Just My Luck

by KendylGirl

Summary

Oliver is a new professor whose life is lacking something. When he enters an all-night coffee shop on his way home, he just may have found what that something is.

Notes

First, you must know that I seriously love Oliver and Elio. The book and film provided them with plenty of heartache, so I see little point in repeating that. I want them to find happiness! In my head, I kept seeing scenes of these boys in a cafe, and this story is what evolved from them. Let's have some fun with these characters, shall we?

Note: Part two may get a bit more grave; however, their happiness together is the primary focus of all!

See the end of the work for more notes.
**Insomniac**

*If I make it to the end of this semester, it will be a miracle.*

Oliver hoists his pack higher on his shoulder and cracks his neck. The street is a strange mix of quiet and chaos at this time of night, the scant traffic and distant sirens briefly overwhelmed by the pulsing of a nightclub as he trudges by, purple lights making odd shadows on the pavement. Those times are over for Oliver, a relic of his undergraduate days, which feel long past at this point. Now, his hours are filled with lecture prep and department memos and bored children twirling their hair around manicured fingernails and wondering aloud if the readings were actually “super-necessary” in his shit intro classes that the seasoned professors refused to teach. Such is the glamorous life of the guy at the bottom of the heap.

He slows to a stop at the next corner and sighs. He’s been carrying these essays around for over a week, but if he goes back to his apartment now, there’s a better than average chance he’s just going to toss his bag on the floor, flop onto the sofa with a carton of yogurt, and flip through the late-night talk shows until his eyelids start to droop. Sadly, he knows it wouldn’t matter, though. He could go to bed utterly exhausted and still lay there numbly, staring at the blank walls of his bedroom and listening to the hum of the television in the apartment above him until the blue call of dawn outlines the bare window.

He looks back down the dark tunnel of the street he’s traveled. Maybe he should’ve just stayed in his office until he’d gotten more done, completely free of troublesome distractions. *Like comfort and sustenance.* He’s never left any personal items there to break the institutional veneer because he shares the office with another new professor, though they’ve never actually met. The notice on the door indicates the other man is on a completely different schedule from him, which suits Oliver fine. He’d rather not have to make small-talk or negotiate for time. He’d rather just come and go like a ghost, never leaving his imprint behind.

Ordinarily, that’s just what he would’ve done, hunkered down and ploughed forward at his desk until well after midnight. He’d practically become an after-hours fixture around Philosophy Hall, to the point that most of the security officers would barely glance his way when he would click down the darkened stairwell on his way to the exit. But he just couldn’t do it tonight. Something had been gnawing at him, a restlessness he couldn’t quite define. It was almost as if he’d forgotten an appointment or left a key ingredient off a grocery list. Though he hates being bothered when he is trying to work, he had found himself almost hoping the night custodian would have ambled by and given him a wave—anything to break the monotony for one small moment.

He growls and scrubs his hand up the back of his neck, indecision clawing at his mind.

Then, he turns his head and notices a lighted sign on the opposite corner. *Insomniac.* Interesting name for a coffee shop. He twists his wrist. 10:15 p.m. Oddly appropriate, though. On impulse, he crosses over and tries to peer through the front window, but it is mirrored, as if it were mercilessly daring him to look at his own haggard reflection and realize how desperately he could use some caffeine. The sign on the door bears an image of the all-seeing eye and reads, “We’re up all night because you are, too.” Oliver huffs a laugh and takes a deep breath. The smell seeping through the gap in the frame is rich and delectable.

*Sold.*

He cranks open the oak door and steps inside, and it is like stepping off an elevator and directly into
someone’s living room. The shop is a long rectangle with floors of distressed timber and deep cabernet walls. The end by the door has armchairs and a few settees in mismatched colors, spotted with throw pillows, each with a golden fleur-de-lis; the rest of the space houses a smattering of small tables which appear to have been made with the same aged wood as the floor, polished to a gleaming finish. Roughly half of the back wall is taken up by the bar and gleaming specialty coffee machines. It is topped by a giant chalkboard filled with the listings of drinks and prices carefully drawn by a steady hand, while the bottom half is a glass case to house various baked goods, though it is nearly empty at this hour.

There is only one other customer present, a man who easily could’ve passed for a John Belushi stunt double, reclining on one of the settees with his feet propped up on the oval table in front of it, giant earphones fixed to his head. He squishes against his raised knees a dilapidated notebook with wide-ruled paper and scribbles furiously in green ink.

