following weekend. He looked sheepish as he walked into the bar where she was already nursing a glass of wine. “Hi. I’m sorry. I should’ve called sooner.”

“You should. But I understand. You okay?”

Oliver sat down opposite her, heavily, and sighed. “No. Not really.” He hadn’t realised how true it was until he said it.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No. Not really.”

“Okay. Well. I’m not going to make you. But I’m here if you want to talk. Look- if this is about the marriage thing, if you’ve been avoiding me because you think I want you to make a decision… well, we don’t have to. Not now, not ever. We don’t even have to think about it. And if you do want to think about it, then take all the time you need. I’m in no hurry. You don’t owe me anything. If you decide that it’s never going to happen, don’t feel bad about telling me. It won’t stop us from being friends. I never want you to feel that-”

Oliver interrupted her rambling. “Julie, I don’t. I don’t feel obligated, not at all. I’ve done a lot of
“You just said you didn’t want to talk about what’s bothering you, and now you want to talk about marriage? I don’t think we should, right now. I think if we’re going to talk about anything, we should talk about Elio.” Julie’s voice was gentle but with an edge of steel. Oliver knew she wouldn’t let him get away with evasion.

“No. There’s nothing to be said. It’s done, Julie. Over. What is there left to say?”

“There’s obviously something to say, or you wouldn’t have avoided me for the past month. What happened in Italy?”

“Nothing happened. We didn’t talk much, to be honest.” He caught Julie’s smirk. “No, not like that. We just… didn’t. Talk, or anything, really. There was one kiss. I told him I might be getting married. He said it was wonderful news. That’s all.”

“Did he really think it was wonderful news? Did he mind?” The symmetry to his discussion with Elio made his chest feel tight.

“He didn’t say if he minded or not. I think if I’d have suggested that he and I kept doing something, being something, some sort of affair, he’d have said yes. Despite me getting married. But none of it matters. It’s over. And I’m actually okay with that. It’s the right choice. It wouldn’t be fair of me to keep seeing him, or to leave either of us in any doubt about where we stand.”

Julie nodded a little sadly before moving around the table and wrapping her arms around him. Despite her small size in comparison to him, she rocked him as though he was a child. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Oliver.”

But Oliver was dry eyed and perfectly composed when he asked, “So. Do you want to get married, or what? Because I do. I really do. I want a normal life, with a house and a kid or two. And a yard for the kids to run around in, and a basketball hoop over the garage. And in the summer we’ll have the neighbours around for a barbeque, and I’ll grill a ton of meat while I chat to the other guys and drink beer.” He laughed. “Like a proper man, the sort my father would be proud of. And Laura can come over and the two of you can, I don’t know, bake cookies or something. Maybe we could have a pool. I’ve always wanted a pool, and—”

“Okay, okay. Ollie. I’m gonna stop you right there. One- no pool. We’d be living in Connecticut. It’s not exactly Florida. We don’t need a pool. Two- Have you ever known me to bake anything? If Laura came to visit, she and I probably wouldn’t bake many cookies, unless that’s a euphemism I’m not familiar with. And three- you know I want to. Get married. I want the things that go with being married, the same sorts of things you do. I don’t want it to be a hasty decision, though.”

“It’s not. I promise. How can it be hasty when we’ve talked about it for so long? I’ve taken a lot of time this past month to think about things.

“And here’s how it is: we’ve come close to agreeing to it before. Really close. And then, yes, I went to Italy and met someone. But he is not a someone I can ever have, so my feelings about him don’t change anything about you and me and the plans we’d made. The two things just aren’t comparable. It’s like… let’s say you really want to go to The Moon. Well, you can’t do that. And just because you can’t go there, it doesn’t mean you won’t enjoy going to, I don’t know, the Bahamas, or Mexico, or Hawaii. You can still go to those places and have a great time. And it won’t stop you from wanting to go to The Moon, but that’s okay, because you didn’t go to Mexico in an attempt to forget about the Moon. They’re completely separate.” He paused. “Am I making any sense here?”
Julie just nodded.

“I can be sad about him without it changing the fact that I think that marriage would be a good decision for me. For both of us. I know that this marriage is something I want. Elio is something completely separate to all of this.” A sweep of his hand indicated you, me, us. “He’s something- something parallel to my reality. The courses of our lives have no way of meeting, and I’ve accepted that. I’m not happy about it, but I’ve accepted it because it’s the way things are.”

Julie took a moment to think then put her hands flat on the table, resolved. “Okay. We still need to talk some more, but provisionally I’m going to say okay. Though if this is your idea of a proposal then I have to tell you it’s not the most romantic.”

They both laughed then. “I know. How about I get a ring and do it again some other time? Or do you want to pick the ring out yourself?”

“God, Oliver. You have no idea how sweet you are. No idea. I don’t care about a ring or a grand proposal. I wish I could love you the way you deserve.”

Oliver found it hard to believe that he deserved anything, really. Certainly he didn’t deserve more than he had. A job he loved, the freedom to pursue his interests, and the luxury of knowing that he didn’t have to work if he didn’t want to, because he could happily live off his trust fund. He hated having his father’s money, and privately swore he’d do any work he had to instead of having to rely on it, but he didn’t underestimate the safety net of having it available and the peace of mind it afforded him. Besides- perhaps it would be useful to his children in the future.

A marriage to a beautiful, intelligent woman who didn’t want him for his money, despite all the things he would never be able to offer her, was more than he had any right to ask for. Never mind the fact that she didn’t want him at all, not in the ways that really mattered- he still felt unbearably lucky.

He knew that gay men didn’t get to live happily ever after, but at least he’d have the luxury of living a comfortable, and hopefully happy, life while he was doing it.

***

It cost about the same as a small car, but other than that it wasn’t an elaborate proposal. Just dinner, champagne, a ring. Oliver immaculate in a beautifully tailored light grey suit. Julie in a black dress Oliver had never seen before. Although their planned marriage would be strictly functional, Oliver was hopelessly romantic and it was the anniversary of the night they’d met. Oliver had mentioned this, along with his planned proposal, when booking the table. He’d failed to mention that he’d met the woman he was going to propose to in a gay club.

His romantic intentions were, unfortunately, not enough to secure him a table. He’d left it too late, and the restaurant had long been booked up. But his father frequented the best restaurants when he visited New York and, much as Oliver hated to exploit it, his name opened doors. He wanted this to be perfect for Julie, so he’d done it, and there they were. When he told Julie all of this, she laughed. “How do you even remember that? I couldn’t even have told you that we met in March.”

“It was a friend’s birthday that night. That’s the only reason I remember. Not that I’m saying you didn’t make quite the impression because- well. Here we are, after all.”

“Indeed. Here’s to us. We’re going to be good together.”

The enormous diamond on her ring sparkled in the candlelight as she raised her glass to his.
She was teary, just a little. “You’re absolutely sure you want to do this?”

Oliver smiled though he was close to tears, too. Something about the whole thing felt so final. “Hey. I asked you. You’re the one who’s supposed to say whether you want to do this or not. I know none of this is what you wanted— he points to the ring, the champagne, himself— “and I’m sorry, but it’s…”

Julie reached for his hand across the table. “I know. Of course I’ll marry you. It would be a privilege.”

They kissed, affectionately, because it felt like the right thing to do.

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Everyone was thrilled. Oliver’s mother threw an extravagant engagement party at which Oliver and Julie, the happy couple, were paraded around. She and Julie’s mother were already discussing bridal showers and flowers and colour schemes and, god, babies. Babies! That was a conversation Oliver wished he hadn’t overheard.

It was going to be a spectacular wedding, that much was certain. Oliver’s mother was determined to make sure of that, and Julie’s mother was more than happy to concur. Money was no object, because Oliver’s father needed to make sure that the wedding of his last and youngest child spared no expense. Many of his business contacts would be invited, and it would reflect badly on him if it wasn’t a remarkable event. Julie’s parents weren’t in the same league when it came to wealth, but they were certainly rich enough to put on a spectacle when it came to their daughter’s wedding.

Oliver wasn’t especially keen to celebrate his engagement, but he was happy to watch people mingling. He didn’t notice Jess coming up behind him until she touched him on the shoulder. “You do make a lovely couple, Ollie. I’m so glad you’ve found someone. I hope you’ll be very happy together.”

They’d never spoken again about the incident with Justin. If Oliver was going to speak to anyone about it, it would have been her. He and his sister were still close. But she wouldn’t want to know the truth, that much was clear. It was best he let her believe that Justin was just a teenage experiment. Because as long as he looked happy and stayed out of trouble, everyone would be content. Maybe he’d be content too- after all, this seemed like a good solution for everyone.

He was determined not to think about the fact that marriage isn’t supposed to be a solution.

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Over the coming weeks, there were long discussions about what they each hoped to get out of a marriage.

Oliver frowned as he looked at the notepad on the table between them and said, “This feels a lot like a business transaction, Julie.”

“It is.” Julie was clicking the cap on and off the pen, and it was a little irritating. “That’s exactly what it is. But I think there’s an element of that to every marriage- it’s just that most people don’t realise it.

“I don’t need much, Oliver. I need you to cover for me, to make sure people don’t find out the truth. I need to know you’ll provide for me while I look after our future children, because we both know my parents and yours would be horrified if I went out to work. And talking of children- I need some of your sperm.”
“What—right now?”

“No, of course not now. Imagine the scandal if I was pregnant before the wedding. But while we’re on the subject—“ Julie had never shied away from the difficult subjects, and she clearly wasn’t going to start now. “I need you to get an AIDS test.”

Oliver’s eyes widened. He could understand why she was asking for this, but it didn’t mean he wasn’t surprised. “And then I need you to not sleep with anyone else until the wedding, until after I fall pregnant. No-one, not even using a condom. Accidents happen, and I won’t take those sorts of risks. And when we have kids, and you sleep with men, you do it safely. Always. I can’t lose you like that, especially not if we have kids.”

Oliver nodded. “Okay. I can do that.” It was all perfectly fair, really. He knew what the risks were, and he knew it wouldn’t be fair to expose a wife and children to that threat.

“What about you?” she asked. “What do you want?”

What did Oliver want? To have a home and a family. To not have to live in fear of being found out for what he really was. To please his parents.

Oliver laughed. “Well. The same things as you do, pretty much. I mean, I don’t want your sperm, obviously. But all the rest of it.”

Julie was quiet and looked reluctant as she asked, “And what about if one of us wants to end it? What if we start to hate each other, hate living together? What happens then?”

Oliver shrugged. “The same as if any other couple splits up, I suppose. Everyone goes into marriage thinking that it’ll never happen to them, so let’s just do that. Assume it won’t happen to us, and that if it does, we can be amicable enough to work things out for the best.”

Julie sighed. She did that a lot during these discussions. “Sometimes I feel like I’m getting more out of this than you are, Ollie. A lot more.”

Oliver pulled her close. “You’re not. I’m happy. I promise I wouldn’t do this if I wasn’t sure.”

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Simon was going to be his best man. He was the only other person who knew the truth, though he also had his reservations about the whole thing.

“So, Ollie. You nervous?”

“Not really.”

“You happy?”

“Yeah. More than you might think, all things considered.”

Simon raised his eyebrows.

“Don’t be like that, Si. It’ll be a good day. We’ll all have fun.”

“I’m not worried about having fun on the day. I’m worried about you, and the rest of your life.”

“Don’t be. I’ll be fine.”
“If you say so. Well then. Since you mentioned it… this is going to sound stupid, but I am kind of worried about the day. I’ve never been to a Jewish wedding before. Am I going to do something stupid and offend your great-aunt or something?”

Oliver couldn’t help but laugh at Simon’s obvious discomfort. “Simon. This is a wedding that’s Jewish because my father likes to keep up the appearance of being religious. And there are some different traditions, sure, but it’s the same basic principle as any other wedding you might have been to. Two people love each other, stand up in front of everyone they know and promise to be together forever. Then we all go have a party. Then everyone goes home, and life goes on much as it always has. That’s the idea, anyway.”

Oliver’s father was proudly and openly Jewish. He celebrated the holidays, he was seen at synagogue, he mingled with the right people. Their town was small and there was no Jewish community there, but James was important and influential among other Jewish businessmen in the state.

Never mind that his father didn’t live a Jewish life in the ways that mattered. Because the important things their faith taught? To be compassionate and modest and kind, to love people, to essentially be a good person… Oliver couldn’t think of any other person less likely to uphold those values than his father.

Oliver was the opposite. The values made sense to him, the organised religion not so much, although he loved the traditions and holidays.

Oliver hadn’t studied religion specifically, but he’d studied ancient people and societies and knew that, regardless of whatever label, whatever name of an organised religion you slapped on it, people essentially share the same values. Good and bad. Right and wrong. That’s enough for him.

While Oliver believed in something bigger than himself, he found it much harder to believe in some of the things religion tried to teach him. It was difficult to believe in a god who would make him feel the way he does and then condemn him for it. What would be the point in doing that? What’s the point in being all powerful if you’re going to make people broken? It didn’t make any sense.

He should probably have felt guilty about the marriage vows he was intending on making but not meaning. It was undoubtedly sinful. But if Oliver believed in sin, he knew he had already done many things that would send him straight to Hell. One more wouldn’t make any difference.

And he believed that, really, there’s not much more he could be expected to do in a marriage other than what he planned on doing. He would provide for his wife, and love her, genuinely, in the same way that she loves him. He wasn’t sure how it was going to work but he would perform his conjugal duties as needed in order to make babies. When it came to sex, the view of religions, as far as Oliver could see, seemed to be that it’s for making babies and nothing to do with having fun. So that part was something else he could do.

Regardless of his views on God and religion, right and wrong, love and sex… Jewishness was part of Oliver’s identity and he was happy with that, whatever it might mean. He wore the symbol of his faith around his neck. He knew it made his father happy, for one thing. There weren’t many things Oliver did which his father approved of, but it pleased him for his children to show their Jewish heritage. It also pleased his mother. Her faith was more genuine, and Oliver knew it made her truly happy to see him appear to embrace it.

And now he also wore it for Elio. For the link it represented between them. A secret sign and a physical reminder when all else was nothing but memories.
Oliver was pulled out of his moment of reflection by Simon. “Well, if you say so. That sounds easy enough. You’ll have to tell me what I have to do and if there’s anything I need to know. I will support you, whatever you need me for. And I don’t just mean at the wedding. I’ll always be here for you, you know that, right?”

Oliver grabbed him and hugged him tight. Simon made a strangled, gurgling sound. “Hey… you’re squashing me.” But Oliver just hugged him even tighter and sent up a prayer to whatever god might be listening, thankful for the people who cared about him. Thankful that he had so much love in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so long :-(
Remember how last chapter I said there would be wedding bells in this one? HA! We didn't (quite) get that far. Well, we did, but I had to split the chapter because it was All Too Much. Too long, that is. And I have no idea whether it's all just a huge disaster. If it's more than two weeks and I don't manage to update again, someone come over here and slap me.
Chapter Summary

It's been several months since Elio and Oliver met up. Dinner in New York, a few drinks, and some talking... before the night takes an unexpected turn.

Chapter Notes

It's Elio! HE LIVES! Thank goodness. This chapter got written fast because I missed him and just wanted to get him back in the story. But HELP! So much dialogue. There is now a summary post on Tumblr. So if you can’t remember what happened in the previous chapter, [click here](#) for a recap!

Or I'll just tell you: this picks up from chapter 8. We last saw Oliver learning to live on his own, drinking too much, not getting a dog and starting to date. You're welcome.

I'm sorry I have got behind on responding to comments. Thank you SO MUCH if you have commented, you are all SO WONDERFUL and I'll get caught up over the weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It’s summer before Oliver and Elio manage to arrange another meet up. Things in Italy are taking Elio longer than anticipated to organise, and he’s only been over in the States for sporadic, flying visits- interviews, Oliver presumes- which haven’t worked with Oliver’s schedule.

But come August, he’s back for a while. Two weeks, probably. We should meet up? I’ll be in New York. Think it’ll have to be an evening though.

Oliver looks at his calendar. He and Andrew are going on vacation for the second week of Elio’s stay. But the first week could work? Oliver would be happy to spend a few days in the city. They could get a hotel, see Andrew’s brother who lives on Staten Island, maybe catch a show on Broadway?

Andrew is in agreement. Arrangements are made. Andrew books a hotel from Monday to Friday and calls his brother to arrange to meet on Tuesday. Oliver gets theatre tickets for Wednesday night. Then he contacts Elio and they settle on meeting on Tuesday, the only evening that works for them both.

But in the end it doesn’t work for Oliver. On Tuesday they go to Andrew’s brother’s place and it seems that there’s been a misunderstanding. Oliver and Andrew had planned on leaving before dinner, but the kids are out for the day and won’t be back until four, and Andrew’s sister-in-law has planned a barbeque. Preparations are well underway when they arrive in the early afternoon.

Oliver catches Andrew alone. “I thought we were leaving before dinner? You know I have plans.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I think they just assumed we were staying. Can you stay? Please? I want you to meet the kids. Can’t you call Elio and rearrange?”
Oliver pulls out his cellphone and dials Elio’s number. Just as he thinks it’s about to go to voicemail, Elio answers. Oliver explains his predicament.

“We’re visiting my, um, partner’s family today, and they thought we were staying for dinner. I think I’m gonna have to cancel. I’m really sorry. But I’m around in the day tomorrow or Thursday.”

“Oh. Sorry, I really can’t- I’m pretty busy during the daytime.”

“Thursday evening then?”

“I.” Elio sighs heavily. In Oliver’s mind he sees him pushing the hair back from his forehead while he thinks. “Yeah. Okay. It’s not ideal but- sure. If that’s the only time we can do, then… okay.”

Elio doesn’t sound like he wants to do this. “We don’t have to. If it doesn’t work for you. We might have to call it off and meet next time you’re around?”

“No. No, it’s fine. It’s no problem.”

So that’s how Oliver finds himself sitting in a restaurant with a glass of wine at 6pm on Thursday, watching the rain fall on the grey street outside. Alone. Still alone at quarter past. He’s trying to avoid looking at his watch but can’t stop. 6.20. 6.25. He doesn’t want to admit it, but he suspects he’s been stood up. He doesn’t want to seem desperate so he decides to wait until half past. Then he’ll call Elio.

At 6.28 the door opens and Elio dashes in, waving and grinning before coming over and sitting down opposite Oliver, shrugging off his raincoat as he goes. He’s pink and flustered from running, and his hair is soaked, dripping onto the shoulders of his pale pink shirt. Oliver watches, mesmerised, as the water droplets spread through the fabric.

“Shit. I’m sorry. I know I’m late.” He doesn’t offer an explanation.

“It’s no problem. I’ve been quite happy here with this.” He holds up his drink.

Elio smiles. “Mmm. We should get me one of those. Or get a bottle?”

“Do you need to dry off first? Don’t you have an umbrella? You could at least have put your hood up.”

“Ha!” Elio rolls his eyes. “Since when have you been my mom? I’ll be fine. It’s only a bit of rain. You don’t get sick from having wet hair. I’m a doctor, I know these things. Now are we getting drinks or…?”

“Sure.” Oliver looks around and makes eye contact with the waiter. They order wine, and Elio orders a cocktail too.

“You want one? An aperitif?”

“Oh, no. Thanks. I’ll just stick with the wine. So. Your hair looks longer. Did you grow it? Or is it just ‘cause it’s wet from the rain?”

Elio pulls at a strand of it and looks at it sideways. It drips some more. “Um. Well, I haven’t had it cut in a while. It is getting pretty long. I should probably get it cut. I think I’m too old to wear it like this.”

“Nah. It’s… nice.” It’s a lame thing to say but Elio seems to like it. He smiles, boyish, at the
It’s a pleasant evening. They drink, they eat, they talk. Elio seems happy, happy and light. His smiles are easy and his manner ebullient. The conversation flows easily and the wine even easier. There’s a very pleasant buzz. They’re easy in each other’s company. Oliver finds himself enjoying this a lot.

Elio asks polite questions about Andrew, the sorts of questions that you ask a friend who has a boyfriend you haven’t heard about until now. What’s his name? What does he do? How did you meet? Are you living together? If Oliver had thought that Elio might be bothered, somehow, by Andrew, then… well, clearly he’s not. Not in the way that Oliver would have been if the tables were turned.

They talk about Elio’s mom, and Oliver’s boys. About work. And then, as Oliver notices a piano in the corner of the restaurant, about music.

“You still write? Or play much?”

Elio shakes his head. “No. God, no. Haven’t really played in years.”

Oliver can’t disguise his shock. He puts his glass down and stares at Elio. “What? You’re kidding, right? I always thought you’d do something with music. For a career.”

“I thought about it, but I always knew it wouldn’t be a career. I loved it, but having to do it to make a living would have sucked the joy out of it.”

“But now you don’t play at all? So surely the joy of it is gone anyway?”

“I do play a little when I’m back in Italy, but I’m really rusty.”

“Why did you stop? When?”

“I played a little when I was a student, did a couple of recitals in college and… then I didn’t. Too many other things to worry about.” Elio’s biting his lip and gazing out of the window. “I was married at 21. We lived in a shitty little apartment, because we had no money. My dad paid for my tuition but he wouldn’t pay for me to live. I mean– he wouldn’t have let me starve or be thrown out on the street, but he said if I insisted on getting married then I’d have to support myself. So. Hence the shitty little apartment. There wasn’t room for a piano, and there wasn’t time to play anyway, since I had to study and work. We had other priorities, like the fact that the heating didn’t work and our landlord didn’t care and it was really fucking cold in Oxford in February.”

“Wait. Wait wait wait. Rewind that. You were married at 21?”

Elio laughs. “Yeah. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but in hindsight it was a disaster. We were a disaster. We were married for two years, and I swear all we did was fight and fuck. I don’t think a day went by when we didn’t do both at least once.” He’s smiling fondly, and Oliver can’t help but smile too.