“Can I help you?”

Oliver startles, not realizing that someone has come out of the back room and now stands behind the counter. His mouth feels chalky. Holy shit. The man is stunning. He is tall and slender, wearing slim-cut black jeans and a tight black button-down shirt, which is tucked in, so it only emphasizes his narrow waist and broad shoulders. The sleeves have been rolled up to his elbows, and the top two buttons are undone. He looks to be a few years younger than Oliver, but how many is unclear. He is obviously strong and fit, but not excessively muscled, his ivory skin setting off the riot of dark curls that he currently swipes to the side with a practiced move of his graceful fingers; the other hand holds open a paperback book. He fixes Oliver with a gaze from sharp green eyes and waits.

Oliver takes a few steps forward. He gestures to the book, whose title he can now read: *Fahrenheit 451*. “Slow night?”

The man continues to stare, then angles his head a few degrees to the right. “Aren’t they all?” is his droll reply.

Oliver shuffles his feet and giggles, abruptly wanting to punch himself in the face. He sounds like a silly little girl in middle school hanging around the stadium to watch the high school boys at football practice. He clears his throat and hefts his bag up a bit on his shoulder. “Yeah, pretty much, unfortunately.”

The man nods and puts down his book, spreading his hands on the countertop and raising his eyebrows. When Oliver says no more, he prompts, “What can I get for you?”

“Umm…” Oliver flushes and looks up at the menu desperately. He’s not exactly a coffee connoisseur. He could get by fine on a cup of plain instant as he stumbles around in the morning, just trying to get himself out the door early enough so he doesn’t have to catch the train to work, and instead he can let the bite of the relatively fresh early air jar him from his fog and bring his mind back to life. He wouldn’t be caught dead at one of the chain coffee places that are always packed with angry people in suits, paying a chunk of money for dark swill that tastes like it was drained off of garden mulch. Now, as he peruses the chalkboard, he realizes he has no idea what some of these concoctions even *are*, and he’s not about to ask and reveal his idiocy to this guy yet again. “Ah, well, what’s good here?”

“Depends on what you like.”

Oliver stares at the menu for a few more hapless moments. “Well, what do you like?” Jesus. Why does that sound like a cheesy pick-up line?
He glances down to find the man’s large eyes pinned on him, studying him, mouth compressed slightly and drawn up on one side. It is such an endearing expression that Oliver has to throw his eyes back up to the board before he starts to sweat. “You might not be into what I like, though,” the man finally says, just enough of a thread of uncertainty woven in that Oliver exhales quietly with temporary relief. Perhaps he’s not the only one who’s rattled here.

It gives Oliver enough of a confidence boost that he meets the man’s eyes and takes another step forward. “I’m willing to try just about anything.”

“Fairly adventurous of you.”

“I’m seeing how the other half lives.”

“Are you not typically the adventurous type?”

“No, but I’m looking to get promoted to it because ‘cautiously inquisitive’ doesn’t pay enough anymore to make the rent.”

Oliver can’t even believe his own ears. He’s not a flirtatious person. He’s always had jobs that necessitated working with others, but that’s what dealing with others had always felt like to him: a job. When he was finishing school in his early twenties, he’d been a bartender, meaning he was the one who juggled the shelves of bottles and the incessant sparkling chit-chat and the inevitable kitchen drama, somehow managing to stay above it all. He was the guy the owner had relied on to keep the bodies lingering around the bar and the overworked staff operating cohesively. Smooth jokes and sparkling smiles were required, and they became his occupational specialty; there was no argument he couldn’t settle with a wink and a nod and a timely refill.

But even then, working the bar was the limit of his interest in places like that, and once he was off the clock, his people skills dried up. Random, careless socializing is simply not in the fabric of his DNA. He was never the guy to drink himself blind and stumble into the alley or a back room with a nameless, blurry face he’d never remember in the morning. He much preferred the pristine quiet of the library and the company of writers long dead. He could tuck himself away in the northeast corner of the fourth floor and enter his own world. There, the atmosphere was infused with the perfect aroma of book paper and printer ink. He could spread his texts out, prop his feet up, and immerse himself in Thoreau or Douglass, Plato or Heraclitus, until the flickering of the lights told him it was time to leave.

“Adventures don’t always pay off, you know.” The man wipes his hands on a towel dangling behind the counter. “Could end in a loss.”