“She was an artist, so the apartment, as well as being shitty and tiny, was a mess. Canvases and paint and arty stuff everywhere, all set up next to a mattress on the floor. The sheets were always splattered with paint. And you could say she had an artistic temperament. She used to throw stuff at me, books and tubes of paint and cups and things. And I used to yell and curse at her in Italian. On a couple of occasions the neighbours called the police, because they thought we were killing each other. Looking back, I don’t think we really liked each other much at all. But there was passion enough to make up for it.” He shrugs his shoulders. “We were happy.”
Oliver is astounded. It's inconceivable that Elio could have done these things without Oliver knowing anything about it. Yet he has.

“So it didn’t work out?”

“No, it did not. My dad was right, though of course he didn’t say I told you so. That wasn’t his style. But there were only ever two things he explicitly asked me to do, and that was one of them. Don’t get married, Elio. Wait, at least until you graduate. But we didn’t listen. My parents didn’t even come to the wedding. We got married one Saturday afternoon in the college chapel. Nobody was there apart from a handful of friends and the chaplain.”

“What was the other one? The other thing he asked you to do?”

“Oh.” Elio won’t meet his eye. “He asked me to get an AIDS test. After you. After Christmas.”

Oliver’s eyes widen.

“I know. It was very out of character for him. He was… subtle about it, I suppose. He said he wasn’t going to ask me if I had reason to think I might need to get tested, but he’d like me to go do it regardless. No questions asked. And then I must’ve looked confused, or…” Elio shakes his head and raises his eyebrows. “I don’t know. Because then he went and asked me. Were you careful? And I couldn’t lie to him, so I just didn’t say anything. He took me to the doctor, which wasn’t as easy as it sounds. It was 1988, and it was Italy. Attitudes to AIDS, and to homosexuality, were… well. You couldn’t just walk into a clinic. I mean- there must have been places where I could have, but I didn’t know about them. They didn’t teach about it in school, so…”

“Our family doctor was a good doctor, but conservative. Elderly. Catholic, very much so. He would’ve asked questions. Would have wanted to know why a seventeen year old boy from a nice, educated family would have reason to think he needed to be tested for AIDS. My dad made some calls, found someone in Milan. He was really nice, actually. I was terrified. It had never really occurred to me that it might be a risk, and then all of a sudden it was.” Elio twirls the stem of his wine glass between his fingers, thinking. But then he looks up at Oliver. “But it was fine. Of course, you already knew that. And then my father sent me off to college with more condoms than you’ve ever seen in your life. Well, unless you’re worked in a pharmacy I suppose. Or a family planning clinic. Which I’m guessing you have not.”

Oliver shakes his head, with a half-smile at Elio’s joke. “We were stupid.”

“We really were. I mean- you think it’ll never happen to you, but that’s what the people who it did happen to thought too. We were both lucky.”

Oliver has thought about this before. “I was… selfish. I mean, I knew I wasn’t in any danger from you. But you didn’t know that about me. I should never have asked you to- should never have given you the opportunity to just trust me.”

“You didn’t know I was fine. You were the first man I slept with, but you weren’t my first sexual partner, not even close. And by then people knew you didn’t have to be gay to catch it. It was unlikely, I know, but I could’ve…” Elio shakes his head, slowly.

It’s a sobering thought. But sobriety doesn’t seem to be on Elio’s agenda, because he signals to a waiter to bring more drinks, and changes the subject.

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They talk some more. It’s been a long, leisurely meal and they eventually decide to order dessert.
Another round of drinks. Then more. Talk, smiles, laughter. Elio is happy. Happy, happier, happiest. Exuberant and energetic, almost bouncing in his seat.

“We should get the check. Move on to a bar. Get another drink or two.”

Oliver has never heard a finer idea in all his life.

They split the check, even though Elio insists he should pay more, “’cause I had more cocktails than you did.” This is true, now that Oliver stops to think about it. Elio has been out-drinking him all night. Oliver remembers that Elio always had a surprisingly high tolerance for alcohol given his slight stature. Elio grew up, after all, in Italy, and he’d been given wine with meals, little and often, from a young age.

On standing up, Oliver realises that he is drunk. Drunker than he can remember being in a long time. In decades, probably. It follows that Elio’s probably drunk too.

And indeed, when Elio stands up and stumbles over his feet it’s obvious that he is drunker than Oliver. It seems funny at first, bordering on hilarious, but it quickly becomes clear that Elio’s not just a little bit drunker than Oliver. He is, in fact, exceptionally drunk, much more so than Oliver. As they start to walk toward the door of the restaurant, he grabs onto Oliver’s arm to stop himself from falling over. Giggles, doubled up and dragging on Oliver’s arm.

Happy, happier, happiest.

Drunk, drunker, drunkest.

How had Oliver not noticed? Probably because he’s so drunk himself.

“Oh. Wow. Everything’s spinning. I think I had too much to drink, Oliver.” He laughs again.

“Yeah, Elio, you’re really drunk. We both are, but mostly you. C’mon, let’s get you some fresh air.” Elio is in no state to walk far, but the restaurant’s bar has an outdoor seating area, which seems like a good destination. Oliver finds a table in a quiet corner. “Here. Sit down. You need to drink some water. I’m going to go get you some.”

“Don’t wanna. Don’t make me, Oliver. It’ll make me throw up.”

“Well, right now that might not be a bad thing, Elio. Might make you feel better.” Oliver is pretty certain that it’s inevitable at this point, anyway, so once he’s satisfied that Elio isn’t going to move from the spot where he’s sitting, he goes the bar and returns with water. He holds a glass toward Elio. “Here. Drink it.”

He does, and he was right. After a few sips he runs to the bathroom, leaving Oliver to drink his own water and think about what to do next. Coffee, maybe? But when Elio returns, he has his own idea. He weaves his way across to their table, almost bumping it to a large potted plant on the way. Then he flops back into his seat and suggests, “We should go back to my hotel. There’s a nice bar there. We could have one last drink before you have to go. I feel a lot better now. I think I just ate something bad.”

“No, Elio. No, no, no. We’re done with the drinks for tonight. Come on. Get to your feet. Let’s walk a little.” A walk would be good, now that they’ve both had a drink of water. The air is cool after the rainstorm, and Oliver has sobered up a little already. He drags Elio to his feet.

Elio has other ideas. “No. Don’t want to walk. Want to stay here. With you.” He spins around to face Oliver, and steps closer. His fingertips find Oliver’s ribs, trace them, dance down to settle on his
waist. He leans in even further, looks up into Oliver’s eyes.

Oliver thinks his world is spinning because of Elio’s closeness. Because of his mouth so close to Oliver’s own. Elio is breathing shallowly, or is that Oliver? Possibly both of them. Oliver feels his own hand, unbidden, moving toward Elio’s neck.

But then he realises. There’s no spinning. It just seems that way because Elio is swaying. Swaying because he can scarcely stay on his feet.

Drunk, drunker, drunkest.

If Elio’s eyes were focused, he’d be gazing into Oliver’s but they’re not. They’re looking through him as much as at him, swimmy and lost.

And Oliver wishes he was drunker because then he’d have an excuse for letting Elio kiss him. But he’s not, so he doesn’t. Regardless of what he might want, he’s not going to take advantage of Elio’s inebriation. Oliver turns his head away at the last moment, and Elio’s head collapses onto Oliver’s neck.

And yes, he’s a little regretful, but he’s also aware that this probably would not have been a good kiss anyway.

“Oliver, I wanna kiss you. Don’t tell me you don’t want to.” His words are muffled by Oliver’s jacket, not to mention slurred, but there’s still something dark and seductive in his voice. Oliver’s cock seems to find this interesting, so in his head he gives it a stern talking to, though it’s not easy with Elio’s fingers there, still light on his waist. Elio pulls back enough to look at Oliver- at least, he’d be looking at him if his eyes could focus on anything right now. “I see the way you look at me. I know those looks. I didn’t know them before, but I know now. Don’t pretend you don’t want to take me to bed.”

Oliver’s brain stutters momentarily, before he gets back to the matter at hand. Elio, blind drunk. So. “I do. I’ve honestly never wanted to take you to bed more than I do right now. I want to take you to bed and leave you there with a big glass of water and some painkillers. And maybe a trash can or something on the floor by the bed, because I think you’re going to throw up again, and probably more than once.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Elio whines.

“Elio. You’re a mess. Right now, nobody wants to take you to bed, not in that way at least. I, for one, certainly do not. Besides, I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t be able to do very much even when you got there. Do you even know how drunk you are? You’re going to regret this in the morning.”

“I regret things every morning. Don’t see why tomorrow should be any different.”

Oliver sighs. “Come on. Where are you staying?” He’s resigned himself to the fact that he’s going to have to take Elio back to his hotel. It’s only a few blocks away so they walk, because Oliver doesn’t want Elio to throw up in a cab, and he’s hoping that the walk and the fresh air might help him to sober up a little. It doesn’t seem to be working, because Oliver keeps having to take his arm to haul him upright and stop him from meandering into traffic. The necessity of being Elio’s caretaker has left Oliver feeling remarkably sober.

The girl at the front desk raises an eyebrow as Oliver drags Elio through the lobby, but Oliver ignores it and proceeds to the elevator. It’s stuffy inside and Elio has gone worryingly pale, so Oliver hurries him down the hall, unlocks his door for him because he can’t co-ordinate the key card
in the slot, and sends him into the bathroom.

Oliver sits in the obligatory hotel room chair while Elio is in the bathroom. There can’t be much left in his stomach, but he’s clearly bringing it up anyway. Oliver distracts himself by looking around the room. There are a few clothes strewn around- a jacket and tie on the bed which look as though they were hastily removed, a pair of sweatpants. A laptop charging on the desk. A half-empty glass of water next to a bottle of pills which Oliver doesn’t examine, despite his curiosity.

He calls Andrew while he waits.

“Hi. It’s me. Look- I’m going to be late. Don’t wait up for me.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Elio got really drunk and I just want to keep an eye on him for a while. Make sure he’s going to be okay.”

“No problem.”

“I’ll try not to wake you when I come in.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll see you later.”

When Oliver finishes his phone call there’s silence in the bathroom, and after a few minutes Oliver knocks on the door. “Hey. You okay in there?” There’s a hesitation, during which Oliver considers his course of action if Elio is passed out on the bathroom floor.

But then the door opens. “I’m okay.” Elio doesn’t look okay. He looks pale and sweaty and he still can’t make his feet move in a straight line. He goes to the edge of the bed and sits. Taking off his shoes requires all of his focus, so Oliver leaves him to get on with it.

“I’ll get you some water. Wait there.”

Elio sips from the glass. “I’m really drunk, aren’t I?”

Oliver chuckles. “You really are. Do you usually do this when you go out for dinner with a friend?”

“No, today was a special occasion.”

Elio has passed the peak euphoria of drunkenness and is starting what will no doubt be a long and miserable come down. Oliver doesn’t envy him.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

Elio nods.

Oliver does, then he splashes his face in the mirror and wonders what just happened? He’s seen Elio drunk before, as a seventeen year old who couldn’t hold his drink, but this is something else.

Maybe something did happen, because when he goes back into the bedroom Elio is curled up in fetal position on the bed, arm thrown across his eyes, sobbing.

“Elio? Oh, god. Elio, what’s wrong?” He’s definitely reached the miserable stage of drunkenness, but Oliver can’t help but think there’s something more going on here. He rushes over and sits on the edge of the bed next to him.
Elio is really crying- noisy, ugly, drunken crying. The pillow is wet and Oliver can hear that his nose is stuffy.

“...I really do not feel good.”

“...Oh, Elio. You’re just so drunk right now. You’re just feeling really rough. You’ll be okay when you’re sober.”

That only causes an even more uncontrollable burst of sobs. So Oliver sits by him and waits. The crying abates a little and when he speaks it’s quiet and unsure.

“My divorce went to trial today. At least, it was supposed to. We settled at the last minute. On the courthouse steps, they call it. But it’s not actually on the courthouse steps. The courthouse didn’t even have any steps. It actually happened in a little meeting room, painted a nasty, civic shade of beige. What a place for a marriage to end. And you know what’s even worse? I was hoping, right until the end, that she might change her mind and suggest we try to work things out. I mean… I knew we couldn’t. But still.”

Things start to make sense to Oliver. This is why Elio didn’t want to meet today. Things have clearly been bad for him, and for some time, if his divorce was going to be settled in court.

“Oh, Elio. I’m so sorry.” Oliver is divorced himself, but he has no idea what this feels like. To have promised to spend your life with someone, loving them, and to mean it in all the ways you’re supposed to. And then for it to end like this. “I thought- when you mentioned it in Italy last summer, I thought things had been bad between you two for a while.”

“Yes. No. Just because we couldn't stand each other any more, didn't mean I didn't still love her. I thought this was it, you know? I thought after everything, that this would be the one that finally worked out. I’m so stupid.” He inhales unevenly. “This is all your fault.”

Is there any point in arguing with someone as drunk as Elio? Probably not, and he shouldn't, because Elio is so, so upset- but he does it anyway. Because that seems very unfair. Oliver has done a lot of things which he could be blamed for, but he’s pretty sure this is not one of them.

“I don't think all this is my fault. I don't think your divorce is my fault. You were already getting divorced when we met, back in the summer, for the first time in years. This, the state of you right now, this is probably my fault. I shouldn't have pushed you to meet tonight, I should have known that there was a reason why you didn’t want to, and then I let you drink too much, and now…” he falters.

He can’t think of anything else to say. On instinct he extends a hand toward Elio, intending to comfort him with a hand on his shoulder. But at the last moment he pulls back sharply, worried that it wouldn’t be appropriate given all the things Elio’s said tonight.

So he waits for Elio to speak. When he does, it’s muffled, his face half-buried in his damp pillow.

“Anyway. So now I guess I’m divorced again. It’s all signed and done. So I just need to go collect the papers from the courthouse.”

Oliver grabs a box of tissues from the desk and puts it next to Elio on the bed. He sits up and blows his nose, and suddenly he’s crying again.

“I’m sorry. Sorry. I thought I was done crying. I’m such a mess.”

Elio and rubs his back, talks softly, soothing. “Shh, shh. It's okay.” Elio buries his face by Oliver’s collarbone. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to apologise for.”

“I really thought- I let myself think that- that this time it was going to work out. That finally…” He dissolves into sobs again. Oliver’s heart breaks for him. His shirt is getting wet but he doesn’t care. “Why do things never work out for me? What am I doing wrong?”

“You’re probably not doing anything wrong. These things just happen.” Oliver doesn’t know what else to say. He leans closer and inhales the scent of Elio’s hair. It’s probably taking advantage of the situation and he should probably feel bad for that but he’s willing to allow himself this. Elio doesn’t use the same shampoo as he remembers- of course not, after twenty years- but underneath it there’s still something that Oliver would recognise anywhere.

Elio continues to cry. Every times Oliver thinks he’s stopping, the sobs start again. Oliver just holds him, and rubs his back, and shushes him gently. He realises that, on instinct, he’s rocking him back and forth, too. Oliver feels the motion soothing himself. Tonight has been a lot to take in.

When the crying has almost stopped, Elio speaks. So softly that Oliver almost misses it. He’s not sure he was meant to hear it at all. “I miss you. But we shouldn’t see each other again. You make me want things I can’t have. Things we’ve agreed we can’t have.”

If Oliver wasn’t supposed to hear, then he’s not supposed to respond. But he does, speaking softly into Elio’s hair. “Me too. I didn’t know this would be so hard.”

They stay there a little longer. Elio held loosely in Oliver’s arms, head to Oliver’s chest, Oliver’s chin resting on his curls.

When Elio yawns, Oliver releases him and lets him collapse down onto the bed. He’s half asleep already. His hair has long ago dried now, springing into long, loose curls, tangled from drying after the rain.

Oliver runs his fingers through Elio’s hair, teasing out tangles in his curls. He sort of hates how much he’s enjoying this.

Elio goes still and Oliver moves his hand away. But Elio reaches for his wrist and puts Oliver’s hand back on his head.

He mumbles, “No, don’t stop. Keep doing that. It feels nice.”

“Okay.”

They’re quiet, until Elio begins to cry again, more quietly this time but no less heartbroken. Oliver’s heart is breaking for him. For the man crying in front of him now, and for the boy he left behind all those years ago. Did he cry like this after I left? Oliver can’t bear to think about it.

He keeps his fingers in Elio’s hair. In time the sobs become more intermittent, turning to snuffles. And eventually Oliver realises he’s fallen asleep. Open mouthed and still congested from crying, his breathing uneven.

Oliver sits on the bed and continues to play with his hair until he’s content that he’s worked out all of the tangles, long after Elio’s breathing turns to the deep, easy breaths of sleep. He should go, but he doesn’t want to. He should go back to his hotel and slip into bed with the man he loves. The man who, he realises with regret, he wouldn’t have spared a thought for if Elio had tried to kiss him while they’d both been sober.
He should forget about the things Elio said. *I see the way you look at me. You make me want things I can’t have.*

In the end, he tears himself away. Stands up to leave. He does what he said he’d do earlier, and puts water by the bed. There was a packet of painkillers in the bathroom so he places them on the nightstand too. He puts the trash can on the floor next to the bed. Elio’s lying on his side, so Oliver’s pretty sure he’s unlikely to choke on his own vomit. Besides, there can’t be much left in his stomach by now.

Elio probably won’t be comfortable, fully dressed and on top of the duvet, but Oliver doesn’t want to wake him, so he flips the duvet from the other side of the bed to partly cover him, and turns to leave. At the last moment he goes back, and writes a note on the hotel paper. *Please call me when you’re up? Just to let me know you’re ok.* He leaves it by the glass of water.

He pockets the hotel pen as a memento, a strange reminder of this even stranger night.

He allows himself one last look, and whispers “Goodnight, Elio,” before he turns to leave.

The girl is still at the front desk. Oliver asks her to have toast and coffee sent to Elio’s room at ten if he hasn’t come to breakfast. “Of course, sir. I’ll see to it.”

Then he walks back out into the cool of the night.

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He tries not to wake Andrew, but he isn’t successful.

“Oliver? That you?”

“Yes. Sorry. Go back to sleep.” Oliver takes off his shoes and hangs up his jacket, wincing as the coat hangers clatter noisily.

Andrew flicks on a light by the bed. At least, he tries to, but he hits the wrong switch and instead of a single light the whole room is instantly ablaze with the half dozen bulbs recessed in the ceiling. “Oh, shit.” He puts a hand over his eyes and fumbles with the switches to rectify his error. “I’m definitely awake now. Everything okay?”

“Mmm. I think so. But I’m still a bit drunk, so…” Oliver perches on the edge of the bed. Like he did in a different room, in a different hotel, just an hour or so ago.

Andrew sits up and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Drink some water, then, before you come to bed. What brought on all the drinking, anyway? It’s not like you.”

Oliver explains a bit about Elio’s divorce. Not all, because it’s not his story to tell, but enough. Andrew is a serious, long-term partner and they tell each other things like this.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound good. Will he be okay?”

“He’ll have to be, won’t he?”

“Do you want to stay and keep him company tomorrow? I don’t mind going back alone.”

“You don’t mind? Any of this?”

“No. Should I mind? You went out and had too much to drink with an old friend. It happens.”
Oliver stares at his own feet, his black socks. “You know what he was to me. It doesn’t bother you that I went back to his hotel room?”

“Should I be bothered?” Oliver shakes his head. “Oliver, I’m not a suspicious person. Why would I be? I trust that what you told me is the truth. Besides- if you were going to sleep with him, I’m guessing you would have lied instead of telling me you were going to his hotel. Unless you’re trying to say there’s something I should be suspicious about?”

“No. Nothing like that happened. Of course it didn’t.”

“Well then. Go brush your teeth. I’m gonna go back to sleep.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too. Goodnight, Oliver.”

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Elio has obviously read Oliver’s note, because he calls at 10.30 in the morning. Oliver’s sitting in the hotel lobby while Andrew checks out. “Hello? Elio?”

“Hi.” It’s a hoarse whisper.

“You okay?” Oliver whispers back.

“I’m okay. Well, not okay but…”

“Why are we whispering? Is there someone there with you?”

“It’s my head, Oliver. Can’t be loud. I think I’m dying. Not feeling good.”

There is something ridiculous about Oliver sitting in a hotel lobby holding a whispered conversation on his phone, but he keeps doing it. “I’m not surprised. You were so drunk.”

“I don’t remember much. Don’t remember anything after… after the food came. I remember there was food.”

“Which food do you remember? Do you remember dessert?”

“We ate dessert? Oh. I don’t remember that.” Oliver holds back a laugh.

“We did. You had a chocolate soufflé.”

“I did?” Elio sounds intrigued by this development.

“Yes. And then we had some more drinks. Mostly you, really. You had three espresso martinis.”

“That was probably not the best decision.”

“And another large glass of wine.”

“Shit.”

And then we left, and you tried to kiss me, and you asked me to take you to bed.

“Did you bring me back to the hotel? No, wait, I know that. You left the note. That’s why I’m calling.”
“Yeah. Not sure you would have made it on your own.”

“I was that bad?”

“That bad.”

“Shit. What did I say? Did I embarrass myself?”

“No! We talked about your divorce. You were upset.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Before Oliver can respond, Elio continues. “Did I cry? I have sore eyes. Suppose that would be why.”

“Yes. You were really upset.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m sorry about it all. Sorry that you’re going through that.” Oliver wishes there was something he could say, or do, to make this better.

“I’ll be okay.”

“You want to talk about it?”

Elio sounds regretful when he says, “No. No offense but, no.”

“None taken.” It’s really none of Oliver’s business, after all.

“What else happened?”

“We came back to your hotel. You threw up. You cried. That’s pretty much all.”

“Phew. I guess that’s not too bad. Oh god- I didn’t throw up on you, did I?”

“No, you did not. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Listen- are you going to be okay? Do you have someone to- um…”

Someone to what? Someone to look after you? Someone to check that you’re okay? Someone to be around you, because I don’t like to think of you being alone right now?

He hears Elio take a deep breath. “I… yes. I’m going to call the airline and see if I can change my ticket so I can go back to Italy tonight or tomorrow. I’ll be better there. I can get back to work, see my mom.”

“Oh okay. Well, if you can’t change your ticket and want some company before you go, call me. I don’t go away on vacation until Monday, so I can be around over the weekend.”

“Thanks. That’s really nice of you. I should be able to get an early flight, though.”

“Listen. Can you let me know what happens? Just so I know you’re okay.”

“Of course- but you don’t need to worry about me. Shit happens, Oliver. You know that. And then you pick yourself up and carry on. That’s how life works.”

“I hope…” Once again Oliver is lost. What does he hope for Elio? He thinks, pauses for too long, perhaps, but eventually settles on “I hope you feel better soon.” Because that could mean any one of
several things, and Oliver means them all.

“Thanks. Enjoy your vacation. Keep in touch.”

“Will do.”

Of course he’ll keep in touch. Because Elio is Elio, and he has a hold on Oliver that won’t be denied. A hold that only seems to grow stronger every time they meet.

Chapter End Notes

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
Oliver loathed weddings with a passion.

He hadn’t been to many, actually, but his memories of them weren’t fond. He’d been a child when his siblings got married, dressed up and paraded around like the angelic, golden-haired boy he was. Distant aunts patting his head and cooing over him. Bored.

The one he remembered best was Susan’s wedding. His memories of that day were far sharper than they had any right to be given the fact that he’d only been four at the time. The ceremony had been boring and the clothes he’d had to wear had been restrictive, but the party afterwards had been a lot of fun. Oliver didn’t play with other young children very much- his siblings were all much older than him, after all- and he was pleased to meet some distant cousins, other little boys, at the wedding.

They ran around, shrieking and laughing while their mothers looked on fondly, chastising half-heartedly when things got too boisterous but not paying too much attention, engrossed as they were in catching up with friends and relatives who they seldom saw.

Until disaster struck. Not a disaster in the grand scheme of things, but disaster for Oliver nonetheless. Oliver crawled out from under a tablecloth (white, damask, not that he knew about things like that at the time) with another boy in hot pursuit, neither noticing the waiter who was clearing glasses from the table. Oliver knocked him off balance so that his tray full of glassware slipped to the floor. Broken glass and sticky, leftover drinks everywhere.

Silence fell as people peered to see the source of the commotion.

Oliver’s mother had looked stricken as she led him from the room by his hand with a smile and a come on, look how tired you are, I think we’d better get you to bed. Oliver had just looked back at the other little boys, who had already taken their game to another corner of the room.

Once they were out of sight of the guests, Oliver’s mother hurried him. Kept glancing over her shoulder. But Oliver dragged his feet because he wanted to go back to the party, which meant that his father easily caught them up. His father had been drinking, of course, and while to a casual observer he might have looked pleasantly tipsy, Oliver should have known better. He’d never really been on the receiving end of James’ anger before, but he’d seen it in action.
Oliver, dragged up the stairs by his pudgy little arm, tears streaking tracks through the grime which dusted his face because of his time spent crawling under tables. Pushed over the threshold of his bedroom with a shove so hard that his body had hit the bed and crumpled to the ground next to it. The door was slammed and he was shut in his room for being an embarrassment, you can’t even behave for your own sister’s wedding, you’re a disgrace to me.

His mom was close behind, and Oliver heard his father shout at her as he sat on the floor, a little dazed and too shocked to move.

This is your fault.

You spoil that boy.

We should never have had him.

He’s going to grow up to be weak and useless, just like you.

He needs some discipline.

Until finally- “Put him to bed. Don’t be long. And sort out your face before you come back down. You look ridiculous.”

His father’s footsteps had retreated and his mother had come in, closing the door softly. A red mark bloomed on one side of her face, and her makeup was smudged from crying.

“I’m sorry, baby. You have to be careful. Please don’t make him mad. Please be a good boy. Don’t upset daddy. Here. Let me look at you.”

Oliver was crying. Snot and tears and grime, and also, from somewhere, blood.

His mother fetched a wet cloth from his bathroom. When Oliver saw the blood on it, it made him almost hysterical.

“Please, Oliver, don’t scream like that. Shh. Shh, it’s okay. Oh, baby. I think you just bit your lip when you fell. It’s nothing to worry about. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

“He pushed me.”

“Shh, shh. It was an accident. You fell.”

“Daddy push-“

“No. No. Oliver. Listen to me, sweetheart. You fell. You tripped and fell and bit your lip. That’s what happened, and you mustn’t say anything else. Daddy will be mad with you and you don’t want that, do you? You don’t want to make him mad again.”

“But-“

“No.” His mother grabbed him by the shoulders, hard, and he couldn’t squirm away. He looked at her face and could see that she was afraid. “You fell, and that was all. I saw it. You remember. You were running and you fell over and bumped into the bed. Okay? Promise me.”

Oliver nodded.
Early the next morning his sister Jessica, sixteen at the time, had found him in his room, lying on the floor and coloring furiously. A picture of a boat. Blue.

“Hey, buddy.” She flopped down beside him and ruffled his hair. “That looks really good.”

“It’s for daddy. He was mad with me. He doesn’t like me. So I made him a picture. Can I go out now and give it to him?”

“Oh, sweetie. He’s pretty busy today. He’s in a bad mood because he has to do some work. Maybe you should just stay here a bit longer. I could give it to him if you wanted?”

“It’s not done yet. Will you help me write sorry?” Oliver didn’t look up, still immersed in his work, his little face set in concentration as he tried to stay inside the lines of the boat’s funnel.

“Sure. I can write it and you can copy.”

Oliver reached to grab a pencil, and Jessica grabbed his wrist. “Oliver. What happened to your arm?”

Oliver shook his head and didn’t look up. “Don’t know.”

Jessica stroked the bruise. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oliver. Stop mumbling. Talk to me. This didn’t just happen by itself. Who hurt you?” She took his face between her hands and forced him to look at her. He saw her eyes widen.

“Oh, Ollie.” She shifted his face around into the light from the window, and touched his swollen lip. “I thought you sounded strange. What happened to your mouth?”

He couldn’t quite get his tongue to make the words around the swelling of his bottom lip. “Mommy says I fell.”

“Well, did you? You can tell me. Come on, Ollie, it’s just me. You know I won’t tell.”

“Mommy said so. She said not to say that daddy pushed me.”

Her hand shook as she took the finished picture from him and stood up. “Color something for me, will you? To take back to school with me. I’ll be back when I’ve taken your picture to dad.”

“Okay. What colors do you want?”

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Her face was pink and blotchy when she returned.

“Do you have to go now?”

“Yeah. Sorry, Ollie. I do. Daniel’s waiting to drive me. But I’ll come see you again soon. Is that my picture?”

Oliver nodded enthusiastically. “I know you like tigers. And I put a heart on it for you. Are you crying?”

“No! No, I’m fine. Promise. I do like tigers. Especially blue ones. I’m going to put this on the
wall next to my bed.”

“Did you give daddy my boat picture?”

“I did. He loved it. He was really pleased.”

“Is he gonna put it on the wall? So he can look at it and remember I was sorry? What a nice picture I colored?”

“Oh. No. He said he couldn’t because it was too special. He wants to keep it somewhere safe instead. So it won’t get lost.”

Oliver had grinned.

He never talked about it to anyone. Sometimes he wondered if he’d imagined the whole thing.

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Part of Oliver hoped that it would rain on his wedding day, just because it felt as though it would be right. That his mother’s meticulously organised garden ceremony would be drenched and ruined. Stilettoes sinking into wet grass. Guests huddled inside the marquee, clammy with damp. All the money his father had spent, down the drain. (Literally. Oliver smiled at his own bad pun.) People would say it’s lucky, to rain on a wedding day, but everyone really knows it’s just polite to say that because they alternative would be huh, well isn’t this spectacularly crappy weather for a wedding?

But another part of him just wanted everything to go well, in the hope that his father would be pleased with everything. The wedding, the marriage, Oliver.

But mostly? The part of him that loved Julie, in the best way he ever could, wanted it to be beautiful. She’d been almost embarrassed when she’d confessed to him that yes, she’d dreamed of a big white wedding when she was a little girl. That she’d been sad when she’d realised that she’d never fall in love with a man and marry him in the wedding she’d imagined. She asked so little of him, really, and the least he could do was to give her this. So he’d feigned as much enthusiasm as any groom was expected to when beset by questions about flowers and canapes and other interminably boring things, when his real thoughts were no more complicated than let’s get this out of the way, and make sure there’s plenty of wine.

Oliver didn’t need to have gone to many weddings to appreciate the fact that his own was truly spectacular. Everything- from the ornate floral arrangements to Julie’s elaborate gown, to the spread of food- was enough to rival a wedding of royalty.

A lot of the day passed in a blur. Too many people, too much going on to remember the details. Things he had to say and do, cameras to smile for, people to mingle with. So many faces saying congratulations and you look so happy together and hasn’t it just been the most perfect day?

But some moments stuck out. A glass smashed under his heel, for one- and Oliver knew the things it was supposed to represent. But the finality of it was a particular kind of breaking for him. Something deliberate and true.

And later, Oliver’s speech, which made Julie cry. It was obviously heartfelt and every word was true. I can’t imagine a more perfect woman for me. She’s the only girl who ever made me feel like this. I’m so happy to share my life with her. She makes me smile, she makes me laugh, she’s beautiful. She’s everything I could want in a woman.
Julie could no doubt hear the words between the lines, the lies between the truth. *She’s all of those things, yes, but it’s not a girl I want at all.*

Even Oliver’s father was happy. Or seemed to be happy, at least. Oliver knew his father was almost certainly at least a little drunk, but James played the part of the proud father perfectly, and Oliver dared to hope that it was genuine. That just once he might have done something right, something that wasn’t constantly disappointing.

As the day turned to a long dusky summer evening, Oliver felt pleasantly fuzzy from champagne. Lights twinkled on amid the trees. He danced with his beautiful new wife, in her stunning dress that probably cost more than a young professor like him earned in a year. Soft and slender, his hands resting on the curve of her waist, enjoying the pleasant feeling of someone in his arms but hating himself for the fact that it didn’t make him feel anything.

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Oliver was a virgin on his wedding night- at least, as far as this particular deed was concerned. So was Julie. It suddenly seemed ridiculous.

It also felt like something they should probably have talked about in much more depth than they actually had.

They were spending the night in a hotel, before returning to Oliver’s parents’ home the following morning. Julie came out of the bathroom of their suite wearing something small and white and made of lace, which left little to the imagination. Oliver was sure there must be a name for such a garment but he had no idea what it was, having never had cause to think about such things.

“I have… never… seen anything like that.”

Julie laughed as she sat down on the bed. “Careful, Oliver. Your eyes are going to pop right out of your head if you keep looking at me like that. You want to hear something that’ll make you cringe? My *mother* picked this out for me. Well, she picked it out more with *you* in mind, actually. She thought she was being very daring talking about such a thing.”

“She… did? I don’t think…”

“She didn’t mean for you to *wear* it, Oliver. She meant for you to, um, appreciate it.”

“Oh. Well, in the interest of not appearing ungrateful, you can tell her I said it was very nice. I’ll be sure to write her a thank you note.”

Julie smiled before flopping back onto the pillow. “It’s not nice. It’s very uncomfortable. I thought it’d be rude not to show you, though.” She paused and looked up at the ceiling. Or, more accurately, at the canopy above the bed. “Has it occurred to you that we should have tried this before? Had a dry run, so to speak?”

“Maybe.” Oliver had considered it. “But… what’s the point? I figure we just have to get on with it. And… why do it more than necessary?”

“True. It’s easy enough for me. I can just lie back and think of England, as they say.”

Oliver took her hand. “I’ve never been to England. We should go some time.”

Julie propped her head up on her arm and looked at him. “We should. I’ve never been there either. And you do like history. There’s a lot of history there.”
“True, but my history is more… classical. England’s history is more recent stuff.”

“They had Romans. Romans were ancient history.”

“That’s true. And I do like Romans.”

Julie winked at him salaciously. “I bet you do. All the boys marching around in their leather skirts and going to the baths together.”

It was a pleasant enough image, but- “I fear we’re getting somewhat sidetracked here. From the matter at hand.”

Julie nodded and said, “I feel like we’re putting it off. Maybe we should leave it for tonight. It’s been a big day. I bet plenty of people don’t have sex on their wedding night.”

“Probably not. And we can wait. If you want. Or just… not do it at all.”

“Do you want? To wait?”

“Honestly? No.” Oliver was too tired to keep the resignation out of his voice. “I think we should do this. Get it done.”

Julie pulled back a sheet and climbed under it. “Well, then. Take your clothes off, Oliver. Let’s see what you can do.” Bits of white lace appeared from beneath the sheet and were flung to the floor. She watched him fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. “Should I have bought you some gay porn? I didn’t think. We can talk about the Romans some more, if it helps.”

Oliver laughs. “No. I’ll manage.” He slid under the covers, but not before Julie caught a glimpse of him in all his naked glory.

Julie laughed. More of a giggle, really, at first, but she didn’t stop. Her laughter turned into a snort. Oliver feigned affront, but it was clear that he was holding back laughter too. “Are you- are you laughing at me? This is an- an insult to my masculinity, I tell you. So rude. And on our wedding night, too.”

“I was just thinking-“ another burst of laughter- “That- that I’m just going to pretend I don’t know where that thing’s been.” She flicked her eyes down in the direction of his now covered crotch, before dissolving into giggles again, wiping tears of laughter with the back of her hand.

“Oh, god.” Oliver was unable to hold his laughter in any longer. “Did you really just say that?”

That only set her off again. It was several minutes before they calmed down enough to talk again. Eventually Julie, breathless from laughing for so long, fell back onto her pillow once again. “This is so weird. But thank god we can laugh about it all.”

“True. I think we should both just… pretend that the other one doesn’t know about us. Pretend that we both want this. That’s what gay people have been doing since forever, right? Gay men have been marrying women since- since time immemorial. And sleeping with them, and having families together. The only weird thing here is that you know about me. If you thought I was straight, then things would be less complicated.” Oliver hoped he sounded more resolved than he felt.

“Okay. Good point. We should pretend.” Julie nodded, more to herself than to him, then threw her head back against the pillows. “God, you’re right. This would be easier if we didn’t know. But… you’re right. We should pretend. Nothing about this would have been weird at all if we didn’t know
about each other.”

“Right. So. Who’s going to start this? Should we just…”

Julie, thankfully, took the initiative, flipping around and putting one leg over him to straddle his hips, before leaning in and kissing him so quickly that he exhaled through his nose with an oof.

And in the end, it was easier than he thought it might be. Oliver’s brain didn’t want to be doing this, but his body was hardwired for reproduction and the testosterone soon overrode any thought he might have about, well, anything much really. His brain switched off and he lost himself in the moment. Although he was distantly aware that this just wasn’t the same, at the end of the day sex is just sex and it felt nice enough, regardless of the details.

Afterwards, Julie stroked his hair fondly as he rolled back to his side of the bed. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” He laughed breathlessly. “Pretty good, actually. Are you- oh- am I supposed to, um…” his hand moved down the flatness of her stomach until she grabbed his wrist.

“No, I think this is where we stop pretending that we don’t both know that we’re both not into this. God, I wish I loved you. Because you are so sweet, and so… polite. And lovely. But no. It’s nothing personal, but I’m not exactly feeling very turned on by all of this. I suppose if I was pretending properly then I would’ve faked it anyway. I still could, if you like?” She looked almost eager.

Oliver swatted at her shoulder and grinned. “I can’t believe you didn’t even fake an orgasm for me on our wedding night. First you laugh at me and now- now this. You are a terrible wife. And are you saying I’m not good in bed?”

“Oh, honey. You’re the best guy I’ve ever had, no doubt about it. The best by a long way.”

They lay there quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. Until Julie scrunched up her nose. “Ew. Well, this feels… weird. And, no offense, sort of gross. You should be the one to sleep in this icky wet patch, you know.”

“Don’t complain. You said you wanted my sperm, and now you’ve got it. Let’s hope it gets the job done.” Despite himself, Oliver nuzzled in to the side of her neck.

“You want to snuggle? You know that’s just your hormones talking.”

“I know. But let’s do it anyway. If it’s okay with you.”

“So of course it’s okay.”

So they did.

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A steady stream of gifts and cards had been arriving at Oliver’s parents’ house for weeks before the wedding. Oliver and Julie had opened many of them already, but it was the day after the wedding before they finally got around to opening the last of them.

Julie tore into an envelope absentmindedly while Oliver was reading another card. A small envelope fell out of the larger one and Oliver instinctively picked it up from where it had fallen on the floor. His hand stilled when he read the front of the envelope.
“What’s wrong? Oliver?” Julie put a hand on his shoulder, shaking it gently and pulling Oliver out of his thoughts. She let him take his time to respond, and when he did it was quiet.

“This is from Elio.” He held the envelope toward her. Bright white, expensive, stiff paper. *Oliver and Julie* written on it in black ink, in Elio’s scratchy handwriting.

Julie handed it back. “Aren’t you going to open it?”

Oliver shook his head. “Can you do it?”

“Or you could keep it for later. It doesn’t have to be now. Open it when you’re alone, sometime.”

“No. It’s addressed to the both of us, so…” He looked up at her expectantly.

Julie opened the envelope but passed the note inside it straight to Oliver without reading it. Oliver took it, reluctantly, and read it aloud.

Dear Oliver and Julie,

*Congratulations on your wedding. I hope you have a wonderful day and that you will be very happy together.*

*With love and best wishes,*

Elio

Oliver didn’t know what he’d expected. He hadn’t expected anything from Elio until he saw the writing on the envelope, and then he’d thought… he didn’t know, actually. He’s thought, *hoped,* for something more meaningful than this nothing-note.

He scrunched his eyes closed and rested his head in his hands. Julie stood behind him and stroked his back until, eventually, he sat upright with a heavy, shaky exhale.

“Fuck. *Fuck.* What have I done? What have *we* done?”

Julie turned him around to face her and hugged him tight. “We’ll make this work. Right?”

Oliver nodded his head, once. Resolved. “I guess we’ll have to.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to take a break from working on this for the rest of the month. Not because I want to, but because it’s Christmas and I have A Ton Of Shit To Do.

I am hoping to finish a little one-shot (or at least short) thing I’ve been working on since August. I lost a big chunk of it on google docs and got pissed off but I do want to take another look at it. It’s about Oliver’s visit to the Perlmans’ for Christmas in the book (1987) and it seems as though I should try to post it around Christmas/New Year, so that’s my aim.

Agonised over some odd things this chapter. Does Oliver, an American, do colouring or coloring? It hurt me to leave out that *u* but I figured it was for the best. Also- who knew Romans was a proper noun? I couldn’t get my head around whether it was or not, and
the internet didn't help, so I went upstairs and spend aaaaages going through a bookshelf full of kids books until I fished out The Usborne First Book about London, which, of course, talks about the Romans.

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
Elio has a birthday.

Summary/reminder post if you need it- click here for a recap! I don't know what to say here, really. So I said I hoped to update in mid-January but that makes this about six weeks late. It’s been a rough couple of months with family and stuff, and things at home are still pretty tough right now. I know people will want to say things like 'don't worry about writing, take all the time you need!' but it's honestly not about that. It's hard to explain, but I don't feel rushed/under pressure to write. I just don't have the time and space I need to do it. But I do hope it won't be another 3 months until the next chapter.

Thanks for sticking around, if indeed you still are. (OK so that line is shamelessly stolen but why not?)

Summary: Eight hours. Oliver has eight hours alone with his own thoughts and nothing to distract him. Well, he tries to watch a movie but can’t focus. He tries several, actually- the latest Star Trek movie, which he’s heard good things about, then a comedy about a bachelor party gone wrong, and even an arty drama he’s never heard of- just because it has an Italian director and is set in Milan and it seems like something which might interest him. But none of them hold his attention, and he finds himself gazing at the clouds outside the window. Wondering how he found himself here, and whether it’s a good idea or not.

There’s not much to wonder about, really, because the first question is easily answered (because of Elio), and the second even more so (probably not).

It’s not entirely because of Elio that he’s here, however. When Julie heard about his plan she said it was because he’s just a nice guy who likes to please other people, and she’s not wrong. Doing this will please Elio (hopefully), Annella (certainly) and various other relatives and family friends.

The events that set this trip in motion started with an email, as such things so often seem to do nowadays. Oliver didn’t recognise the email address when he saw the message in his inbox. Half expected it to be a blank message containing nothing but a virus. But he opened it anyway and no, not a virus- it was from one of Elio’s cousins. Oliver remembers her, vaguely, from all those years ago, although she can’t have been more than twelve at the time he was in Italy. She’s getting in touch because she’s organising a party for Elio’s 40th birthday, and Elio made a list of friends she should invite, and would he like to come?

Honestly? No, not really. There will be nobody much there who he knows very well, and he will feel shy and awkward, a feeling which is only made worse by the fact that people judge him on the
way he looks. He’s used to the fact that strangers look at him and assume that this tall, good looking
man with a killer smile must be comfortable in his own skin and sure of himself. And yes, he’s good
at putting on an act, having spent most of his life pretending to be someone he’s not. But he’s an
introvert at heart and he finds it all so, so draining.

So, no. He doesn’t really want to go. Big birthday parties are not really his thing.

But also yes- because Elio will be there, and try as he might (and he has tried, truly he has) Oliver is
not good at staying away from him. And the party probably won’t be so bad. He doesn’t have to
stay for long. Besides- there will probably be at least some people he knows there. Annella, of
course, some of Elio’s relatives who visited them in Italy that summer, perhaps even friends of Elio’s
who Oliver knew- like Marzia and Chiara. (Please, not Chiara.)