“At times, sure, but I’m trusting your professional judgment.”

That gets Oliver a genuine smile that flashes a row of neat white teeth. “All right, then.” He pulls a cobalt mug and saucer from a shelf. “It’ll just be a few minutes.”

Oliver wanders over and places his bag on a chair by the window. He drags out the stack of essays and starts to rearrange the pile, figuring he’ll start with the ones that are going to be less painful, from the students who actually seem to care enough to apply their brains to the topic at hand. A teenager’s interpretation of Emerson is painful enough, but more so when, based upon the bullshit he’s written, the kid could very well think Emerson is an outfielder for the Yankees and Transcendentalism his training plan to squash the Red Sox.

He’s about to sit down when he hears, “All set,” from across the room.
The blue cup now holds a frothy concoction. “What’s this called?”

“It’s caffè macchiato. No self-respecting Italian would drink cappuccino at this time of night.”

Oliver raises an eyebrow. “I’m not Italian, though.”

The man smirks. “I am.”

Oliver files that away and pulls out his wallet. “How much?”

“$3.01.”

As he fishes for the money, he chuckles, “You know, it’s so funny. I walk down this street all the time, but I never noticed this place before.”

The barista shrugs. “Well, for most people, the things easiest to miss are the ones right in front of their faces.”

For a moment, Oliver is frozen because the words, “Not if that thing is you,” have bubbled up from nowhere and are poised on the tip of his tongue. *What is the matter with me?* He coughs into the crook of his arm, feeling the blush creep up his neck. “Right…well…guess that explains how that tiger bit me last week,” he finally chokes out, offering a weak smile.

The other man’s lips quirk, softening his features adorably once more, and Oliver wants to call it a win, rather than to recognize it for the tepid courtesy that it probably is.

He lays a couple of bills on the counter, but after digging around with his index finger, can’t find a penny hiding amongst the folds of leather. “Just my luck,” Oliver sighs.

The man brushes a curl off his forehead and digs his hand into his own pocket. He pulls two pennies out and drops one in the drawer. Then, he holds the other out for Oliver to take. Oliver runs his thumb over its face, smooth and warm from where it had been nestled beneath the snug denim in the crux of the other man's hip.

For a moment, the man watches the motion of Oliver’s thumb. “Heads up,” he says thoughtfully, then looks up, eyes a deep emerald. “Perhaps your luck is changing.” Then, he turns and disappears through the curtain to the back room.
Fresh Eyes

Chapter Summary

Oliver returns to the coffee shop the next night--how could he stay away? Perhaps he should have...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oliver zigzags through the sluggish lines of cars, letting the random horn blasts of the morning rush quicken his pace. He stutter-steps to edge past the bumper of an impatient cabbie, who inches forward at exactly the right moment and yelps out the window for him to watch where the fuck he was going. Oliver looks back over his shoulder and waves an apology, answering the flipped middle finger with a broad grin.

He leaps the curb and slows his strides as he rounds to the park. He’s decided to take the long way to campus this morning. The sky is rapturous, a deep golden band at the horizon that morphs to a cap of indigo directly above. There is not even a wisp of a cirrus cloud to be seen. The leaves of the huddles of trees swish and brush against his ears like cornsilk. He breathes deep, relishing the chill bite of the early autumn air. Is this what it’s supposed to feel like? The city’s incessant buzz of activity, that cacophony which gives it its famous reputation for sleepless vigor, now inspires him rather than drains him. His commute typically resembled a stoic gladiator’s march, as if to steel himself to enter the Roman Coliseum; never had he expected it to electrify.

He actually feels awake. He actually feels alive.

Maybe it’s because he had gotten a few solid hours of sleep for once, falling into bed as soon as he got home without even bothering to undress, turning off his alarm in the morning with a wild slap of his arm and realizing that it was the first time he’d gotten to hear its obnoxious wail since he typically is awake long before it’s had its chance to ring. Maybe it’s because the toast didn’t burn, convincing him to put away the butter and dig out the Nutella, or because he managed to crack open his boiled egg without drowning half the shell in its depths. Maybe it’s because an overnight shower had cleansed the neighborhood, or because the chrysanthemums he never even noticed in the courtyard of his apartment building picked today to bloom, lining the sidewalk in yellow and purple velvet.