It would be nice to see Elio again, and even better to do so at an event like this because it won’t be
just the two of them. They’ve met up a few times since that night two summers ago, and things have
been awkward. A little less eye contact, the conversation a little more stilted. Elio has seemed
slightly puzzled by this, but he hasn’t asked for a reason and Oliver hasn’t volunteered an
explanation.

When he plies the cousin for more details about the party, she says that she’s not sure yet who will be
able to go- but she does know that Annella won’t be able to make it. There’s nobody over there in
Italy right now who can accompany her on the journey, and she won’t be able to fly over here on
her own. It’s a shame, but she and Elio will celebrate when he goes over there for Hannukah.

And that’s when Oliver had an idea. Phone calls were made. Discussions were had. Tickets were
booked. Which is how Oliver has found himself flying to Italy a few days before Elio turns 40.

The party is set to be a lavish affair, in the ballroom of a hotel in New York. Elio’s cousin provides
more details. If you’re planning on staying in the city, the hotel is offering discounted rates to party
guests. I can arrange a room if you’d like?

Oliver will stay over in the city, because he’ll be too tired to drive home after flying to Milan and
back. But staying in the same hotel as Elio? Something tells him that it’s best if he doesn’t.

Which brings his thoughts circling around to the reason why things have been awkward for the past
two years. It’s Oliver’s fault, but also not. Oliver’s reticence has been deliberate, but it was brought
about by what Elio said. And none of the things which are Elio’s fault are things Elio himself
remembers saying, but they were said all the same, and Oliver has been careful to keep his distance
since then.

Oliver can’t help but think back to the message which appeared in his inbox the day after that
drunken night. Just wanted to let you know that I’m getting a flight back to Italy tonight. And I
wanted to say thank you. For everything you did for me. For looking after me. Thank you for
arranging breakfast. Thank you for the water and the painkillers. For being my shoulder to cry on,
even though I don’t remember that bit. So I’m not sure if I mean it literally or metaphorically, but
thank you either way.

And Oliver’s simple reply- Any time. Then the bit he wrote but deleted- I’m worried about you.
Please keep in touch and let me know how you’re doing. And the things he thought about but didn’t
write at all- hardly daring to put them into words even in his own head. Did you mean what you
said? Do you really want those things? Because I do, too, and I don’t know what to do about it.

Two years is too long to have spent tiptoeing around Elio, but Oliver remembers the night clearly,
and he can’t escape the reasons why he’s avoided seeing Elio since then. Elio’s words, in between
his tears, in that hotel room. *I miss you. But we shouldn’t see each other again. You make me want things I can’t have. Things we’ve agreed we can’t have.*

Elio was right, and Oliver knows it. Elio makes him- has always made him- want things he can’t have. It’s sensible to stop dangling that possibility in front of himself, isn’t it? But this is hard. He can’t quite bring himself to cut Elio out of his life completely. Yet is seeing him every few months, deliberately avoiding talking about anything of consequence, any better? Can they keep doing this? And for how long?

Avoiding Elio certainly felt like the kind thing to do. The right thing. Elio had been hurting and he’d said that Oliver only made things worse. This- the slow, gradual drifting apart of the last two years- is surely better for both of them.

Because *drifting apart* is more accurate than *avoiding*, really. Oliver hasn’t gone out of his way not to see Elio. Hasn’t avoided him, as such. He’s simply left the ball in Elio’s court. Oliver hasn’t initiated contact, but when Elio has got in touch with him and suggested meeting, he hasn’t said no.

Not avoiding Elio then. Just avoiding making things worse, by avoiding creating false hope. For either of them.

Eight hours alone with his thoughts, and he still doesn’t have the answers. Hasn’t even really worked out the questions yet. He sighs heavily and goes back to staring at the clouds.

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He spends a restless, jetlagged night at the Perlman’s apartment in Milan, before he and Annella leave for the airport and fly back to New York the next morning.

On the flight back, Oliver isn’t alone with his thoughts. Annella seems to be doing much better than she was when he saw her the summer before last. Time since Samuel’s death has healed her, a little. Today she’s good company, and can’t hide her excitement. “My baby. How is my baby going to be 40? Where did the years go? I wish Samuel was still with us. He’d have loved to be there. Seeing Elio, catching up with friends and family. We always said we should try to spend more time in the states, but we never did get round to it and now… well.”

Of course conversation turns to Elio. “Have you seen Elio recently? I haven’t seen him since the spring. He couldn’t make it over to Italy during the summer. But in spring he was…” She takes a moment to think. To find the right word. “…different. He’s started playing the piano again, did you know?” Oliver didn’t. “I forgot how much I loved to hear it. He spent hours practising. Scales and arpeggios, simple little pieces, then more complicated things. He hunted down some of his old score books in a cupboard upstairs, and played around with some of his own pieces from when he was in high school, back when he still used to write. He seemed to be doing well. Better than he was, at least. The divorce really tore him up. He struggled so much for a long time, but I think things have finally turned around for him. I hope so.” She smiles warmly.

“And what about you, Oliver? Elio said you were with someone.”

“Oh. Yes, I was, for some time. But not any more. We broke up last year.”

Annella raises an eyebrow. “I sense a story there. And we have a lot of time to kill, so you might as well tell me.” She shifts in her seat as though to get comfortable. “Humour an old woman. I don’t get out much anymore.”

“No, no,” he laughs. “There’s really nothing to tell. Andrew and I… it had run its course, that’s
Their break up had been mutually agreed. They’d reached a point where things either had to become more serious or they had to end. They discussed moving in together, but it was too complicated. Oliver didn’t want to move away from Julie and the boys, and Andrew didn’t want to leave Boston. And neither really wanted to move and live somewhere in between. And, yes, they did love each other and probably could have made things work, continued their relationship as a semi-long-distance thing. But neither of them wanted it enough to put in the work they’d need to do.

It wasn’t what Oliver wanted. He doesn’t want a relationship of distance and unsatisfactory compromises. Deep down he wants the sort of relationship and commitment he’s never been able to have. A partner who he can love and live with and maybe, someday, even more. Someone whose absence would be unthinkable, would steal the air from his lungs and tear him to pieces. And when it was time to make the big decisions, he quickly realised that Andrew simply wasn’t that person.

They’d parted amicably, and have even had drinks together a few times since, when work had brought Andrew into the city. The last time they met up, Andrew was seeing someone else. Oliver is happy for him, and hopes it works out.

Oliver tells Annella, “We’d been together for a while, but we both realised it wasn’t going to be more. Wasn’t destined to be forever.” He goes on to tell her some more about Andrew and their relationship and the circumstances leading to its end.

He doesn’t tell her that Elio had been a part of the problem. Not because of Andrew’s jealousy, because he really wasn’t like that. But because Oliver had seen a maybe. A crack in Elio’s hard outer shell. He’d wanted to see more, and after that- despite his decision to respect Elio’s insistence that there can’t be anything between the two of them- something in him just couldn’t fully commit to someone else.

There have been others since Andrew. Oliver did, eventually, take a brief foray into the world of online dating. It turned out that there were other men out there who wanted what he wanted—something more than a one night stand, but less than a committed relationship. No exclusivity, no strings attached.

And it’s not been a bad thing. Oliver feels he knows himself a little better for it. Being able to live openly and, yes, to enjoy himself just for the sake of enjoyment, has been liberating. There have been times of loneliness, but it hasn’t been a bad year.

He finishes his explanation to Annella. “So, no. There’s nobody right now.”

And the conversation soon turns back to Elio, because how could it not? Annella has no qualms about telling Oliver about Elio’s life, including his love life. Apparently he’s seeing someone, has been doing so for almost a year now.

She smiles but, as so often happens when she speaks of Elio, she looks concerned too. “Things are better than they were. But he still pushes people away. He’s not good at trusting people, never has been, and he’s been worse since his marriage ended and we lost Samuel. He’s been hurt too many times, by too many people, so he doesn’t let people in. And when he does, they’ve hurt him. I sometimes wish that…”

She takes a deep breath but then falls silent. Oliver waits. He doesn’t push her to continue, but eventually she does anyway, looking at him intently. “It’s too long since he’s really been happy. Far too long. He’s afraid. He will keep pulling you in and pushing you away. You will need to keep pushing him back. Tell him what you want.”
Oliver can’t help his wide-eyed expression. What, exactly, does Annella know? Because right now it seems like she might know something Oliver isn’t even sure about himself.

She must recognise his surprise, because pats his hand and chuckles. “Rest, muvi star. You must be exhausted and we still have hours until we land.”

And he tries, but he can’t sleep. So when Annella settles down to take a nap, Oliver is left to think about what she’s said.

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Time was always going to be tight. Oliver knew that, and would have liked to catch a flight the day before, but it wasn’t to be. And on arrival circumstances conspire against them- the flight is delayed by over an hour, then there’s a problem with baggage reclaim, and traffic on the way into the city is terrible. Oliver is worried that all of this effort might be for nothing, that they might miss the party altogether- and in the end they’re fashionably late. Far from fashionable, having barely had time to check Annella into her hotel room, let alone to freshen up after the flight- but Oliver’s just relieved to have made it at all.

Oliver is exhausted from flying to Italy and back. He aches from sitting for too long, his skin feels dry and his eyes are sore. But it’s worth it. The smile on Elio’s face when he sees his mother makes it worth every cent it’s cost him, and the fact that he’s half-dead on his feet suddenly doesn’t matter in the slightest.

“Mom? You- how did you-?” Elio’s mouth hangs open in shock as he runs to her and crushes her in a hug, swiping tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. She looks impossibly fresh given the fact that she’s not long stepped off a transatlantic flight.

“Elio! Bon anniversaire, mon amour.” She kisses his cheek.

“Mom, you- I- you’re here! How did you get here? I can’t-“

Annella just smiles and pinches his cheek. “By plane, of course. How else?”

“But how? Surely you didn’t come all this way alone?”

“Ah,” she smiles and taps a finger on the end of his nose, “that’d be telling.” They’ve agreed not to tell Elio that Oliver went to Milan and brought her here. He doesn’t want Elio to know that he… well, he’s not sure, really, but he doesn’t know if he can pass this off as something a friend (and not a particularly close one at that, he thinks with regret) would do. And of course he doesn’t want Elio to feel as though he owes Oliver something.

Elio frowns at her vagueness, and she laughs at him. “I’m not telling. It’s a secret.”

Oliver watches them and smiles fondly before going to the bar to chat to the cousin who arranged this whole thing.

She pulls him into an embrace and kisses him on both cheeks. “You’ve made them both so happy. You must really care about him.” Oliver wonders how much she knows.

“Yeah. They are. It’s nice to see.” Elio is mingling with the guests, dancing a little, his mom never far from his side. Oliver keeps an eye out for Elio’s partner- surely he or she is here, somewhere? But there’s no-one he could identify as being such a person.

Oliver doesn’t feel as awkward as he thought he might do. There are more familiar faces then he
thought there would be- family and friends whose faces he sort of recognises from his summer in Italy. It’s a family oriented affair, with a new generation of children, too. Not in the frilly party dresses worn by little girls at family events back in the 1980s, but jeans and t-shirts. Sequins. Oliver thinks about the fact that his own children are adults too now, and feels even older than usual.

He finds himself chatting to a slightly drunk friend of Elio’s from med school.

“How do you know Elio?”

“Oh, well, I’m a…” what is he, exactly? A friend? And ex? I loved him more than twenty years ago? He settles for, “Family friend, from a very long time ago.”

“He seems to be in a good mood tonight. It’s unusual, especially lately. After the divorce and everything he was in pretty bad shape. He’s a great guy, and I love him, so it’s good to see him like this.”

“You do?”

The friend puts down his drink. “Love him? Yeah. But not like that!” He laughs affectionately. “No chance. I’m not into guys. Wait, are you jealous?” He gives Oliver a quick once-over. “Well, you’re not his type anyway.” *If only you knew*, thinks Oliver.

“And even if I did like guys, I would steer clear of Elio. Romantically. He messes with people, tries not to care about anyone. I think it’s part of what makes him such a good doctor- he gets on with the job but doesn’t get hung up on caring about the patients as people.”

Oliver must look slightly horrified, because the friend places a hand on his shoulder good-naturedly. “Nah, man, I don’t mean it like that. He cares, and he’s good with people- kids, old folks, they all love him, but he’s able to keep himself distanced from them. It’s a good thing, really- some people who can’t do that don’t cope with the job for long. But in his personal life? Well, he broke a lot of hearts back in med school. I honestly don’t know how he found the time. He had quite the reputation, and from what I’ve heard he’s not much better now. But he and you go way back, so no doubt you know what he’s like, right? He’s a good friend, and a good person, but boy is he a mess.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure.” Oliver laughs, but he knows it doesn’t quite ring true. “I know what he’s like.”

Does he? Is this the boy Oliver knew? And if this is who Elio is now, is it Oliver’s fault?

***

Oliver is content to people watch and make small talk with Elio’s friends and relatives, all the while trying to be surreptitious in his watching of Elio. Elio is busy mingling and aside from a quick hello, Oliver doesn’t manage to speak to him until later in the evening, when Elio suddenly meets his eyes and moves purposefully towards him.

“Oliver.” He hugs him, his still-thin arms squeezing Oliver hard enough to knock the breath out of him, before pulling back to look at him. “You did this.” He gestures toward the table where his mother is sitting chatting to someone Oliver doesn’t recognise, before looking back at Oliver, eyes swimming. “Thank you. I don’t know how I can ever repay you for making this happen. Thank you so much. So, so much. You have to let me reimburse you for the plane tickets at least.”

“No. Absolutely not. I won’t hear of it. Consider it a birthday gift. Who told you, by the way? This is why you weren’t supposed to find out. Of course you don’t owe me anything, financial or otherwise.”
Elio laughs incredulously. “I overheard my mom talking to my aunt. She asked me not to tell you I knew, but it’s my birthday so I’m going to do what I want. I can’t believe you went to all that trouble. Why did you do it?”

Oliver tries to pass it off as nothing. “Because I couldn’t think of a gift to get you.”

Elio nudges him with an elbow and grins. “Be serious.”

“I am! I couldn’t think of anything. Besides- I knew she’d want to be here, and that you’d want her here. Your dad would’ve wanted it, too. And I had the time, so… yeah.”

Elio bites his bottom lip and squeezes his eyes shut, as though he’s taking a moment to stop himself from bursting into tears. Then he looks right at Oliver again. “I can’t believe that anyone would want to do something like that for me. Nobody has ever…” He shakes his head slowly. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

He reaches up and kisses Oliver on the corner of his jaw, an inch away from his mouth, before taking his hand and dragging his away from the bar, grinning.

“C’mon. I haven’t talked to you all night. Dance with me?”

“I can’t dance. You know that.”

“We don’t have to do dancing. This is a pretty slow song. We can just do, y’know, swaying dancing.”

“Isn’t that… um…” What couples do?

“It’s fine. Come here.”

This is how Oliver danced with his then-girlfriend, at prom. Carefully keeping a distance between them, his hands tentative on Elio’s waist and Elio’s on his shoulders. Is it ridiculous? It should be. At the very least, Oliver himself is ridiculous for the way it makes him feel. It’s intimate and frightening.

Elio looks up at him, and Oliver tries to work out whether Elio is a fraction taller than he was twenty years ago. Of course, it could be to do with his shoes. They both spent almost the whole summer barefoot. The thought of Elio’s bare feet makes Oliver feel even more lightheaded. He’s not one of those people who has a thing for feet, but this is Elio and… never mind. “Oliver…” Elio whines. “I wanted to talk to you. You’ve been avoiding me.”

“No, I’m haven’t. I’m not. I’m just tired right now. And I don’t want to monopolise your time. You have a lot of people to see tonight, it’s your party, and-“

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t mean tonight.”

Oliver is quiet, trying to formulate a response.

Elio laughs. “Don’t pretend you haven’t. I can read you like a book.”

“You never used to be able to. You always said you had no idea what I was thinking.”

“I lied.” Elio enunciates it slowly and clearly, and Oliver notices his tongue flick out momentarily between his teeth, before Elio turns his head away from Oliver’s gaze. Hiding. “To myself, mostly. Deep down I knew what you were thinking. I knew what you wanted. I just didn’t believe it.”
Didn’t dare to believe that you might...”

Elio shrugs, then clasps his hands more decidedly around Oliver’s neck, like a lovesick schoolgirl at her first dance. Oliver wraps his arms tighter around Elio.

Then Elio’s hands move down to Oliver’s waist. And one hand, slowly but confidently, under his jacket. Pulls his shirt out of his waistband. A hand, cool on the small of Oliver’s back. Oliver tries not to flinch at the shock.

“Elio. What are you doing?”

Elio shakes his head. “I don’t know. Is it okay?”

Oliver thinks it might very well not be okay, but he nods, because he doesn’t want to think about it too much and he doesn’t trust himself to speak. His breathing is shallow and he can’t work out what’s going to happen next, or even what he wants to happen next, so he clears his mind, closes his eyes and keeps dancing.

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It doesn’t last for long- certainly not for long enough. They’re interrupted when a child- a cousin’s daughter, probably? Comes along and tugs at Elio’s jacket, demanding his attention.

The dancing they’ve been doing was nowhere near strenuous enough to explain the breathlessness of his laugh as the girl tries to drag him away. “One moment, sweetie.” He takes her hand in his as he turns to look at Oliver again. “I’ll catch up with you again later?”

“I… listen, Elio, actually, I think I’m gonna take off. It’s been a long couple of days, and I really need some sleep. You go spend time with your family. I’ll, um, I’ll get in touch again soon, okay?”

Elio nods, his expression one of unguarded disappointment. “Oh. Okay. Yes. Let’s meet again soon.” The little girl tugs at his sleeve again, and Elio looks down at her. “Hang on! I’m coming, just wait for a second!”

He leans in and gives Oliver a brief, one-armed hug, then lets himself be led away back into the crowd.

Oliver spends a few minutes saying his goodbyes before leaving- and then gets lost on the way out of the hotel. Well- not lost, really. He just heads for a door he thinks will take him towards the lobby, and finds himself on a balcony instead. A dead end. It overlooks a small garden area with some flowers and a few tables. It’s probably usually a place where people come to smoke, but the night is chilly and he’s the only one outside right now. And since he’s here, he might as well stay and collect his thoughts before he leaves. The last few days have been… a lot. He leans on the balcony rail and takes a moment to enjoy the cool air.

Oliver has been standing there for a few minutes when a burst of music and chatter comes through the opened doors, bringing Elio with it. Elio stops stock-still when he sees Oliver. “Oh. I thought you’d left. I just came out here to…” He holds up a packet of cigarettes.

“No. Though I am. Leaving. I will, in a few minutes. Just getting some fresh air. I thought you didn’t smoke?”

“I’m trying to quit again. But it’s been a tough couple of years.” Elio looks down at the packet in his hand, before looking back up at Oliver as he stuffs it back into his pocket. “Listen. Don’t go. Not yet.” He sounds earnest and honest.
“Elio…” Oliver trails off. He’s not sure what he wants to say.

“Stay. Dance with me again.”

“Your mom said you were seeing someone.” Oliver blurts it out without thinking, only realising afterwards just how much is implied by him saying these words at this time.

Elio tilts his head to look at Oliver quizzically. “That’s… not what I expected you to talk about.” Then he laughs. “My mom is such a gossip. She pretends she’s above all that, but she’s not. What else did she tell you?”

“About that? Nothing, really.”

“Well, it’s true. I was. And it was… it was fun. It was nice. She was nice. It was what I needed after everything with the divorce, and… well. But it was never going to be anything serious, and when it started to come close to that, it was time to let go. We ended it last month. A mutual decision. I didn’t tell my mom until tonight.”

Oliver just nods.

Elio takes a step closer. “So, will you dance with me again, or not?”

“Are you drunk tonight?”

Elio shakes his head sharply. His curls bounce around his face. “Not drunk. A little fuzzy, maybe. Pleasantly fuzzy. I am allowed to be. It is my birthday, after all.”

Oliver steps forward and slides his hands around Elio’s waist, pulling him closer. Closer, without being exactly close, because that wouldn’t be wise. The music isn’t really audible out here above the sounds of the city, but they sway together anyway as time seemingly stands still around them.

And then a little more. Closer again, because Elio’s proximity is playing havoc with Oliver’s resolution to be good. To keep his distance, emotionally and physically. But he’s so tired. Elio buries his nose in Oliver’s neck and inhales deeply. Oliver’s hand skims up from Elio’s waist, up his back, and into his hair. Curls fall through his fingers until he tightens his grip to gently tug Elio’s head back. Just before his eyes drift shut, he sees a flash of green eyes meet his own. There’s a strange moment of clarity when Oliver realises what he’s about to do. A realisation that he’s making a decision. Yes or no. Stop or don’t. Be good. Now, or later, or never.

Now.

His lips, just barely, brush Elio’s. Because he may have made a decision, but that doesn’t eliminate his hesitance. He feels Elio’s mouth move in a small smile just before he feels his tongue on his lips. Teasing- until Elio laughs, mostly through his nose. He doesn’t move away.

“What?” he whispers. “What’s so funny?”

Elio’s lips are so close, Oliver swears he can feel them moving as he speaks. “You taste of strawberry chapstick.”

“I need it. I’ve spent a lot of the past 48 hours on airplanes. You know what airplane air’s like.” Oliver still has his eyes closed. Daren’t open them for fear that he might catch another glimpse of those eyes and become even more lost than he already is. He breathes.

“I’m not complaining. It’s just… unexpected.”
“Okay.” A whisper, again. A slight nod.

Elio kissing him is both unexpected and inevitable. It’s warm and delicious and Oliver gasps because he has no idea just how much he missed this until he had it again, and now he’s frightened because he knows, he knows, that he’s going to lose it once more and he suddenly doesn’t know if he can bear it. Elio snuffles another laugh and kisses him a little more. It’s different to kissing Elio at seventeen- he kisses with certainty, like someone who knows exactly what he wants and exactly how to do this, someone who’s had a lot of practice.

Oliver keeps his eyes closed and kisses back.

It’s Elio who stops, and pulls back a little, all the while keeping Oliver close with a hand to the back of his head. Oliver wonders just how long they’ve been kissing for. Surely not long enough for Oliver to be out of breath. He finally opens his eyes.

Elio looks right at him and whispers. “Suppose I asked you to come up to my room.”

A pause. “Suppose I said yes.”

A sharp inhale. “Suppose I asked you to stay the night.”

Hesitant. Does he want to ask this? To know the answer? “Suppose I asked what happens next?”

Brutal honesty. Regretful. “I’d have to tell you that I can’t promise anything beyond tonight.”

But Oliver can be honest too. “Suppose I told you I wanted more.”

“I can’t promise that. Not a definite no, but… is maybe enough?”

No hesitance now, because Oliver knows the answer. Even while some part of him screams yes, take it, one night has to be better than never again. It’s not enough. “No, Elio. I don’t think so. I want it to be, but it’s… not. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to apologise for that. We can just…” Elio leans back in and kisses him again.

Maybe is not enough. Not even for this, chaste as it may be. Oliver pulls away, placing a hand on Elio’s chest to signal no. Or at the very least, wait. “Elio.” Elio places a hand on the back of Oliver’s neck and gently pulls him in again. Oliver can’t escape the parallels with the first time they ever kissed. “No. Elio. Please. I can’t do this. Not if it doesn’t mean anything. I need more than maybe, even if kissing is as far as this goes. If you just want something for tonight, then no.” Elio has just ended a year-long relationship. Oliver doesn’t want to be a rebound, a diversion. And even more compelling- his mind can’t help but go back to what Elio’s old friend said earlier in the evening. He messes with people. Oliver would like to think that Elio wouldn’t do that to him, but he knows he shouldn’t flatter himself into thinking he’s special. And how well does he really know Elio, anyway? Perhaps not at all. “I’m not your plaything, Elio. You know how I feel about- about all of this. About you.”

Elio steps back and looks at him, eyebrows scrunched in bewilderment. “What? I do? You want to tell me? Because I honestly have no idea. None at all.”

Oliver tries to keep the frustration out of his voice. “Why do you always have to make things so difficult?”

“I make things difficult? You think this is easy for me?”
“No. No, I know it’s not easy for you. But that doesn’t mean you get to mess with me like this. You know what? This isn’t the time to talk about this. If you want to talk about it some time, you know how to contact me. If not then you’re probably right. We probably shouldn’t see each other again. This is too difficult. For both of us.”

Elio’s eyes are wide. “Wha- what? When did I say that we shouldn’t see each other? I didn’t say that!”

Oliver’s gentle now. “When I saw you on the day you got divorced. When you were drunk. You said some things, and I- you- well, you weren’t wrong. That’s why I’ve been sort of avoiding you. You said you… look. We should probably talk about this. Clear the air, regardless of whether we’re going to see each other again. But not tonight.”

“Oliver?” Elio grabs him by the sleeve of his jacket. “What did I say?”

“You said that you missed me. But that we shouldn’t see each other again, because I make you want things you can’t have. That’s why I’ve been keeping my distance from you since then.”

“Oh. I… why did you lie about it? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like the kind thing to do. There was nothing to be gained by you knowing what you’d said. And you were so upset. I didn’t want to make it about that, about me, or us, when you were hurting over the end of your marriage.”

Elio slumps down into a chair.

Oliver thinks, briefly, about what he has to lose by being honest right now, and comes up with nothing. The truth, then. “Elio. I wouldn’t have kissed you if I didn’t still…” He sighs, frustrated with himself because he’s written books, for god’s sake, several successful ones in fact, but he can’t find the right words when it matters the most. “Okay. You asked me why I brought your mom here. I didn’t tell you the whole truth. I did it because I’m selfish. Because I wanted to see that smile you did when you saw her. That’s how I feel about you. When you said what you said that night, I said I felt the same. Because I did. Do. I know it’s complicated, and we’ve said… You said we’d agreed it was something we couldn’t have. And I don’t think I did agree to that, but I know it’s what you want, and it does sort of make sense. You’re probably right. It would be easier if we just stayed away from one another. But, Elio. That’s not what I want.”

Elio nods, slowly and thoughtfully. Oliver can see him trying to take in this information, use it to reshape his understanding of a situation he thought he had the upper hand in.

“Do I need to apologise?” he asks.

Oliver shrugs. “I don’t know. Do you?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I don’t know if I’m messing you around or not. I don’t think I am, or I don’t mean to but… I don’t know what I want. This is something I never thought would be an option again, and I still- I still don’t think it could be the same as before. I don’t think I could settle for something less. So I shouldn’t…”

Elio stands up and leans on the balcony rail, staring out into the city beyond to avoid Oliver’s gaze. Something in the way he’s standing tells Oliver that he’s trying not to cry. “I am sorry. And I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“If you had, would you have done it anyway?”
“Probably. I never pretended to be a good person, Oliver. I wanted to kiss you, so I did. I didn’t think of anything it might mean beyond that.”

“And it wouldn’t have bothered you if it things had gone further and it was just a one-night stand?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking about that.” He laughs, short and bitter. “Because what’s the point in worrying about the future? You only end up missing out on what you can have in the present. It would’ve been fun, and if that’s all, then…” He shakes his head and shrugs.

Elio has run out of things to say, and they stand there, side by side, neither looking at the other. Listening to the faint music spilling from the party inside and the distant traffic.

Oliver doesn’t know what to say. “I’m so confused right now.”

“I’m sorry.”

Oliver’s instinct is to say don’t be. It’s fine. But, actually, it’s not fine at all. So he stays silent.

They’re still standing there, not speaking, when a woman comes out onto the balcony looking for Elio. An aunt, perhaps? She looks vaguely familiar, but it could just be that she has the Perlman nose and dark wavy hair. “Elio? Your maman is going to go to bed. She’s looking for you to say goodnight.”

“Okay.” He looks at Oliver. “You want to come and say goodbye to my mom?”

“Sure.”

He does, and Annella thanks him again as they hug to say goodbye. After she leaves, he turns to Elio.

“I’m gonna go, too. Definitely go, this time. It’s getting pretty late and I really don’t think I can stay awake for much longer.”

Elio bites his lip and nods once. “Okay.”

“We’ll talk soon?”

“A proper talk?” Elio looks apprehensive at the thought.

“Yes. A proper talk. I think now it has to be that or nothing. I think at this point we have to talk this through properly or cut all ties. Because you’re right- as things stand now, it’s just too difficult. But-” he grabs Elio’s wrist before he turns away. “I have to ask one more thing tonight. I need to know- could it be more than a maybe?”

Elio’s smile is sweet and apologetic, unsure and yet full of wicked promise when he turns around. “I’ll think about it.”

Chapter End Notes

If you missed my fic Should Have, Could Have, which was posted over New Year’s, and want to read it, it’s here.

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at
natures-cunning-ways.
Driving up to the Perlmans’ villa in their hire car felt surreal. The boys were both asleep in the back, exhausted from the long flight. Julie tried valiantly to stay awake in the passenger seat. Oliver, fuelled by a double espresso he’d grabbed at the airport, was wide awake and jittery despite the ungodly hour. He told himself it was the caffeine in the effort to ignore the fact that it was nerves making him feel so tense.

As Oliver parked the car at the front of the house and turned off the engine - in the same spot where his taxi had stopped eleven years ago- there was a flurry of activity. The children woke up and the Perlmans ran out to greet them all. Hugs and it’s nice to meet yous and you look just the same s were exchanged with Samuel, Annella and Mafalda. Suitcases were unloaded, breakfast appeared at the table, and the boys ran around the orchard much to the amusement of Anchise, who lifted them up to let them pick ripe apricots.

“Mommy. Mommy! Look! I got it from a tree! Can I eat it?” Edward, six, was still small enough to be enthusiastic about such things.

“Sure you can, Ed. Here. Come and sit at the table. Have something else to eat too.”

Alan, now eight, was more interested in the pool. He stood on the edge and dipped a foot into the water. “Daddy? Can we go swimming now?”

“Hey, be patient.” Oliver chuckled. “Soon. But let’s get settled in first. We have two days here. There’ll be plenty of time to go swimming. I’ll take you down to the sea later, too. Now come and eat something. You want an egg?”

As Oliver sat, with the sun shining down and his children playing in the garden, he couldn’t help but think about just how much his life had changed since he was last here.

Married life hadn’t suited Oliver as well as he’d thought- or at least hoped- it might. Not at first. He’d felt stifled and restless right from the start.

He wasn’t promiscuous by nature, but Julie’s- admittedly reasonable- ban on him sleeping with men while they tried for a baby had quickly worn him down. The fact that he was ‘forbidden’ made the desire to do so much more pressing than it would ever have been otherwise. He thought about hooking up with someone, anyone, just to make things more bearable- but how? He could hardly
pick up a guy in a club and say oh, by the way, my lesbian wife and I are trying to have a baby and until we do she’s made me swear to celibacy- so although I’m not supposed to I guess we can do hand jobs, but that’s all. Is that okay with you?

It wouldn’t be okay with Oliver anyway, not really. He’d promised Julie he’d stay away from men altogether for the time being, and he didn’t want to betray that promise for the sake of a quick and ultimately unsatisfying fix.

And it turned out that living with and marrying your best friend wasn’t always all that it was cracked up to be. Because she was right there, all the damn time. When he woke up. When he got home from work. When he went to bed. At the weekend, all weekend, every weekend. He complained about the fact that she didn’t pick up her clothes. She complained about the fact that he snored (was that even true? He didn’t think so). Julie was bored, because Oliver’s father had bought them a house and insisted on hiring staff and she had next to nothing to do. She didn’t have to cook, or clean, or shop for groceries, or anything much really. She was used to working, but now she was expected not to, and the boredom and feeling of uselessness made her irritable. The resentment between them grew, and they argued in ways they never had before.

By Christmas, a mere few months after their wedding, his marriage was falling apart.

After a particularly blazing argument about- what was it? Something of too little consequence to remember now- Julie sat on the couch and cried. “This was- is- a huge mistake, Oliver. I don’t think I can live like this. This isn’t working for either of us. We’re both trying but it’s just not enough. I’m miserable and I know you are too.”

Oliver sat down next to her. “You think I don’t know that? But what do you want to do about it? Get a divorce? Get couples therapy? I don’t know the answer. Relationships are hard work.”

She shook her head. “Hey. I know. I’m sorry. I just… whatever else is going on, I love you, and I hate seeing you so unhappy. What can we do to make this right?”

“I don’t know. But I feel like it’s too soon to give up.” Oliver hated how helpless he sounded.

She dried her eyes, calmer now. “Okay. Look. Oliver. Let’s say we’ll give it a year. In the summer we’ll make a decision. We can put up with it for a few more months, right?”

Of course he could. Having a possible expiration date made things much easier to bear.

But long before the summer, fate intervened and the decision was taken out of their hands.

“I’m pregnant.”

“What?!” Oliver almost dropped the glass of orange juice he was holding.

“I’m pregnant. We’re going to have a baby. In October, probably.” She laughed. “Don’t look at me like that, Ollie. Your eyes are going to pop right out of your head.”

“I’m- wow. That’s- that’s amazing. Are you sure? How are you feeling?” Oliver smiled for what felt like the first time in months. Maybe they could work this out after all. A baby! He placed a hand on Julie’s back, pulled out a chair and guided her to sit down. He sat down next to her and looked at her intently, as though to check for any signs of her feeling sick, or weak, or tired.

“I feel fine. A little nauseous, sometimes, but fine, really. Though I guess it’s early days yet.” She took his hand between hers. “Are you excited?”
“I can’t believe it’s real. What do we do next?”

In the six months since their wedding, Oliver had had sex with his wife thirty-three times. Women’s bodies were an utter mystery to Oliver, and not one he had any interest in knowing any more about. But Julie somehow knew things. Women’s things. Things that seemed strange and almost mystical-things that involved markings on a calendar and numbers recorded from a thermometer she kept by the bed. Texts in ancient Greek made more sense to Oliver than this, but he was happy to concede to her wisdom and for her to tell him when he needed to perform his marital duties a few times every month.

And it seemed to have worked, because here they were. Going to have a baby and be a proper family, and he was thrilled.

Everyone was thrilled, in fact. The housekeeper fussed over Julie, cooking her favorite foods and ensuring she rested. Julie’s mother cried, and promised to come and stay when the baby was born, much to Oliver’s secret horror. Even Oliver’s father showed some emotion- or at least what passed as emotion for him- clapping Oliver on the shoulder and saying well done, son. Which seemed pretty weird, because it wasn’t exactly a laudable achievement. But praise from his father, especially praise which alluded to Oliver’s masculinity, was hard to come by and Oliver was happy to take it wherever he could get it.

Laura was in the process of moving, to be closer to Julie. Living near them would take her much closer to her family, too, so nobody thought it was strange for her to move to the same town as her best friend. When she visited and found out about the baby she pulled them both into a hug. “I’m so happy for you both. Does that mean I get to be- an aunt? Something like that?”

They were lucky. Julie was young and healthy and continued to be well through her pregnancy. The birth was straightforward and Oliver found himself with his son, wrapped in a yellow blanket, in his arms. Were all babies so small? Had he once been so small? Logic told him that he had, but his brain couldn’t quite make sense of it.

Alan was pink and wrinkly, and covered in white goo, and honestly? Not very attractive at all. Oliver didn’t care. And when he’d been cleaned up and dressed he looked a lot less like a squishy alien and a bit more like a tiny person. A tiny person, who instantly and finally filled a part of the hole Oliver had been carrying in his heart for want of something to love.

A package arrived from Italy when Alan was a few weeks old. Mafalda had knitted a cardigan and hat in soft blue wool. Annella and Samuel sent a blanket and a tiny outfit for the baby- a blue and white romper with yellow ducks. Oliver and Julie sent a note and a photograph back, with a promise to bring him to Italy someday.

Elio sent nothing. Oliver hadn’t exactly expected him to send a gift, but a note would have been nice. Annella had added Elio’s name to the card, but clearly that meant nothing, and Oliver couldn’t pretend it didn’t hurt.

Julie, rocking from side to side with Alan balanced in the crook of her arm, rubbed his back in sympathy. “I’m sorry, Ollie.”

“It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t. This was Oliver’s life now, and he loved his son more than anything else in the world, but that didn’t make things easy. Laura had taken a post in an elementary school nearby and she spent a lot of time at the house, keeping Julie company and helping her with the baby. Oliver was happy for them both. Happy that Julie had the help and support. But jealous. It wasn’t that he felt
that Laura was usurping his role as a parent in any way, because it wasn’t like that at all. But he wanted to love someone and share this aspect of his life with them. Of course he loved Julie, but it wasn’t the same. He fell back into casual encounters with enthusiasm, but it didn’t fill the emptiness.

So life fell into a new routine. Julie had given in to Oliver’s father’s insistence that they have a housekeeper and a gardener and a cook, but she was adamant that she didn’t want a nanny, so caring for the baby was down to her and Oliver. And, although his son made Oliver so happy, it was exhausting. He soon lost count of the times he fell asleep at his desk in an evening, trying his best to grade papers, while Alan’s pterodactyl squalling echoed through the house. Things between him and Julie were better- much better- than they had been before her pregnancy, but sometimes he still thought that this whole thing, his whole life, was a huge mistake.

Two years later, Edward came along, because of course they were expected to have a second child. The perfect family. This time Julie conceived in the second month of trying, and Edward was born not long after Alan’s second birthday.

And here they were, almost seven years later. A beautiful family- wife and two children. Happy? Yes, most of the time. Busy, and tired, but satisfying. Right now, they were looking forward to their well-earned vacation. After two days staying in B., they were travelling on to Nice and the Côte d’Azur. Oliver was determined for the children be fluent in at least one foreign language so they had both been learning French from a private tutor, and this would be a good opportunity for them to practice.

Edward was falling asleep on Julie's lap after breakfast, and Samuel suggested they go unpack and take a nap if they wished. "I know it's not supposed to be good for jet lag but, well. The children, at least, won't make it til bedtime without falling asleep anyway. We’ve already taken your luggage upstairs.”

Oliver scooped Ed out of Julie’s arms and carried him up the familiar staircase to the tiny room which had once been Elio’s. Elio’s for a month or more, until it had sat empty while Elio and he stayed in the room next door, together.

Alan quickly claimed the camp bed set up by the window where the desk used to be, leaving Oliver to settle Ed on Elio’s bed.

"You want to take a nap too, Alan? We’ll wake you for lunch." He obviously did, because he was already snuggling on the bed with the stuffed dinosaur he’d had with him for the whole journey.

Julie kissed the children’s heads and picked up her bag. "Come on, Ollie. Let's go unpack.”

He grabbed her shoulder before she went into the room next door. "Hey. Wait. Can you just give me a moment?"

"Oh. Sure. I'll wait here. Unpack a few things for the boys." A smile and a touch to his shoulder, to reassure.

Oliver nodded and stepped through the door, cracked and creaking, into his past.

He’d expected to feel something. Good or bad, he didn’t know. But not this... nothing. Empty.

Everything was different- of course, Elio was a grown man now with a job and responsibilities, not a teenager who went to high school and lived with his parents and spent every summer mooching around here with nothing much to do. So the posters were gone, replaced by pale, blank walls. The
bedding was different. But the same beds, pushed together now for Oliver to sleep here with his wife. The bookshelf still there, the spines of the books faded but familiar. Elio's paperback edition of Armance, the fraternal twin to Oliver's. He felt an urge to pull it out of its place on the shelf and inscribe it with a note. But what would he say? And would Elio ever read it? He settled for flicking through the well-worn, yellowed pages, and was just placing it back on the shelf when there was a gentle knock at the door behind him.

Julie peeked around the door without entering the room. "Hi. You okay?"

Oliver took a deep breath and turned around. "Yeah. I'm okay. Come on in. Let's unpack a bit. We can leave most of the stuff in the suitcases, since we're only here for two nights."

"Do you still think about him? You don't talk about him anymore."

"Sometimes no. Mostly no, in fact. But then other times he's all I can think about."

Which was the truth. But right now? Nothing. He turned his back to her, opened up a suitcase and started to unpack, thus ending the conversation.

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The boys woke up in time for lunch, and had a swim afterwards. "But you can't stay outdoors for too long, or you'll get burned."

The boys protested about being made to go indoors but soon cheered up when Annella produced a box of toys and books and games. Mafalda served espresso and Oliver and Samuel chatted while Annella and Julie played.

"So, how's the new book coming along? It sounds like an interesting premise. I hope you'll send me a copy when it's done."

"Of course. But don't hold your breath. It's coming along very slowly. When I wrote the first I didn't know how easy I had it. Nothing much else to do. And the second wasn't so bad either, since it was almost finished before Alan was born. But this one? I don't have the time nor the energy. Now they're older we spend all of our free time doing things with them. Days out, and sports, and play dates... you know. And work has been keeping me busy, without much time to do research or to write."

"Well, you're very welcome to come stay here some time for a couple of weeks and get some work done in peace, if that's something you'd like to consider."

"Oh, I'd love to. But there's the family to think of so... I don't know if I could. But thanks. I'll think about it."

The conversation was relaxed and Oliver realised how much he'd missed Samuel's easy manner and his insights about pretty much everything. Oliver sat chatting and enjoyed the peace, the warmth, and the laughter of his children on the floor by his feet. Isn't this what life is supposed to be about?

It was then that he noticed, in pride of place on the wall, a photograph of Elio and his parents. He was obviously graduating from college, standing in a stately stone courtyard wearing a gown and a cap that didn't hide the fuzz of curls. Samuel, ever observant, noticed his gaze.

"It was a beautiful day. I don't think we've ever been more proud of him. He worked long and hard for that degree, and overcame a good deal of difficulties along the way."
"Oh. It looks wonderful. And he looks just like I remembered. Apart from the hair."

Anrella stood up. "Oh, yes, he hasn't changed a bit. Wait there, I'll find you some more recent pictures."

Elio with a group of friends in a bar, Elio on a beach, Elio grinning by the Great Wall of China, Elio in front of a nondescript house on a tree lined street. No evidence of any one particular person with him, which could mean anything or nothing.

It was true. He hadn't changed. Oliver would recognise him anywhere. He was noticeably older, but still slender and boyish, all sharp angles and bones. Hair still dark, messy curls, though shorter at times and longer at others- at one point almost down to his shoulders.

Julie came over and sat down next to him.

She said nothing, just smiled at the pictures and squeezed his arm. An unspoken you alright? Oliver nodded.

Oliver pasted on his most convincing smile. "So, he's doing okay?"

Anrella is beaming with pride. "Oh yes, very well." She glanced at the clock on the wall. "You should talk to him- let's call him now, see if we can catch him before he goes out. He'll be so pleased to speak to you."

"I don't know-"

Samuel cut in. "Oh, of course he will." He was already reaching for the phone.

He dialled a number and waited. "We might have missed him. He might already have gone to work. Oh!" He turned his attention to the voice on the other end of the line. "Elio! I know, I know, we usually call in an evening but I wanted to catch you before you left for work. You'll never guess who is staying with us for two days. In your old bedroom. And standing right in front of me now."

Samuel looked at Oliver and smirked at something Elio must have said.

"The fact that you refuse to say you've already guessed says a great deal. Here. I'll pass you over now."

He handed the phone to Oliver who took it, cautiously, as though it might bite him. Deep breath. "Elio." When was the last time he'd said that word out loud? He'd forgotten how it felt in his mouth.