Then again, perhaps macchiato is secretly an Italian word for “mystical” and the drink that the statuesque barista had brewed for him is infused with healing powers. Drinking it down had given him the antidote to a poison he didn’t know he’d ingested. Is that why he never noticed Insomniac before—it doesn’t actually exist? If he rewound the ribbon of his thoughts to the day before yesterday, would he see nothing but a burned out shell of a building where the coffee shop should have been? After all, even Rod Serling couldn’t dream up half of what happens in this city after dark.

Oliver cannot restrain the smile that ripples across his lips. I’m so full of shit.

There’s little point in denying to himself the real reason he’s seeing this day through fresh eyes. It was not any of that. Sleep had little to do with the fact that, when his head hit the pillow, it did so with a whisper of espresso froth still in the corner of his mouth, and he could lick his lips and call up
its complex flavors on every part of his tongue. Breakfast didn’t matter if, before he awoke, his captive subconscious bubbled up the lingering image of a dark curl cascading into playful eyes of sparkling green, thick brows barely held apart by a broad bridge of alabaster. The weather patterns have no relevance when he can reach into his pocket right now and clutch the warm metal of a single penny, massage the face of it, walk it slowly across his fingers, and feel a heated tingling in his chest as his heart pulses faster.

Oliver takes a deep breath as he waits at the crosswalk for the next light to change. *Down, boy.* He shakes his head and smooths the front of his shirt, trying to reset to his default work mode. It’s had an auspicious start, but today promises to be a long one. He couldn’t afford to skip into a department meeting with stars in his eyes, only hearing every other word because he’s too busy mentally drawing hearts on his Trapper Keeper to care what the provost has decided with respect to their budget or which learning outcomes are not being met in the level-two courses. The department head has already begun to scowl at him whenever they cross paths, and Oliver has no illusions about the nature of his scorn. While his colleagues continue to produce articles and texts or to deliver keynote speeches at conferences around the globe, Oliver’s own research has stalled, the book for which he’d been given an advance by the publisher still in the drafting stages, his deadlines passing by like driftwood in a flood.

Still, something under the layers of his skin, something shouting from behind a closed door in his mind, insists that he encountered a force last night that could be something akin to magic, one that could lift up his semitone life and allow him a sample of what could be if he worshipped under a different moon and traded the dissonance he’s so soundly cultivated for a harmony he’d never glimpsed before, one that could make the whole world open like the draping folds of jimsonweed on a cloudless night.

At 9:07 p.m., Oliver can’t take it anymore.

Meetings and classes complete, he had gotten dinner at a cafe on campus and returned to his office per his usual. He’d spent the next couple of hours reading and annotating one of the neglected resources for his book. Despite a decent degree of focus, the words have started to meld together and the niggling of desire inside of him can no longer be ignored. He sighs, rubbing his eyes and pressing his thumbs into their sockets, the quiet pride he’d felt for a few moments about achieving some genuine progress hijacked by the realization that he is, to some degree, a complete fraud. Only a sliver of the current motivation to be suffering through the incipient neck strain and blurry vision of these extra hours was out of his usual overdeveloped sense of duty and academic zeal.

Tonight, he is preparing.

No, that’s not right. He is planning.

Well, isn’t it more about *plotting*? Because the publisher had indeed mentioned that—

Oh, to hell with it.

He is *stalling*.

Last night, he had spent roughly an hour and a half at Insomniac, slowly picking through the student essays as his eyes kept drifting up to the counter. The young man who had served him had slipped
back and forth through the curtain as he restocked items and cleaned various machines, but Oliver
never got more than a glimpse of the man’s profile as he worked, just enough to follow the soft
waves of his hair as it rocked against his cheekbone and nape, the subtle undulations of the freckle
that punctuates the column of his throat. It had made Oliver’s hand sweat where he’d gripped his pen.

He had found himself rereading the same paragraphs with vague attention while silently willing the
boy to come out from behind the counter and into the dining area for any stupid reason, just
something to give Oliver a chance to get closer to him, to talk to him about coffee or Montag or long
division or the Yellowstone caldera—it really didn’t matter what. He had only craved to hear his
voice again, to see that enigmatic smile soften his tantalizing features and make Oliver’s insides boil.