And then- his own bubbling emotions were reflected back to him in the form of a single word, echoing from thousands of miles away. "Elio." He felt it as his own name, and something frightening and beautiful tried to claw free from his chest.

Too much. Take a step back. "It's Oliver. Because that's all I can be. You know I can't be anyone else. I gave up the right to claim your name as my own long ago. I don't deserve it now."

Keep talking. "They showed me pictures, you haven't changed. You- it's so strange being back here. Surreal, almost. My boys are right here, playing with your mom. They're, um, well, they're growing up fast. Six and eight now, can you believe it? God, you should be here, Elio. You should meet Julie, my wife, she'd love to meet you too." Oliver was dimly aware that he was babbling. Hysterical, almost. "I- I am so happy to be here, you have no idea. No idea." So, so happy to finally hear your voice again after all these years.
"It's the most beautiful spot in the world," replied Elio. Quiet and non-committal.

"You can't understand how happy I am to be here." Still talking too fast, desperately trying to make true what was true but also not. So happy to be here, and yet. Is here still here when it’s the wrong people, the wrong time? Does it become a different place altogether? Oliver swallowed around the rapidly rising lump in his throat, and blinked back the tears which seemed to have come out of nowhere. He sucked in a silent breath.

Annella came to his rescue and took the phone from his hand. “Oh, he’s all choked up.”

Oliver had never cried in front of his sons. He thought that he probably should, because god knows he doesn’t want to be like his own father, afraid to show any emotion, teaching his children that it wasn’t an unacceptable weakness. But nonetheless it felt strange and wrong and frightening. He continued to fight against the sobs that threatened, ever more determined, to escape.

Julie saw his distress and took him by the shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go get some fresh air.”

Choked up indeed. He and Julie left the room. The old hurt, long buried and squashed and ignored, still rising in his throat. The sound of the boys grew fainter as they walked down the hall. Edward's little voice asking who are you taking to? And Annella telling him, "It's my little boy. Elio. Well, not so little now. He's a grownup. He lived here when your daddy came to stay with us, before you were born." Then back to the phone. "Listen, Elio. I should go. I'll call you at the weekend. Okay. Goodbye, love."

Julie led Oliver outside and he sat down on a stone step with his head in his hands.

“Fuck. I thought I was okay. I thought I was happy to be here- I am happy to be here, it’s just… I just wish I could be anywhere else in the world right now. Does that make sense?”

“No. But this isn’t the sort of thing that makes sense. You want some time alone?”

“Yeah. Yes, actually, that would be good. I’m going to go down to the sea, have some time to think. If that’s okay?”

“Of course. Take all the time you need. I’ll go look after the boys.”

Some fresh air did help. Oliver sat out on the rock where he’d done his thinking during his summer in B., and alternated between trying to think things through and trying not to think at all. By the time he headed back up to the house, he felt as though he almost had himself back under control.

Almost.

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Despite their nap earlier, the children were exhausted by the end of dinner. Oliver was sitting chatting to Samuel when Julie came over. “Hey.” She touched him on the shoulder. “I’ll go put the boys to bed. Let the two of you have a proper catch up.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” asked Annella, turning to the boys. “I could read you a story? I have some books that you might like- they used to be Elio’s when he was small.”

Julie smiled and she and Annella led the boys upstairs, chattering all the way.

The usual chaos of bedtime with two small boys was distantly audible- doors opening and closing, the patter of small feet on the bare wooden floors, water running, arguments over a missing
toothbrush.

Samuel closed the study door and held up a bottle of scotch. “Another?”

“She’s so good to see you again. And your family. Your boys are just wonderful. It’s so nice to have children around again. Seems so long since Elio was that age. Well, it is, really. Twenty years, I suppose.”

He sipped his drink, thoughtful, and smiled at Oliver.

“You and Julie seem very happy together.”

Oliver smiled back. “Yeah. We are. I won’t lie- it hasn’t all been easy. But it’s been ten years now since we got married, and things are good.”

“I can see that. I have to confess, it’s not quite what I expected. There’s something between you… it’s hard to describe. There’s a very effortless honesty, which is unusual, in my experience. Often when you meet a couple you get a feeling that they’re making an effort to make sure that they show themselves at their best, that things look good, and easy, and happy between them. But you- your affection seems so genuine. Uncomplicated, as though you have nothing to prove.”

“Uncomplicated by what?”

“Well, I don’t know. Perhaps it’s just my imagination. And of course, I don’t expect you to tell me. It’s none of my business. Suffice to say I’m happy to see you happy, and to meet your lovely family.”

It wasn’t Samuel’s imagination. In fact, he wasn’t the first person to have noticed something about their relationship. Friends had commented- you guys have the best marriage. People have asked how do you make it look so easy? And Oliver always thinks because it is easy. Once they’d got over the early teething troubles, their marriage was a breeze. They’d found a balance between having their own space and being together, and their demands and expectations of one another were clear and, generally, easily fulfilled. They didn’t have to deal with all the mess that seemed to blight a lot of other people’s relationships- of love and sex and thinking about each other’s feelings. It was, on the whole, uncomplicated.

Samuel lit a cigarette and smoked, thoughtfully and in silence, for a while.

Then he turned his attention back to Oliver. “So. Are you going to ask?”

Oliver raised an eyebrow quizzically.

“About Elio. We got to talking about him this afternoon but then got side tracked by the phone call.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Elio. You said he’s doing well?”

“Yes, actually, he is. He’s grown up now, settled down. Seems to be doing very well of late.”

Oliver nodded. “Good. That’s… that’s good. I don’t know anything about what he’s been doing since shortly after I stayed with you, apart from the bits you mentioned in your letters.”

“Oh, well. You’re a father, you know what it’s like- I could talk about my son all night. You want to know everything, I suppose?”

“After you last visited us, at Christmas… what was it, eleven years ago?”

Oliver nodded again.

“Well, I’m not going to lie to you. There were some difficult years. For all of us. He went to college- university- and he was…” Samuel shook his head. “He was wild, Oliver. It was as though he took all of his non-existent years of teenage rebellion and lived them all in one spectacular year.

“The first year was alright. He seemed to be settling well, studying hard, making friends. But then the next year things started to go downhill. He stopped calling us, stopped writing. Annella used to call the porters at his college just to check that he was alive. He didn’t come home for the Christmas holidays, didn’t even let us know. We were frantic with worry, so we got a flight over there and found ourselves knocking on the door of his room in Oxford one Tuesday morning in January. I thought he wasn’t there, or just wasn’t going to answer, but eventually he did. He was holding a towel around his waist, and we couldn’t help but see his bed in the corner with two men sprawled on it asleep. At least one of them was naked, and the other… probably. There was no evidence to the contrary, as far as we could see. Elio looked up and down and rubbed his eyes and just said, “Oh, fuck. I was expecting someone else.” And Annella, well, thank god for her, because she took it all in her stride and just said, “Someone else? It looks to me as though there are more than enough people here already. Get yourself cleaned up and meet us in the porters’ lodge in half an hour. We’ll go get some lunch.” And we did. It’s amusing, looking back, but it certainly wasn’t at the time.”

Oliver got the feeling that this was something Samuel needed to talk about, for his own sake more than Oliver’s.

Samuel took a deep drag on his cigarette and shook his head. “He looked awful. I mean, he’s always been a pale, skinny little thing, but he’d lost weight and looked like he’d neither slept nor seen the sun for weeks. He looked very unwell. I didn’t know what to say to him, but luckily Annella did, and I think he was just so hungover, judging by his appearance and behaviour and the smell of his room, that he didn’t have any fight in him. She asked questions, he answered. Answered honestly, I believe, because despite everything he’d always been honest with us and we’d never judged him and… well. I don’t think he had the energy to lie, and it seemed as though it must be the truth- because if he was lying then I don’t know what he could have been trying to cover up- what could have been worse than what he confessed to. That day was the closest I’ve ever come to really being angry with him. But I didn’t dare, we were so afraid of pushing him away and losing him altogether.

“Anyway, to put it bluntly. As far as I can tell- and don’t ask me what questions Annella asked to get this information out of him, because I don’t remember- I think I’ve blocked out the whole experience- it seems he was drunk almost every night, taking drugs, sometimes, not to mention wildly promiscuous, sleeping with pretty much everything that moved. He knew things were out of control and was worried that he was going to fail his exams and be sent down.”

“Sent down?”

“Expelled.”

“Oh. But he wasn’t, right?”

“No, no. He sobered up and studied like crazy and relied on the innate intelligence he is fortunate to be blessed with, and pulled it out of the bag. Just about scraped through. And things were better the following year, but still not right. He still looked ill all the time. I think he kept doing all the
destructive things he’d done in his first year, but just to a lesser extent and with more studying in between. Annella always looked so calm and collected when we saw him, but back home she’d cry. Every time we didn’t hear from him for a while we’d lie awake at night waiting for a phone call to say that something awful had happened to him. That he’d had some terrible accident while drunk, or something. Annella lived in fear that he’d call to say he had AIDS. It was an awful time, Oliver. I pray your sons never give you such worries.

“But things were more settled when he started his clinical placements. I think he was busy enough to take his mind off whatever had been eating away at him, and he finally felt as though he was doing something with a point to it. And then, by time he graduated, things were… stable. And have been ever since. He’s happier now. Settled.”

Oliver doesn’t want to ask, but has to. “Settled as in…”

“Oh, no. I don’t think he’s ready to settle down like that. Not like you did at his age. Marriage in your 20s isn’t for everyone. It wasn’t for me, that’s for sure. And that’s fine. I’m not worried about him.”

There was silence for a moment except for the clink of ice in Oliver’s glass as he raised it to take another sip. He couldn’t help but ask something more.

“Is it my fault?”

Samuel obviously knew what he meant, because he didn’t hesitate to reply. “Do you think it’s your fault?”

“I- yes, sometimes I do. Not that I knew just what to be sorry for, but yes. I’ve always felt that something was my fault.”

“Well, I don’t think any of this is your fault. I often feel it’s my fault. That if I’d done things differently… I don’t know. Maybe we should have been harder on him. Maybe he needed more discipline, more structure- although he never seemed to need to be told, so we just let him get on with things. Maybe we should have forced him to socialise more, not let him spend so much time alone with his books and his music. Maybe if we’d given him more boundaries and let him have his small rebellions, he wouldn’t have gone completely off the rails.

“Rationally I can tell myself- I do tell myself, that Elio at 18, 19, 20, was a grown man perfectly capable of taking responsibility for his own bad decisions. But as a parent… well. You know what it’s like. How can you help but blame yourself? They rely on you to teach them how to navigate the world, and I can’t help but feel that I failed him. That I left him unable to cope with the realities of adult life.”

“I don’t think that’s true. He always seemed to know so much.”

“He did, I don’t doubt it. But knowledge is only a small part of life. And his precociousness made it easy to forget just how young he was in some ways.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not going to pretend that I don’t know what you’re sorry for. But don’t be. Maybe it makes you feel better to say it, but it’s unnecessary. I think that what happened, or some version of it at least, would have happened anyway, and neither I, nor especially you, are to blame. He was searching for something and I don’t think it was because of what the two of you had shared. I’m sorry, now, for bringing this up. I don’t like thinking about it, but sometimes it helps to get it out in
the open. After everything, it would have felt like cheating to just tell you that Elio is fine without any… any context. It’s been a long time, after all, and you probably wanted to know more than how he’s doing right now. A lot has happened in the past eleven years.”

Oliver wasn’t sure. He wanted to know everything, and yet he wished he hadn’t heard what he’d just heard. That it wasn’t true. That the truth was something else entirely- maybe Elio’s happily married with a baby on the way, here, would you like to see the wedding pictures? See how happy they are. She’s a lovely girl, a wonderful daughter-in-law. Jewish, too, not that we’d mind if she wasn’t. Or even just yes, he had a wonderful time at college and now he’s a junior doctor. It’s a lot of hard work and he doesn’t have much time for his personal life but he loves it. We’re so proud of him.

Oliver took a deep breath while he thought about his next words. How much did he want to give away? Surely it was nothing Samuel didn’t already know. So, why not? “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

Samuel raised an eyebrow in question.

“All of it. Being here, talking about all of this. I didn’t think- after all this time- that it would hit me so hard. I thought I’d moved on more than this.”

“Ah. Well, I can only imagine that it’s hard to move on when things are… the way I suspect they are for you. You don’t have to tell me, but… I think that there are reasons why you feel stuck in the past. Because the present, and indeed the future, don’t hold any such promise.”

Oliver was silent, both because he didn’t know what to say and because he feared confirming the things he was too afraid to consider.

“Tell me. Would you do things differently? If you could turn back time and do it all again?”

Oliver took a moment to think. “No.” It was true in so many ways. His life made him happy. His beautiful, wonderful children. His work. And, yes, his marriage brought him joy. He was free to satisfy himself with men as and when he chose. And most importantly, despite everything he’d just heard, he remained convinced that what he’d chosen had been the best decision for Elio too. Even without the problems Oliver’s father could have caused, would they have been happy together? What had Samuel just said? I don’t think he’s ready to settle down like that. Not like you did at his age. Oliver imagines, and sees it all. He and Elio, trying to make a relationship work. Elio at seventeen. Certainly far from ready to settle down. Far from the stage Oliver’s life was in at that point in time.

He’s happier now. Settled.

“That’s good. Don’t live your life with regrets, Oliver. There’s no time for that.”

“I just wish…” Oliver trailed off, because he didn’t really know what he wished. Maybe that he could live a whole different life, in a whole different world? But Samuel was right. No point regretting things that couldn’t be, even though sometimes he felt as though his regrets were the only thing that made him feel alive.

“I know. Look, Oliver. It’s lovely to see you. Enjoy your time here with us. Let us all enjoy one another’s company. Let your delightful boys swim, and play, and eat good food. The simple things that bring us all happiness.” He put a hand on Oliver’s shoulder, and Oliver realised he was holding his breath in an attempt to hold back tears again. He exhaled shakily.
“Come. Let’s see if those boys of yours are in bed, and if our womenfolk are ready to join us for
drink and conversation.”

Oliver gave a watery smile, and nodded.

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When they went to bed, things finally cracked. The same night sounds, the same smells, the same
room. The bed where he’d given away a bigger part of himself than he’d ever dared dream of doing,
willingly and wonderfully. Where he’d loved in every way he could, and been given everything in
return. Oliver.

He sat on the edge of the bed and blew out a breath, harsh in the quiet of the dark.

“Hey. Ollie. You okay?” Julie rubbed his back. “It’s been years since I saw you cry. Is there
anything I can do?”

He shook his head and whispered, “I feel like- it’s stupid, I know it is, but I- I think my heart’s
breaking all over again. I didn’t know it’d feel like this. This is the room where we… where
everything…”

They seldom spoke about this anymore, and even through his misery he could sense her surprise that
he was bringing it up. “Okay. Well, I don’t mean okay. I know it’s not okay. I get that. We
could…”

“Could what? What’s your bright idea?” His laugh was close to a sneer. “Pack up and leave in the
middle of the night?”

“Don’t take this out on me, Ollie. What do you need? You need to be somewhere else? You could
go sleep on a couch if you want. We’re not at home now- we don’t have to share a bed, there are no
staff to report back to your father. Or I’ll go, if you want to be alone here. Whatever you want.”

“I don’t know what I want. I don’t want to be here like this.”

Julie sighed. “Okay. Here’s what we’ll do. Let’s go get the boys and carry them through here.
They probably won’t even wake up. There’s plenty of room for them to sleep in here with me, and
you can have the bed next door. Or if you don’t want me to be in here, then one of us can sleep next
door and the other can go sleep on a couch. I really don’t mind where I sleep. Whatever works for
you is fine by me.”

“Bringing the boys in here- that might work.” Mostly, he just wanted to be alone and not here in this
bed with his wife. This was all so messed up. “We should probably never have come here.”

“Maybe. But the boys are happy, and Anella likes having kids around. And if we hadn’t come
here, you would never have known.”

“Known what?”

“Known that it wouldn’t lay those old ghosts to rest. Known that you’re still not over this. Him. I
think you needed to find this out.”

“I did, but I didn’t know it would hurt like this. And I don’t know what to do now I know about it.
I talked to his dad, and he told me some things about Elio. When he was younger. I’ll tell you about
it when I feel a bit less fragile.”
“Okay. Come on, let’s go get the boys and we can all try to get some sleep.” Then, tentatively, “You still want to stay? I’m sure they’d understand if we decided to cut our visit short. We could leave tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I’ll see how I feel.”

People say that things look better in the morning, after a good night’s sleep. In Oliver’s experience this was rarely true. And he didn’t exactly get a good night’s sleep anyway. All the same- he thought they should stay. He knew it wouldn’t be an easy couple of days, but his boys loved the sea and the pool, and there was a certain catharsis to bringing them here, to the place which had been so pivotal in his life. They swam and smiled and ate ice-cream, and Annella doted on them happily. Oliver wondered if she’d ever get grandchildren of her own.

When it came time to leave, Oliver’s feelings were mixed. Mostly he was pleased to be leaving the memories behind. They were good memories, but memories of things he could never have, and it had been too overwhelming. He was ready to get on with the rest of his vacation and then get back to his normal life.

As they pulled out of the driveway, with Oliver driving the hire car, his smallest son piped up, “I like it here. It was nice. Can we come back again?”

Oliver sighed. Saying no, we won’t be coming back, would lead to complicated questions, so he settled for a white lie.

“I don’t know, Ed. We’ll see. Maybe some day.”

Julie put a hand over his and squeezed.

Chapter End Notes

1. As always- apologies for the delay!
2. As always- hopefully the next will be quicker
3. As always- progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
Chapter Summary

A few weeks after Elio’s 40th birthday, they finally talk some things through. (This is the first half of a chapter which got too long. The second half picks up immediately after this one and should be up in a few days’ time. This part isn’t very cheerful, to put it mildly, but in the next one there will be more fun.) If you can’t remember what happened in the previous chapter, click here for a recap!

Chapter Notes

Please note- this chapter contains references to miscarriage and fertility struggles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The morning after Elio’s party, Oliver wakes up tired and jetlagged but smiling. Julie calls while he’s eating breakfast, to ask how everything’s going. Oliver recounts the past few days (flying to Milan, flying back from Milan, not much else) and the party. He doesn’t mean to tell her that he and Elio kissed, because he’s still trying to work out what it means, but using her superhuman psychic powers she guesses that something’s happened and Oliver ends up telling her everything.

Oliver has the phone tucked between his shoulder and ear, talking as he makes another cup of coffee. “I don’t know what to do now. Don’t know where things are supposed to go from here. If anywhere. I mean- he said he couldn’t promise anything, so maybe it was just a kiss. But it…”

But it what? What’s the word for the things it makes Oliver feel when he thinks about it?

“Ooh, lemme guess. It made you go weak at the knees? It made the world stop spinning on its axis? Or maybe it made time stand still? It-“

Oliver has to interrupt before she gets any more carried away. “Not helping, Julie. I don’t know whether to call him, or not. Whose court is the ball in now?”

“I don’t know. You know ball games aren’t exactly my thing, in any sense. Hey, you know what you should do? You should send him flowers.”

“What? I should? Am I trying to- to court him now? Have I woken up in some sort of 18th century romance?”

“Court him? Oliver, who says that? Although now I think about it, maybe you are. Something like that, at least. But you don’t need to make it sound so… archaic.”

“You were the one who suggested it. Wouldn’t it be weird? Can you send flowers to a man?”

There’s a sigh over the line. “No, Oliver. You can’t. It’s not allowed. In fact, there are laws against that sort of thing.”
Oliver rolls his eyes, not that she can see. “Quit the sarcasm. You know what I mean.”

“How about you quit asking stupid questions, then? Yes, of course you can. Think about it- if he sent you flowers, how would you feel about it?”

Oliver’s heart does a little jump. He likes that idea more than he wants to think about. “Oh. Well, I would think it was a bit weird. Honestly. But I’d be flattered, and… happy.”

“Do you want to make him feel flattered and happy?”

There’s no need to answer that. “Yes, but… I don’t want him to think I’m trying to treat him like a girl. Do you think it’d be feminising him?”

“No, not at all. I don’t think that, at least. It’s society that makes us think that flowers are for women. But I get that some men wouldn’t like it. I don’t know Elio. You’ll have to think about how he’d see it.”

Oliver ends the conversation, finishes his breakfast and picks up his phone once more. It’s extravagant and makes him feel a little ridiculous, but he finds himself arranging for a large bouquet to be sent to Elio at his hotel.

Seventeen peach colored roses. The florist laughs and says, “Nobody has ever asked for that before. I sense a story in this request.” Oliver smiles but doesn’t volunteer any information. “It’ll work beautifully, though. And what would you like written on the card?”

Something simple. Hope you enjoyed your birthday. It was really good to see you. We should talk about it soon? O.

Oliver is back home by the time he hears from Elio. A text message. Well, a series of them really. An email would have been more suitable, given how much Elio wants to say, but it would be less immediate, and Oliver wonders if he’s reading too much into that.

Thank you! I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. You’re ridiculous, but in the best way. Yes to talking. You still in the city? I’m here until tomorrow.

So could get together this evening. Or if not, mom is here for two weeks, then I’m going back to Italy with her and staying for another fortnight. So some time

after that. Mom says hi by the way. She laughed when she saw the flowers. She adores you, you know that? Were you two talking about me on the plane? I can

never thank you enough for bringing her here. She’s so happy. Me too. Best birthday present ever. xxx

Oliver grins as he reads the messages, and keeps his response simple. You’re welcome. Say hi to your mom. I’m home now, not in the city, so will have to talk when you get back from Italy.

The next month is one of the longest of Oliver’s life. Because what now? What does Elio want? Is he going to explain to Oliver how it’s best if they pretend it never happened? Or if they never see each other again? Or something else? And what does Oliver want anyway?