Finally, he had heard a click of footsteps coming his way, and his stomach had clenched. He angled
his head slightly to prop it up onto the closed fist of his hand, going for something in the bored and
disinterested department. It wouldn’t do to appear to be waiting. He kept his gaze riveted to the
page and tapped his Bic against this teeth—surely that would scream “lost in thought,” wouldn’t it?
The Contemplative Intellectual? Should he chuckle under his breath? That would be an open
invitation for conversation, that innate desire to be in on a private joke. What curious Adonis could
pass that up, right? But then what? Oliver would actually have to answer, and he did not trust
himself enough in that instant to have some kind of witty reply at the ready. The last thing he wanted
was for the barista to roll his eyes and label him a moron.

Like a panther stalking prey, he had waited until the footsteps halted at a table nearby, and he could
hear the telltale swish as a sanitary rag was swiped over its surface. That’s when Oliver sat back,
stretched his arms, and yawned noisily. After a few more seconds, he looked up.

*Shit.*

A young girl with a huge thicket of dark hair was at the table, rearranging the small packets of
sweetener and pushing in the chairs so that the legs hooked around the table’s foundation and
allowed for more walking space. When Oliver moved, she looked over at him and smiled, then
approached his table.

“Something you need, sir?”

*I need you to stop calling me sir; I’m only 25, for Christ’s sake.* “No, I’m fine.”

“Is your drink to your liking?” She had spoken with a faint French accent.

Oliver had laughed in spite of himself. “It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

The girl had giggled, brushing her hair away from her face and leaning one hand on Oliver’s table.

“It’s one of my favorites as well.”

“Well, I can definitely see why,” He had given her a polite smile while surreptitiously stacking up
some of the papers on his table before the girl crinkled them with her fingers. “Your colleague has
quite a knack for it, doesn’t he?”

“Oui, he does!” She had thrown her head back and giggled again while pushing her hip out and
resting the other hand upon it. “But he almost never makes them.”

“That so?”

“Absolument.”
Oliver’s smile had broadened, “Aren’t I the lucky one, then?”

As she nodded furiously and pushed a tendril of frizzy hair behind her ear, Oliver had happened to peer over her shoulder and catch a glimpse of the young man. With the momentary distraction of the girl, Oliver had not seen him return from the back room, and he had stood stiffly behind the counter, frozen in the midst of picking up a packet of napkins to watch their exchange, his face unreadable. The green eyes had flicked back and forth between Oliver and the girl several times before he had compressed his mouth and spun on his heel to return to the back. That was the last Oliver had seen of the man before he finally had left about a half hour later. He’d never even gotten his name.

Now, he can’t sit here in this depressing cubicle another minute. He throws his stuff into his pack and heads out, barely restraining himself from jogging down the blocks until he is finally at the door to Insomniac, taming the feathers of his hair and wiping his eyes to make sure he has no globs of goo in the corners of them. When he pushes open the door, he’s struck once more by the rich aroma and takes a deep breath of it.

The young man is behind the counter, dressed as before in black, his back to the door.

“Hello again.”

He glances at Oliver and turns back to the mugs he’s rearranging on the shelf. “Hello.”

“I didn’t get a chance to thank you for yesterday.”

“Thank me?” He doesn’t turn around.

“Yeah, that drink you made was superb. You’ve got very talented hands.” Out of nowhere, his voice had dropped, so the compliment comes out as far more suggestive than Oliver had intended.

“No, it didn’t.”

He clears his throat and tries again. “The girl you work with said that you don’t make that drink very often.”

“Nope.”

“That’s a shame.” He takes a quick breath. “Does that make me special?” Oh, brother.

The barista finally turns toward him and crosses his arms in front of his chest. If Oliver didn’t know better, he’d swear that the blank expression was an effort, forced upon the normally expressive face. Is he embarrassed by the praise? His gaze does not quite meet Oliver’s. “Look, it’s no big deal. It’s just coffee, not brain surgery.”

Oliver laughs, “Well, perhaps not, but it was curative nonetheless. Besides, brain surgery doesn’t leave you with insane cravings for more.” He can’t help himself. He moves closer to the counter and winks. “Think I can get another?”

At that moment, the man’s eyes connect with Oliver’s, smoldering deep with some emotion that Oliver cannot quite grasp. Is it annoyance? Anger? I’ve offended him. Great. Of course he did. Of course Oliver is gross and obvious, and a man as gorgeous as this one wouldn’t want some aging weirdo who comes in off the street in the middle of the night and hits on him when he’s just trying to do his job. Who would? Who in their right mind would enjoy that? What in the hell had he been thinking?

The man’s voice is flat. Cold. “I think the machine is broken. You’ll have to try something else on
the menu.”

Oliver feels like he’s been slapped. “Yeah. Sure. Ok. Just a small drip coffee, then.” He swallows hard. He can feel the penny in his pocket burning a hole in his thigh. “To go.”

Chapter End Notes

Rod Serling was the host of "The Twilight Zone," the famous sci-fi television series of the early 1960s.

Trapper Keepers were a staple for American school kids in the 1980s; it's basically just a binder for folders.
Not This Time

Chapter Summary

Oliver reels from his last encounter Elio and comes to a decision about what to do.

Chapter Notes

I've decided to cut in half the age difference between Oliver and Elio; I just felt like that would suit this scenario better.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Why didn’t you just climb over the counter and rip his shirt off? You idiot. Could you possibly be more lame?

Oliver stares at the ceiling, bunching the bedsheets under him in tight fists. Once he left Insomniac, it had taken him an extra fifteen minutes to get home, hunched and plodding as he was, shoes suddenly too heavy to lift far off the pavement. The whole way, he’d gripped the cup of coffee so tight that the cardboard had eventually buckled and some of the steaming liquid splattered onto his hand. It probably gave him burns. He barely noticed.

He had dropped his bag at the door and slumped over to the couch without even taking off his coat. He flicked on the television and stared at it purblind. It might as well have been nothing but static. When he finally had given up and decided to go to bed, he had realized he was still gripping the coffee cup in his hands. By then, the liquid had turned cold.

The dead white ceiling looms over him now like a cruel mirror, reminding him of the appalling blankness that he can never seem to crawl out of for any length of time. His duels with hope always have ended in blood, this one adding a sickening thud, like dropping out of a fourth-floor window onto cement. The concept of “all summer in a day” has become his pattern, hasn’t it? Get the dream job at the university, then realize the crushing depth of the other drudgeries that he hadn’t counted on; get a publisher’s agreement for his book, only to lose the thread of his entire purpose, research and writing getting bogged down by the menial demands of his job, nearly fizzling out. Just brief periods of contentedness are all he seems to be allotted, dots and dashes of an unsolvable code. Lasting happiness remains irrevocably beyond his grasp.

At the bottom of it all, he can’t get the image of the barista out of his head, the intense fire in the other man’s eyes that had seemed to well up from his core, despite the stringent mask he’d tried to wear on his face. It makes no sense whatsoever, but Oliver would bet anything that it had not been a flash of anger at all, more like hurt, as if Oliver had done something traitorous to him. It had looked so much like betrayal.

Oliver growls, rolling his head around on the pillow in frustration. “Yeah, that has to be it. Great detective work there, Sherlock. You’ve just got it all figured out, don’t you?” he mutters bitterly and flops onto his side. He punches the pillow several times to try to reshape it, resolutely closing his eyes.
Be logical for once. The guy was angry, plain and simple. Any hints of betrayal were likely due to a sense of misplaced faith, the faulty assumption that Oliver was a decent person and would behave with at least a smidgen of propriety and restraint, and instead, Oliver decided to humiliate himself and leer at the guy like he was an object, trading the man’s respectful attitude with rude innuendo every time he opened his mouth.

Idiot.

He deepens his breathing in a vain attempt to slow it, praying for the veil of sleep to enfold him. But his eyes pop open when he catches a whiff of something, so he tilts his hand closer to his face. His gut abruptly twists when he realizes what it is.

It’s the coffee, still tacky at the base of his thumb from where it had spilled.

Oliver should get up. He should get up right now and clean his hands, scrub out his mouth, and purge his mind of everything to do with Insomniac, as if he’d never gone in there in the first place, never seen the Italian barista and his hypnotic eyes, the man with the angelic hands attached to the body tailor-made for sin.

Instead, he closes his eyes and pulls his wrist to his lips, laps at it with his tongue, savoring the rich dark flavor until his skin feels raw. He finally drifts off an hour later with one devastating thought floating through in his mind: That’s as close as I’ll get. That’s as close as I’ll ever get to having him in my bed.