He sometimes thinks that it’s too late to go back. If Elio was correct before, when he said that they could never get back what they had for those all-too-fleeting days, 23 years ago. Oliver’s not sure if he could take it. Could he settle for having Elio, but as something less? He tries not to agonise over all the questions but it’s not easy, and he only gets more nervous as they arrange to meet and the day
approaches.

It’s definitely not a date. It’s just two old friends meeting up to talk, the same way he and Elio have done many times over the past three years.

It may be cold but it’s a glorious, sunny day, so they get coffee to take out, wander into Central Park and walk in silence, hands wrapped around their paper cups.

Oliver breaks the silence. “So.” Nice work, Oliver, he chastises himself. All the things you could’ve said, and that’s the best you can come up with?

“So. Here we are.” Elio looks at Oliver, and his smile is endearingly awkward.

“How are you?”

Elio looks ahead of him and nods earnestly. “Good. Pretty good. You?”

“Fine. Um. How’s your mom? How was Italy?”

This, at least, is something they can talk about easily, and the ice between them is slowly but steadily thawing.

They soon exhaust their repertoire of small talk and catching up and Elio, as though he’s been waiting to get this out of the way, goes in the for kill.

“Oliver. What are we doing here? You said we needed to talk, and I don’t disagree with that, but what’s the point? To what end?”

Now or never, Oliver. Speak or die. He tries to keep his voice under control but ends up blurting out, “I want us to try again.”

Elio clearly didn’t expect this, although Oliver’s not sure whether it’s the sentiment that’s unexpected or that fact that Oliver has been so open about it. “Try again? We never tried in the first place. Not really.”

This is not a promising beginning. “Elio, don’t- please don’t start by being antagonistic. You know what I mean.”

“I- sorry. But you know what I mean, too. I think you’re trying to simplify things. It’s not as easy as saying that we were- together, or whatever you want to call it- and it didn’t work, and you want to try again. It wasn’t like that for us.”

They’re still walking, so Oliver spins around and moves in front of Elio, stopping him in his tracks and forcing him to look at him. “Okay. Forget trying again, forget the way things happened. You asked what the point was, and the point is that I want to have something with you. A relationship with you. That’s what I want, and I think you want the same thing, and I think we should give it a try.”

Elio shakes his head, slowly and gently. “I don’t think we can, Oliver.”

Oliver takes a step back and watches a jogger go by, because he can’t look at Elio as he says this. “Okay. Alright. If we’re not going to try this, then I think we should stop seeing each other. Because being… I don’t know, whatever we are- like this is really difficult for me. And I think it is for you, too.”
“I didn’t mean that I don’t want to see you at all.” Elio looks miserable, as though this discussion isn’t going the way he’d hoped.

“Elio, you know something has to give. You said it yourself, that night when you were drunk. Doing what we’re doing is too painful, and if we can’t work something out then we probably shouldn’t see each other. I’ve told you what I want, and you need to decide. You can’t just keep stringing me along like this. It’s not fair. There’s no room for negotiation on this: I need you to make a choice.”

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?”

“No. Absolutely not. Like you said, things aren’t that simple. I’m just being honest about what I want. Need.”

“I don’t want to lose you, Oliver.” The words are an ungainly tumble, and Elio’s honesty feels sudden and raw.

“I know.” Oliver grasps Elio’s arm, because to take his hand would be too much. “I don’t want to lose you, either. But I can’t keep doing this. If we’re not going to try to be something more, then you have to let me go. Please. I have never had that sort of relationship, and more than anything I want it with you. But if I can’t, then I want to be free to look for that, or something like it, with someone else. And I can’t do that while I’m living in the hope that there might be a chance for us.”

Elio just looks at him. Is Oliver imagining it or is he paler than he was before this discussion began?

“Elio, you were the one who said it hurt too much. And the more time I spend with you, the more I know what I want, and the more it hurts that I can’t have it. And I know you want the same thing.”

“I’m not the boy you loved more than twenty years ago. You must know that.”

“I do. Of course I know that. But-“

Elio interrupts. “Heraclitus had it right- No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man. Everything has changed since we were together.”

“I know things have changed, of course I know.” Then it hits him. A lot of his book, the first book, the book he wrote in Italy, centred around that quote. “I- I didn’t expect you to remember that.”

“Of course I remember, Oliver.” Elio looks at him fondly. “And besides, I may have reread your book in the not-too-distant past.”

“That doesn’t mean you get to use philosophy against me! Look- I’ve had a lot of time to think about things since then. Everything’s different, yes, everything about us is different, but some things haven’t changed at all. I don’t expect you to be the same person you were when you were seventeen. But some things don’t change. Maybe you can’t step in the same river twice, but you can go back and step in the river in the same place where you did long ago. You may be different, and the river may be different, but it can still feel just the same.” Oliver is exasperated with himself, because he doesn’t think he’s getting his point across very clearly. “What I’m saying is- I understand that we’re different people, but I don’t think we should write this thing between us off before we give it a chance to be something. I see you now, and everything is the same. I’m 24 again, and the way I feel hasn’t changed at all.” Oliver is trying to plead for understanding, but it’s difficult when he daren’t show just how exposed this makes him feel.

“You don’t know that. How do you know that your feelings for me aren’t just a result of the way
that you’ve lived your life? I was the last thing you had before it was time to get married, and you’ve just latched on to me ever since because you haven’t had a chance to move on. That’s not real, Oliver. That’s just you attributing meaning to something for lack of anything better. It doesn’t mean that we should be together.”

The words sting, and Oliver can’t pretend they don’t hit a nerve. Of course he’s wondered about those things. “I know that. I do. I’m not stupid, I know it’s not that simple. I just really want to give this a try. I think it would be worth it. Don’t you?”

“It doesn’t matter what I want, Oliver. It’s not a good idea. We’d just be setting ourselves up for disappointment, and I’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime. I don’t think I can handle any more. And with you, of all people- I mean, you were- I don’t even know.”

Oliver isn’t going to let him be vague. “With me what? What do you mean?”

“At just mean that with you it would matter. Matter more.” Oliver must look confused, because Elio explains further. “Okay. Look. The thing is…” Elio’s mouth is open as if trying to form the words he needs. “…I don’t know if I am strong enough. Brave enough to try this. Because if we did, and it didn’t work, then there would be nothing left of me. Nothing. I have been through so many crappy things, and I know what it’s like to get hurt, but this…” he shakes his head and looks so, so helpless. “This would be something else. I have been broken, Oliver, I’m not exaggerating, but this I could not survive. They say that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, and I think that losing you again would be the thing that kills me. Maybe everything else I’ve been through has made me stronger, but not strong enough to take this. Please don’t do this to me. You are asking me for something I cannot give, and you know why I can’t.”

“No, I don’t know why. I don’t know why you won’t give this a try. Tell me.”

They’re still standing in the middle of the footpath, ignored by the weekend afternoon families and dog walkers and couples all around. Elio moves to a bench and sits down. Oliver drops down beside him.

“I can’t give this a try because it’s you. Because all my life, you’ve been this- this beautiful, unattainable, perfect thing. During everything else that’s happened in my life, even during all the years when I never thought about you, you were still there. So many other things went wrong, but you and me? That never did. It just… stopped. Frozen at the moment you left. I always had it and carried it with me, buried somewhere. And if we try to be together and find it doesn’t work out, then all of that is gone, and I’m left with nothing in my life ever having worked out.”

And suddenly Oliver realises what he’s feeling. It’s a somewhat alien emotion to him, because he doesn’t like it and tries to avoid it in himself and in others. But right now he’s angry. He’s had enough of this elaborate thing with Elio- he doesn’t know the steps of this dance or the rules of this game.

“Can you hear yourself, Elio? You’re accusing me of not having moved on, and saying that we can’t give this a shot because I’m still stuck in the past, stuck in a summer romance with a boy who no longer exists. When all the while you’re right here doing the exact same thing. You haven’t moved on. You’re saying that you’ve held me- or maybe you and me, what we had- to be this impossible, perfect thing, and you’re scared to do anything that might ruin your carefully constructed vision of what it was. You’re afraid to test it out and see if it’s really as good as you remember. Because you’re afraid that it was the best thing in your life and you don’t want to risk ruining that ideal.

“I’ll tell you now- it doesn’t matter that I have spent my whole adult life married to someone I wasn’t
in love with. I won’t apologise for the decisions I made or for the life I lived. And don’t look at me like you pity me, because you shouldn’t. Yes, it hasn’t been perfect, but it’s been pretty great for a lot of the time. And it doesn’t mean that I don’t know about these things you’re talking about, because I can tell you now that we are the best thing you ever had, and we’re the best thing you ever will. The best thing either of us will ever have. And, yes, it won’t be the same as it was so many years ago. I’m not going to pretend it will. It won’t be the same, but it will be just as good, and it will be worth it, and it might even be better.

“I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, because of course it won’t. And, yes, maybe that was part of why what we had was such a good thing. Because it had to end, because we both knew that it didn’t stand a chance, so we just made the most of what it was without worrying about the future. There was no point, because there was no future. And if we do this, we won’t get to have that luxury again. But if we don’t give this a shot, make sure you know that it was only because you weren’t brave enough to try.”

Oliver isn’t usually one for delivering impassioned monologues, and he’s hardly stopped to breathe. He feels a bit wiped out, and is dreading what Elio might say. He tries to squash the little bit of hope that’s trying to tell him this might work, he might say yes, because he’s already made himself so vulnerable and doesn’t want to set himself up for disappointment.

Elio’s response is not what Oliver expects. “I’m a broken mess, you know that, right? A disaster. I’ve never managed to make anything work. The only reason I made it work with you was because we only had ten days together. Since then everything has gone wrong.”

“So tell me about it. If- if you want, that is. I want to know what’s happened to you all these years.”

“Okay. I’ll tell you some bits. Then you’ll see what I mean. My first wife and I, we… well, we should never have got married in the first place. I told you a bit about it before.” He raises an eyebrow as if to ask do you remember? Oliver nods.

“So that didn’t last for long, and then we got divorced and I was fine with it, really. It felt like drawing a line under that phase of my life, growing up and finally starting again. That was not long before I finished my degree, and it made sense to move. You know I’d originally been planning to go to college in the States, but then I changed my mind and ended up in Oxford…. but after I got divorced it felt like the right time to make the move over here. And the next few years were… good. Really good. I felt like being a junior doctor, and basically having no free time, freed me from the need to feel like I had to pursue some sort of epic love affair. So everything was easy. There were lots of dates and flings, boys and girls and one-night stands, and the pressure for all of it to mean anything was finally gone. It was liberating. There were a few people who crossed the line from a fling to a relationship, and I even lived with a guy for a while before meeting my second wife.

“I say meeting her, but that wasn’t really what it was like. She’d been an acquaintance for a while. A colleague, really. Well, she was a doctor in the same hospital where I was working, though not in the same department. It was good. We both understood the demands of the profession, which made it easier. We already had something in common and plenty to talk about and understood the pressures and difficulties of work.

“And then…” He pauses, and when he continues Oliver can see that it’s cost him something to say this. “I was so in love with her. It was the first time I had come close to feeling what I felt with you. We’d been together for a year or so when she fell pregnant. An accident. But it felt right, you know?” Oliver nods. He doesn’t know, but this feels like a time to nod and listen.

“It wasn’t really something we’d talked about much. Wasn’t something I’d even really thought about. I mean, you date someone, you live with them, maybe marry them, maybe have kids
eventually. Of course I knew it was an option, something I might want to do some day, but we
didn’t have any plans to do that right then.”

“But there we were. And I was happy, and excited. Really excited. You probably remember how it
feels. And then…” he sits back in his seat and exhales. “I don’t usually talk about this, you know. But I…”

Elio’s looking down at his shoes. He doesn’t look up. Oliver resists the urge to cover Elio’s hand
with his own. “Hey. Elio. You don’t have to. You know that, right? You don’t have to tell me
anything.”

“No, I know. I think you know what happens next, anyway.” Oliver has a pretty good idea, and
although he’s not sure he can stand to hear Elio’s pain, he has to listen.

“So. We, um. She lost it. Early. Maybe six, seven weeks along. Early enough that it wasn’t a big
deal, not really. I mean– it was, of course it was. But you tell yourself that it’s really common–
because it is– although that doesn’t make it any easier when it’s happening to you.”

“So after that we tried again. And– I don’t know how we managed to get pregnant by accident the
first time, because it wasn’t so easy after that. But… after a few months, she was pregnant again.
We weren’t excited this time, because you can’t be, you know? And we were right not to be, because we lost this one too. Later this time. Towards the end of the first trimester. My god, Oliver, the blood. You’ve never seen anything like it. At least, I hope not. Unless you and Julie…”

“No. No, we were lucky, both times.” Until he had a baby of his own, Oliver hadn’t known
anything at all about them. Or pregnancy, or birth. There’d been plenty of blood then, of course, but
it had been eclipsed by the joy of his son’s arrival. Miscarriage wasn’t even something Oliver had
considered as something that might happen at the time.

“It was funny. Strange, that is, not… amusing. Strange that a child hadn’t been something I’d
wanted until I thought I was going to have one, and the more it was snatched away, the more I
wanted it. We both did, so badly. So. Then there was a third. Things seemed to be going so well.
There was– there was a tiny bump, and I felt the baby kicking. But then–“ There’s a really long
pause. Oliver says nothing.

“It was a boy, he was a boy, and he fitted right here in my hand. I thought he might still look like an
alien, like on those weird sonogram pictures, but he had these tiny fingers and toes, just like a real
baby, a little person, only…” Oliver hears him swallow, and when he continues he sounds very far
away.

“They dressed him in this tiny white gown. It was nice, I guess, apart from that fact that it was so
fucking awful. The nurses cried and said he was an angel but, you know, I don’t believe in any of
that. I’m a doctor. I know he was just another dead baby, really.”

“Elio–“ Oliver wants to say something. The right thing, whatever that might be. He wants to cry,
but this is not his hurt and he has no right to share it.

Oliver can’t see if Elio is crying, and Elio doesn’t move to wipe his eyes, but a small snuffle gives
him away. He continues, defensive. “You’re shocked by my callousness, I suppose? I’ve seen a lot
of death, you know. Both before and since then. Sometimes it’s easier to feel nothing. And it was
nearly ten years ago, Oliver. Really, it’s okay.”

Oliver isn’t sure whether he should ask, but the question feels right. “Did you give him a name?”
Elio nods and sort of smiles. He may sound cold, but it’s clear that there’s some warmth in that memory at least. “We- yeah, we did. Do you mind if I don’t tell you, though? Not- not right now, at least.”

“Of course. You don’t have to explain yourself.”

“It’s a weird sort of grief, a weird loss. Losing something you never had in the first place. I mean—might have hated being a father, for all I know. I would probably have been terrible at it.”

“I think you’d have been great.”

“Thanks. I guess we’ll never know.” Another deep breath. “So then we decided to put that on hold. She was younger than me, so we figured we’d wait a year or two and think about it again then. Tried to forget about kids for a while. Decided it wasn’t the right time. We got engaged, travelled, bought a house, got a cat—she got the cat in the divorce, by the way—and then we started to talk about actually getting married.”

He finally looks up at Oliver. “Which is when I came to see you. I had to see you first, before I took that step. To remind myself of something. And seeing you only confirmed that I still wasn’t over you, but I found that I was okay with that. I felt as though she made it not matter.”

“What would you have done if I’d done what I wanted to do at the time? Kissed you?”

“You wanted to kiss me?”

“Of course I did. You must have known it.”

“Well, I don’t know.” Elio shrugs. “If you’d asked me to be with you, I might just have dropped everything and gone. And of course there must have been a part of me that hoped for that. But I was pretty certain that wasn’t going to happen.

“We got married a few months after that. It wasn’t like my first wedding. My parents came this time, for one thing, and it was beautiful. One of the best days. And we were so happy. But of course things went wrong, because they always do. We’d been married for just a few months when my father died. It was sudden, but of course you knew that.

“You can imagine how that affected me. And we’d been trying for a baby since just before we got married. So when it didn’t happen…” Elio tilts his head back and stares through the leaves of the trees above him. Oliver stares at Elio’s neck, and hates himself for it. *Not the time, Oliver.*

“We went for all the tests, which was awful in itself because nobody likes having to hand over a sperm sample to a nurse in your own place of work, all the while hoping you won’t meet her at the vending machine in the middle of your next shift. And it was all pointless because they didn’t find anything. *Unexplained infertility.* An official way of saying *we don’t know, we can’t find anything.* So we tried other things. Expensive things. Two rounds of IVF, but still no baby.

“And our marriage was falling to pieces. Sex had long ago become something we did for the wrong reason. We weren’t doing it for love, or intimacy, or even for fun. Despite all the orgasms, it didn’t even make us feel good, not really. It was something we had to do to achieve a goal, and when it didn’t work, it just became… well. It was another thing that it took away from us. And then what were we left with? We had nothing to talk about, because all we could think about was getting pregnant.

“And then one day we got another bill for… I don’t even remember, any more. Some IVF stuff. Tests, drugs, none of it was covered by my insurance. And I just looked at the numbers and thought
This is crazy. I don’t want this enough to pay all this money out for something I’m not even sure if I want any more. And then I realised I’d already been paying for it with my relationship, my sanity, everything. So I told her I didn’t want to do it any more.”

“She didn’t agree. Still wanted a baby, more than anything. And it killed me that I couldn’t give her that, but I was done with it all. She wanted to talk about more IVF, more tests, sperm donors, egg donors, surrogates, adoption… whatever it took. And I just didn’t want it any more. Is that awful?”

It saddens Oliver that, again, Elio’s response to his own feelings seems to be the conclusion that he’s a terrible person.

“Must’ve been awful for both of you, at the time, but it’s understandable that you felt that way. I don’t think you’re awful.”

“And it turns out there was nothing left of us. Some couples say that going through something like that makes them stronger, closer. But with us, it drove us apart until we couldn’t stand each other. So we fought, then we fought some more, and we said the most horrible things to each other, and it was over pretty soon after that. I loved her but I hated her for being unable to see past wanting a baby. She hated me for refusing to keep going with the fertility stuff, and I hated myself most of all. The divorce was messy and bitter. We argued over stupid things, and neither of us would give in. On the day it finally ended, I’d finally had enough. My lawyer was tearing her hair out, she said the only problem here is that both of you are too fucking stubborn. This divorce should never been settled long before now. Stop wasting your money on my fees and just sign the papers. She wasn’t wrong.

“And since then I’ve been rebuilding my life. Trying to work out what I want to do. And I still don’t have all the answers, but I know I don’t want to put myself in a position where I can get hurt like that again. Hence this.” He gestures towards Oliver, at the distance between them. “I don’t know where this leaves us.”

Oliver takes his time choosing his words, and he isn’t sure if they’re the right ones but he has to say something. “Elio, I’m sorry for everything that’s happened. More sorry than I can say. And I understand if now isn’t a good time to talk about you and me, if you need to think about things. That’s fine. But you have to tell me that. I’m not asking for a decision now, but you should know this- if we do this, if we try to be together, that’s it for me. I’d be going into this with the intention of it being something important. It’d be a- a long term commitment for me. Because it’s you, Elio.”

It’s too soon to say permanent, forever.

He waits for Elio to say something, anything, and when he doesn’t, Oliver gives in and asks.

“Please, Elio. Say something.”

Elio is staring off into the distance and his face is unreadable. His breathing is loud, and steady enough that is has to be a deliberate effort.

Please.

Elio just shakes his head, very slowly.

Oliver can’t do this anymore. So he stands up and walks away.

Chapter End Notes
Don't be disheartened- the next chapter, which should be up in the nest few days, picks up right where this one leaves off.
As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.
He doesn’t get far. Crosses the path and find himself leaning against a railing overlooking a pond.

But then, “Hey. Wait up.”

Oliver doesn’t have time to turn around and look before Elio throws himself against his back and wraps his arms tight around him.

“Oh.” Oliver doesn’t know what to say. Elio’s arms feel reassuringly solid around him and he melts into the embrace.

“I mean- it’s not a yes either, not as such, but not a no.”

“Does that mean we’re back at maybe?”

“Sort of? But mostly I suppose it means we’re back at talking some more. If you still want to. If you’re not all talked out.”

Elio’s head is resting between Oliver’s shoulder blades, his hair tickling the back of Oliver’s neck, and his hands are crossed over Oliver’s chest. Oliver reaches up to cover them with his own.

“You’re freezing!”

“I know. I forgot to bring gloves.”

Oliver prises Elio away and turns to face him, rubbing his hands between his own.

“We should go warm up somewhere. You want more coffee? Or something to eat?”

“Coffee, now that’s a definite yes. I’m not very hungry, but maybe a snack? I know a bakery near
“Here where they have the best cookies.”

“Sounds good. Lead the way.”

There’s a lightness in Elio’s step now, almost a skip, a bounce, as though he’s unburdened himself of things he needed to say and is floating, ever-so-slightly, on his new found lightness. He chatters as they walk, and once they’re sitting down he gratefully accepts a steaming cup of coffee from Oliver and wraps his hands around it.

“Mmmmm. Ooooohhhh, that’s so good. Oh, I needed this.”

Oliver laughs. “You didn’t have to make it sound so dirty. It’s only a cup of coffee.”

Elio’s cheeks flush pink. “Oh no, I-“

Oliver interrupts with more laughter. “Are you blushing?”

“No! It’s just… um, it’s really warm in here.”

He looks away and sips the froth of his cappuccino. “I like it here. It’s a nice place to sit and read. The coffee’s good, and these cookies really are to die for.”

Oliver breaks a piece off his, and nods. “Probably not the healthiest snack, though.”

“Definitely not. But it’s okay to indulge sometimes.”

Elio licks his lips to get rid of the froth, and Oliver doesn’t even try to hide the fact that he’s watching. Elio looks at him intently.