The next two days pass in a fog. Oliver holes up in his apartment and rarely leaves his desk. By the grace of God, it is the weekend, so he’s no obligations which require his presence. All he wants to do is immerse himself in his work. It is the only thing that has never let him down. When he was twelve, his parents had split. When they got to the point where screaming matches in the den officially supplanted the interminable months of strained silence, he survived by closing himself off in his room and making friends with Henry David Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Both writers had owed a fostering of their genius to its solitary pursuit, using isolation as a forerunner to inspiration. It had kept Oliver sane in the midst of the lunacy that moved grown adults to argue over useless sticks of furniture and knick-knacks that they never even liked to begin with; then, it had gotten him multiple scholarships and extracted him from all of that chaos for good. He never looked back.

Still, since having a front-row seat to the drama of love distorting to hate, Oliver avoided relationships, period. To him, it was akin to seeing his cousin vomit up tuna casserole; once Oliver got an eyeful of that gelatinous slop, he never ate another bite of casserole again. He’d had a handful of people that he’d casually dated as an undergraduate, but in the end, it was obvious each time that Oliver never intended to go much further. Lunch or dinner, maybe a movie—that was typically the extent of their interactions. If he was particularly desperate, maybe he’d accept an invitation to their place—he’s only human, after all. But as soon as they would look at Oliver with a hint of that telltale gleam in their eyes, Oliver snapped the line and let them drift away. Never did the process leave him with more than a vague sense of guilt. Now, he would struggle to remember any of their names.

That’s why it makes no sense. It makes no sense that he keeps dreaming of him, a man with whom he’s not even had a real conversation, a man whose name he hasn’t even heard, but one Oliver
knows with a sureness as deep as his bones that he would never be able to forget even if he tried. It makes no sense that the few fitful hours of sleep he has managed to piece together in the last couple of days have been filled with ephemeral images of Oliver’s fingers floating over skin of soft ivory, thick dark lashes tickling his cheek as he reaches to snatch a soft earlobe with his tongue, perfect pink lips stretched tight around him as Oliver falls back against the sheets and begs him for more. And when he awakens, half hard and panting, he feels even more wrecked than the time before.

By Sunday evening, Oliver has finished drafting two solid chapters and finally decides to stretch his legs. He plans a short jaunt around the neighborhood, but somehow, he wanders off course and ends up at the river. He leans with his forearms against the rail and lets the wind bluster against his face, relishing the numbness in his cheeks. He spies a singular boat crawl through the murky water, leaving no wake behind it, no discernible evidence that it had ever been there. As he watches it, the back of his throat tightens, forcing him to grab at the railing before he pitches forward into the drink.

_Not this time._

For all the times he’s let opportunities float by him, for the countless people in his life he’s passively allowed to fade from view, for whatever the cost may be to his dormant heart, this time he cannot let that happen. Two days ago, he’d vowed never to go anywhere near the coffee shop, to tuck away his hot embarrassment as a lesson learned and move on. But in this moment, he knows, for whatever reason, that he needs to go at least once more, to apologize somehow and make it right, to square up to the man he suddenly cannot stand to be anymore.

The knob is warm despite the frigid air. Business must be good. And when Oliver pushes the door open, he finds a fair amount of people littering Insomniac’s interior. Judging by the proliferation of books with a yellow “Used” sticker on them and the vaguely puzzled visages, most are students from one university or another.

As the door swishes closed behind him, Oliver sees his barista at the far end of the counter. The man’s eyes sweep over to him for a second before he palms a bag of whole bean Tanzanian blend and slips behind the curtain. After a few seconds, the young French girl emerges, coquettish smile intact as she tugs at some strands of frizz to try to stuff it behind her ears.

Oliver’s heart sags, but it’s not as if he wasn’t expecting it. _Not my barista, remember?_ He tacks on a closed lip smile. “Good evening.”

“Bonjour. What can I get for you?” Her eyelids flutter.

_Your colleague’s phone number, for starters._ “Umm, well, how about a mug of the dark roast and that slice of lemon poppyseed bread.”

“Yes, of course!” She flits around behind the counter to gather his items, then taps away at the cash register.

Oliver just slides her some cash and lets his smile warp. “Keep the change.”

He commandeers a table in the corner and props his bag against the wall, hauling out his copies of _The Presocratic Philosophers_ and _Walden_, along with his notebook. If Thoreau is here
with him, at least he knows he’s got one friend in the room. He breaks off a corner of the bread and takes a long, cautious slurp of the searing coffee. It’s no caffè macchiato, but it is decent. Better this than nothing at all, he decides. He exhales heavily and flips open the text, quickly losing himself in the worn and familiar pages.