“You look as though you’re thinking something. Is this going to be like one of those bits from a movie, where you pick up a napkin and say hey, you got some… even if it’s not true, and use it as an excuse to touch my mouth, and then we gaze at each other and have A Moment? Then you sort of blink and look away and it’s all a bit awkward. You know what I mean?”

“I do know. And no, I wasn’t planning on it.”

“You could. I wouldn’t mind. You already sent me flowers, so we’ve already got that whole romance vibe going.”

“You didn’t think it was weird?”

“The flowers? No. It was… unexpected, I’ll give you that.” He’s blushing again. “My mom said that it was the most romantic thing she’d ever seen. I think she almost cried. To paraphrase, she said that you’re a wonderful person and a wonderful man and I should hold on to you and never let you go. That bit was embarrassing, to be honest. I tried to explain that we… weren’t. And she said she knew we weren’t, but that we should be and she meant everything she’d said all the same. She also said that I was a stupid boy, although I’m not sure quite which bit that was in reference to.”

Oliver smiles. He can clearly imagine this exchange between Annella and her son. “She seemed to be doing really well.”

“She was. Is. The doctors think that maybe she got so bad so fast because of the shock and stress of my father’s death. Now things are much more settled and most of the time she’s doing better. She will continue to decline, of course, but we can hope that it will be a slow process.”

“Well, I’m glad. And I’m glad you liked the flowers. Though I was worried you might
misunderstand my meaning. Turns out that flowers- their types and colors- have all sorts of connotations, which I’d never thought about before. Apparently peach roses are supposed to symbolize modesty, sincerity and gratitude. Though I didn’t know that until after I sent them, when Julie started asking me about it and told me that there are all these meanings. And then I was worried that you’d think that that was the message I was going for.”

“No, I think I figured out your meaning well enough. I would have been really confused if I thought you were trying to convey a message of modesty. So, you told your ex-wife? You’re pretty close, still?”

“Yeah. She’ll always be important to me. We still talk most days. She knows me better than anyone. We lived together for twenty years, so we’ve been through a lot together. I love her, in a way that I can’t define. She’s my family.”

Elio looks intrigued. “And neither of you ever felt as though it could be more? All those years? Never wanted it to be?”

“No. Never. I mean- it would’ve been understandable if we’d fallen for each other. But we never started to feel that way. Thank god, really, because that would have been difficult. I think we’re both just…” he shrugs. “Very gay.”

Elio grins, then bites his lip, thoughtful. Almost hesitant, as though he’s debating whether to say something or not.

“I was happy for you, you know? Your marriage, your kids… I assumed that you’d married for love and were living happily ever after. Then when I found out it wasn’t like that, I was sad that you’d felt you had to live like that. Hiding. Lying. But now, I hear you talk about her, and I’m so happy for you again. I’ll always wish you could have had more of the things you must have wanted, but I’m happy you found her and I’m happy you made things work so well for the two of you. Maybe you were right, that evening when I saw you after your lecture. Maybe you weren’t living in a coma after all.”

Oliver has thought long and hard about Elio said that night. “I don’t think I was. I’ve had a lot of happiness, a lot of fulfilment in my life. My parallel life, if you want to call it that.”

“No. I don’t.” Elio shakes his head decisively. “You know, the more I think about it, the more I don’t think it’s right. These so-called parallel lives we’ve lived, they’re not really parallel at all. Parallel would mean they’d always stay the same distance apart, never getting closer, never able to meet. And that’s not true. Because, look at us here and now.”

“Look at us now.”

They look at one another and the silence is long, but not awkward.

“I’m scared, Oliver. Scared of what all of this means.” He says it quietly, and Oliver can see how reluctant he is to admit this. Of course he is. No-one wants to admit their fears, especially to the person who’s the cause of them.

“Me too.”

“Me more.”

“I don’t think so. I just seem brave right now, because I’m saying what I want. But you have no idea how hard this is for me, or how terrified it’s making me. I’m still not used to being vulnerable.”
“And I haven’t exactly made things easy on you.”

“No, you haven’t- but that’s okay. I don’t deserve for you to go easy on me. I know I’ve messed some things up, in the past. Badly. I should have done some things differently.” This is another topic Oliver has devoted a lot of thought to over the years, but it’s still difficult to articulate. “Getting married was… Honestly, I still believe that it was the right decision, and I don’t think anything will ever convince me otherwise. I think you’re my only regret.”

“You mean you regret being with me, or…”

“No, of course not that. I regret that things couldn’t be different. I regret not being honest with you, because you deserved that. I regret hurting you. And this probably doesn’t make sense, but I’ll say it anyway: it may have been the right decision, and maybe if I had another chance I’d do the same again- but I still regret walking away. More than anything. And if you decide that you don’t want this, then I’ll walk away again but at least I’ll know I tried.”

Elio has his chin resting in his palm. He nods. “It’s not that I don’t want this. Right now I just don’t know where we’re supposed to go from here.”

“Well, we could go on a date?” Elio is gazing into the distance, over Oliver’s shoulder, so Oliver tucks a strand of hair behind his ear to gently get his attention. Elio looks up at him, slowly. “I could ask you out on a date. Take you to dinner, or something. Go see a movie, or to the theater, or… whatever people do on dates.”

“You could ask me out on a date. I can’t exactly stop you from asking, can I?”

“No, I just… I know that this afternoon has been sort of intense. But just in case I haven’t made it completely clear what I want. Um. That’s what I want. That’s where I think we should start. If you wanted to. I don’t want to ask if it’s going to make you feel awkward.” Oliver is desperately hoping he’s not messing this up, because it finally feels as though they’re making progress. He feels like he’s holding his breath, waiting to see if it could be true. If Elio might just say yes.

“You know the very thought of it terrifies me. I want to give us a try, Oliver, I really do, but I’m so afraid of losing you again. Just the thought of it…”

“I know. I know it frightens you, and I understand why.” Oliver takes Elio’s hand. “But it’s just a date. I’m not asking you to marry me or anything. Maybe we need to give it some time, see what it’s like. See whether we can make this work. I really think we can, but it still makes sense to go slowly and see how we feel about things. You can walk away any time. I’m not holding you to any promises.”

“And what about you? What if you want to walk away?”

“I don’t want to walk away. I’ve done it once and regretted it for a really long time. If I get another chance, I don’t intend to waste it by making the same mistake twice.”

Elio looks down at their hands. Takes a deep breath in. Lets it out. “Okay.”

“Okay? So I can ask you out?”

“Sure.” Elio looks more confident now. Full of mischief, in fact. Trying, and failing, to look serious. “Though I’m a busy man. You’ll have to make it worth my while. What did you have in mind? What did you do the last time you went on a date? A first date, that is.”

“Um… I’m not sure. Dinner, probably? Drinks?”
“Did you fuck?”

“Oh- um, no. I don’t think so.” Oliver is a little taken aback, but he loves this side of Elio, the one that delights in teasing, surprising him.

“You don’t remember?”

If Elio intended to make him flustered (which of course he did), then he’s succeeding.

“I- No. Not on my last first date, no, I-“

Elio interrupts. “But you have. Fucked on a first date.”

“I- well, sometimes I have. Yeah.” Oliver knows he’s the one blushing now, and can feel the delight Elio is taking in making him do so.

“Well I don’t. Fuck on a first date.”

“Okay. That’s fine. You didn’t need tell me that. It’s not like I was, um, expecting that, or anything. It’s not any of my business.”

Elio raises his eyebrows. “Well, like I said- I’m a busy man. I don’t date much anyway.”

“Maybe you do now. I’m asking you out. Are you free next Saturday?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Not this Saturday, no. But I could do the following week? Oh no- wait-” Elio thinks for a moment. “Yeah. I could do, though It’d have to be somewhere in the city again. I can’t come out to you. Sorry.”

Olivier smiles. “Next Saturday works for me. What do you want to do?”

Elio shrugs. “Whatever. You decide and let me know.”

“Oh, well. I hear that Elio Perlman doesn’t date much. He probably doesn’t want to go for dinner or to the movies or… any of those normal things. So you’ll have to wait and see.”

“Fine. Surprise me.”

“Oh, I will. You just wait and see. I have plans for you.”

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But Oliver does not have plans.

“Julie? What can I do? I told him I’d surprise him.”

“So surprise him.”

“I have no idea what to do.”

“Well, think of all the things he’d expect and don’t do those.”

“He’d probably expect most of the things I could do on a date. Let me think. Dinner, a movie, an
exhibition or gallery or museum, a concert or play… none of those are surprising.”

“So do something fun! You know about fun- remember the good times we have with the kids? The way we used to laugh? You’re good at fun, even though I know you don’t think so. Do something he won’t expect.”

She’s got a point, and Oliver has an idea.

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“You’re kidding.”

“Absolutely not. Why? You scared? Don’t have the balls?” Oliver raises his eyebrows and opens his hand to reveal two golf balls, one yellow and one blue. “C’mon. Let’s go. Loser buys food when we’re done.” He pokes Elio with the wrong end of his club, and walks away smiling.

“Hey! Wait for me.”

Oliver bends to place his ball at the start of the first hole. Maybe his jeans are a little on the tight side. Maybe it’s deliberate.

Of course Elio notices. “Are you trying to flirt with me by giving me an eyeful of your ass?”

“What?” Oliver cranes his head back over his shoulder to look. “This old thing? You don’t like it?”

Elio rolls his eyes. “Just get on with the game.”

So he does. Tap. A hole in one.

He turns back to Elio and grins, stepping back and gesturing to him. Your turn.

Three hours later Oliver finds himself settling the check after a leisurely dinner, as Elio celebrates his victory.

“I still can’t believe you brought me to play mini golf on our first date. How old are you?”

“So you admit this is a date? That’s a start. Well, I’m a man of surprises, you know.”

“You certainly are.” Elio finishes his glass of wine and looks up through his lashes, sly. “And a cheater, too.”

Oliver places a hand on his chest and looks mock-surprised. “Cheating? Moi? Surely not.”

“Yes, you.” Elio pokes him, hard, in the chest. “I shouldn’t have trusted you to keep score.”

“Like you could be trusted to keep score. For all your fancy pants education, you can’t count for shit. I swear that hole with the dinosaur took you at least 5 shots. At the very least. Probably more like eight. No way was it three.”

“You be careful. How dare you accuse me of such a thing? Why would I need to cheat when I beat you so soundly?”

“You beat me by 3 shots. That’s nothing. And besides- you wouldn’t have beaten me if you’d been honest about your score.”

“Well, maybe we should have a rematch some time. I’ll let you keep score and then you’ll have no
They walk out of the restaurant and Oliver’s laughter is giddy. He’s finding a peculiar satisfaction in having surprised Elio— not to mention that this has genuinely been a lot of fun.

Elio’s been smiling that smile again, the one that makes Oliver crazy.

“So. You said you need to head home?”

Elio sighs. “I do, really. But you said you’re staying near here? I can walk you home, then get the subway.”

“Yeah, I’m staying at my brother’s place. One of his places. He doesn’t spend much time here since he retired.” Oliver points in the right direction and they start to walk. “He’s young to have retired but when my father died he sold his share in the business and bought himself a— I don’t know what you’d call it, actually. A farm, I guess? He makes artisan goat’s cheese which he sells at farmer’s markets on weekends. And he paints landscapes. I have one hanging in my hallway at home. It’s… pretty weird. I’ve never been out there, but I think he has chickens as well.”

Elio laughs. “Really?” Oliver nods. “Oh, wow. But I thought you didn’t get on?”

“We don’t. Didn’t. But… I don’t know. He always said I could stay here if I wanted to, and it seemed like a good idea to take him up on the offer. It feels as though it’s time to build some bridges. I’ve been trying to spend some time with my brothers and sisters, and their kids, and grandkids… now that my father is gone.”

“But they knew, right? When you were a child, and they were adults, they knew what your father did to you and they did nothing? How do you forgive that?”

“Elio, I don’t know. It’s complicated. I haven’t forgiven them, as such. It’s not as simple as that. But it’s in the past. It doesn’t make them bad people. They were afraid of him, too. They thought that I was the strong one, for standing up to him and following my own path. Look at Daniel— he says he’s never been happier. He hated working for my father, always wanted to live out in the middle of nowhere with trees and animals and things, but he spent his life living in my father’s shadow, fearing him and doing what he expected. He hasn’t had a happy life, Elio. None of us did. And so many other people got dragged into it all, trapped in the fear and unhappiness. My eldest brother, James? He got divorced, too when dad died. He married the girl my father wanted him to marry. They never loved each other. Hoped it would happen, but it never did. And Daniel was in love when he married, but says that with hindsight it wasn’t fair to bring her into that. Or the kids. In a lot of ways I was lucky. I was the strange, eccentric one with my books and my studies and everything, so I had my own life, away from it all. Should my siblings have done more to protect an innocent child who was being abused? Yes, of course. But I don’t hold a grudge that they didn’t. There’s nothing to be gained by doing that.”

They’ve stopped walking now, standing outside the building where Oliver’s brother’s apartment is. Oliver can see that Elio is struggling to take this in.

“Well, you’re a better person then I am. I don’t know that I could forgive them.”

“No, I bet you wouldn’t. But that doesn’t make you a worse person. Just… different. You’re all fire and fight whereas I’m just not a passionate person. I prefer to have an easy life, to be quiet, to acquiesce.”

Elio snorts. “That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve seen passion in you unlike anyone else I’ve ever
met. If you want to pretend that you’re not passionate, you’re talking to the wrong person.”

“That was- that’s different.”

“No, it’s not. Look at me and tell me that there’s no fire in you. You just have to stop stifling it and let it burn you up.”

Maybe he’s right.

And so he kisses Elio. This hasn’t felt like that sort of date that ends with kissing, really. There hasn’t been hand holding, not even much flirting. More like friends, the way it always was with them. But maybe Oliver just needs to let the flames take hold.

It’s not a careful kiss, nor a hesitant one like when Oliver kissed Elio on his birthday. And it’s not pretty, either- Oliver’s mouth crashes into Elio’s with no finesse and no control, as he grabs him by his shoulders and pulls him close.

Elio seems to be on exactly the same page, because his tongue is in Oliver’s mouth and there’s no teasing- just a determined certainty. As they kiss he pushes Oliver steadily backwards until he’s pressed flat against the wall. Elio’s hands are flat against the wall next to Oliver’s head as Oliver’s hands move to his waist and pull him close, close, close. Oliver is a man of 47, and there’s no way he should be so hard so quickly, but he is- and should he be embarrassed by his neediness? Doesn’t matter, because Elio has the exact same predicament and Oliver can’t work out whether he’s pulling Elio closer or whether it’s Elio pressing himself into Oliver.

It’s both, actually, and their movements are becoming more and more deliberate, more desperate, until the distant sound of a siren brings Oliver back to the reality that although this isn’t the busiest area, it’s still a very public place, and they may be fully clothed but nevertheless they’re practically having sex in the street.

He puts a hand on Elio’s chest and pushes him away, just far enough to make them both pause. “Elio? You want to stop? Or take this upstairs?”


Oliver fumbles for his keys as he strides through the lobby with Elio right behind him, sparing a nod for the doorman.

They kiss in the elevator, and when they reach his floor Oliver takes Elio’s hand to pull him along the hallway.

The questions he asked at Elio’s birthday flit through his mind. What happens next? Is it more than a maybe? Oliver knows that Elio is still a little hesitant about this whole thing between them. Is Elio doing this, now, because he’s decided that wants the same things he knows Oliver wants, or is he just taking advantage of the fact that they’re getting carried away, in order to avoid answering difficult questions?

Should Oliver stop and insist that they talk about this? He made the mistake of not doing so in the distant past, and he knows, he knows, he’s risking getting hurt once more, by the same person, if he makes the same mistake again.

But Oliver made it quite clear that he didn’t just want one night. That he needed more, or nothing. Elio knows that, knows exactly what Oliver wants this to mean, and therefore rational deduction has to lead him to the conclusion that there are two possibilities- either this is, indeed, more, or Elio is messing him around.
He refuses to consider that the second option might be true, which just leaves the first. The conclusion that this is something. And if he’s wrong? No point worrying about that, so he just lets it happen, determined to enjoy it while it lasts.

There’s an entryway just inside the apartment and they take off shoes and coats, kissing all the while, because why stop? Oliver is embarrassed by his own moans because it’s only kissing, but he’s powerless to stop himself and he knows that Elio is no less desperate.

Elio pulls back and looks at him. Green eyes, exactly the same as they ever were. He bites his lip before whispering, “I…”

Oliver waits, but Elio doesn’t continue. “You, what?”

Elio just shakes his head slightly and grabs Oliver by the hair, pulling his mouth back down onto his own.

Oliver moves backwards, slowly, leading them towards the bedroom where he’s staying. Long before they get there, Elio’s fingers, frantic and hungry, reach for the button of Oliver’s jeans. There’s the smallest hesitation, until Oliver nods, and then Elio takes no time at all in undoing button, zipper, his right hand right there pressing over his cock and Oliver’s fingers grasp at Elio’s shoulders so hard he’s sure it has to hurt. Elio laughs his dirtiest, breathiest laugh and when Oliver manages to unfurl his fingers he uses the convenient positioning of his hands to reach up into Elio’s curls with one hand and down to the buttons of his shirt with the other.

Elio sighs as Oliver pushes his shirt off his shoulders. The fabric is soft but the skin underneath even more so, pale and smooth, and Elio’s shoulders fit perfectly under Oliver’s hands, as though they were made to be there. He slides them down, following the path of Elio’s shirt, finding an unfamiliar muscle to his upper arms.

They’re in the bedroom and there are a lot of things that Oliver could make happen now. Things that could happen slowly and gently, or fast and rough. Things which fall into the realm of the almost-innocent, or things that are… not so much. But the one desire which consumes him is the need to get Elio naked, to see him again and touch him and taste him all over with his mouth and tongue and fingers. He wishes he’d stopped to turn on the light but they’re already on the bed and he’s not getting up now to do it, so it’ll have to be darkness, apart from the orange city-glow shining through the window.

A part of him thinks that after all this time they owe it to themselves to take this slowly, to savour and appreciate every bit of it. But want and need and the fact that Oliver feels as horny as he did half a lifetime ago take over and everything is rushed but no less delicious for it.

He closes his eyes and wonders if he’d have known Elio by touch alone, even after 23 years without it. Not that it matters- the taste and the smell and the sounds he makes are a dead giveaway, an echo of the boy from his past.

Elio hisses and arches beneath him at the first touch of Oliver’s hand on his cock, and it’s Oliver’s turn to be amused at his neediness. But Elio soon regains the upper hand, flipping them over with a strength he didn’t have at seventeen and dropping down to kiss him again. He pushes Oliver down with hands on his shoulders, heavy, and kisses him, kisses him, kisses him.

Elio grins and raises his eyebrows in an unnecessary question as he wriggles down the bed, waiting, again, for Oliver to nod before he takes his cock in his mouth, pressing him down with one hand on his hip while the other… oh god.
And then several things happen at once. Oliver knew that Elio’s mouth on him felt good, really good, but hadn’t realised that he was close until it’s too late and he’s coming in Elio’s mouth. There’s a piercing, insistent beeping coming from the pile of clothes on the floor at the end of the bed. And Elio’s sputtering and pulling off, sitting up and wiping his mouth and chin with the back of his hand. “Shit. Oh, shit. Fuck.”

“Sorry! I’m sorry, it was just… so good, and I swear I got no warning, it just happened, I—“

“No, no, it’s not that. That’s my pager. It surprised me and I forgot to swallow. Shit. Are my pants over there?”

“Down there, I think.” Oliver’s in no fit state to help with the search, but he points in the general direction of the pile of clothes.

Elio’s found what he’s looking for and sighs. “I have to make a phone call.” He pulls on his boxers, finds his cellphone and heads out into the kitchen, only to return a couple of minutes later, scratching his head absentmindedly. “I have to go in to work.”

“Oh. But I feel bad, you didn’t—“

“Well, it’s sort of a mood killer.” He flicks his eyes down to his boxers, where his erection is clearly flagging. “And I think it’s kind of frowned upon to go back to bed to finish having sex before going to the hospital.”

“Right. That makes sense. Does this happen often?”

Elio’s collecting the rest of his clothes and getting dressed. Oliver feels very naked. Exposed, really.

“What, getting paged when I’m on call or having it happen while I’m having sex? No to both. I don’t often get paged now, and it’s never happened at a time like this.”

“I didn’t even know you were on call tonight.”

“Oh. Sorry. I guess I didn’t say? That’s why I needed to stay in the city this evening. Just in case. But I know, this is…” he rubs the back of his neck with his hand, awkward, before looking up to meet Oliver’s eyes. “Far from ideal. Shit. Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

“True, but I should have mentioned that it might happen. You look like it’s all a bit of a shock. Look- I had a really good time tonight, even if things have ended kind of unexpectedly. I’ll call you. Or you can call me. Will I be able to get a cab outside, or…?”

“Sure, you shouldn’t have a problem. If not outside, then head around the corner where it’s busier. Have a good evening.”

Elio snorts. “Right. A nice Saturday night at work. Just what I had in mind.” He grins at Oliver, who’s moving to get up. “No, it’s okay, you stay there. I’ll let myself out. Talk soon?”

Oliver nods, and hears the door close a few moments later.

He’s left alone, still a little out of breath, staring at the ceiling.
Chapter End Notes

It may be some time before the next chapter. As in, several weeks. I go away a week on Saturday and as soon as I get back my super-time-consuming second job thing kicks off and it will take almost all of my free time until late July. Obviously I will try to work on this because a) I love it and b) I will need some breaks for my sanity- but really, I will have a lot of work to do, and I will get so sick of my laptop I will probably not want to sit at it for any longer than I have to.

As always progress updates may (possibly!) be found on my tumblr- you can find me at natures-cunning-ways.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!