It isn’t long before he becomes aware of movement around him as the customers at the next table head out, and Oliver raises his head to see the room now half empty. Then, he finally sees what he’s been waiting for: a mop of dark curls moving through the dining area, resetting the tables and ridding them of trash. He coughs to try to release some of the pressure beneath his sternum, reflexively clutching the book tighter in his grip, as if it were a security blanket.

When the man reaches the table next to him, Oliver sits up higher. “Excuse me.” The dark head turns, one eyebrow raised. Oliver holds his breath and gestures to the chair opposite him. “Please?”

The man hesitates but eventually complies, perching on the edge of the chair like he’s prepared to flee at any moment. His face is neutral as he waits for Oliver to continue.

“I’m—I mean, I—I think I owe you an apology. Of some kind.” He swallows. “If I did something, or…or said something to offend you, I’m very sorry.”

“No, I’m not offended.” The barista’s lips compress briefly. “It’s all fine.”

“I hope so, but—“ Oliver winces, “you seemed to not…well, when I came in…I mean…” he splutters. How the fuck do I say this?

The man strums his fingers, but the nonchalant gesture is belied by the rigidity of his spine. “I just thought after the other day…well, you really seemed to enjoy Marzia’s company. A lot.” He bites off the last two words so they snap like bone.

“Who?” Oliver’s eyebrows fold over themselves. “You mean the young French girl?” He slumps against the chair back. “But why would—“ Then, he has a flash of the rigid face he’d seen over the girl’s shoulder that day.

Seriously?

Oliver takes in the tapered corner of the man’s luminous eyes, the stretch of the black t-shirt over his strong frame, and wants to laugh out loud. How could this man possibly encounter a situation in which jealousy were a viable option? He is ridiculously handsome, like he could have been peeled from the pages of a fashion magazine; factor in his obvious intelligence and easy competence, and if he’s not the most sought-after person in the room, then the goddamn room must be empty.

“No,” Oliver insists. He scoots his chair closer and angles over the table. “No. I mean, she seems like a nice enough kid, but…well, she reminds me of one of my freshmen.”

“Oh.” He exhales in a rush. “I thought that—“

“I know what you thought.”

The green eyes are dark, scanning his face like lasers. Deciding. “She’s only a few years younger than me,” the barista says, lilting his voice, almost as if it were a question, a test.

“You’re no kid.” The words come out unexpectedly gruff, and Oliver holds his gaze for several long moments, unflinching under the deep scrutiny. “I’m Oliver. What’s your name?”

For a few more beats, he remains motionless; then, a lip quirks. “Elio.”
Oliver cannot tame his broad smile. “Nice to meet you.” He holds out his hand.

“Likewise.” Elio’s smirk warms with a sudden bashful air as he takes the hand in a firm grip and shakes it twice.

“Are you a student?”

Elio shrugs, “A graduate student, yes, but not at your college.”

Oliver flushes, “How do you—“

“The lanyard for your keys. Plus, I saw your i.d. in your wallet when you paid the other night.”

Oliver laughs and takes a moment to sip of his coffee. “As long as you didn’t see my Mickey Mouse Club membership card. That would’ve been awkward.”

“Was it behind the ticket stub from the Captain & Tennille concert?”

“Come on, who would pass up front-row seats?”

“So close you get hit by the sequins?”

“Nothing but the best for me.”

“Evidently.”

Elio bites his lip, but his dimples show in his cheeks, anyway. Adorable. He swipes at his hair a few times, pulling the fringes out of his eyes. “Are you a lit professor, Oliver?”

Oliver follows his gaze to the cover of the Thoreau book, still open with the pages flipped over to the wood. “Oh, well, you’re close. Philosophy, actually.” He grimaces. “Pretty boring, huh?”

Elio shakes his head and leans closer, resting his elbows on the edge of the table. “Contemplation is a lost art. What could be boring about that?” he murmurs. Oliver’s blood percolates as a small smile parts Elio’s soft pink lips, just before his face scrunches to the side in an unsuccessful attempt to hide it.

Slowly, Elio rises. “I really should get back to work.”

“Right, sure, I understand. Thanks for…well, for…” He fumbles, unsure of what really to say, how to phrase it.

But Elio seems to understand, nodding slowly, “Have a good night, Oliver,” he says quietly.

“You, too, Elio.”

Oliver gulps down his last bit of sweetbread and loads items into his bag one by one. From the outside, it probably looks like he’s merely being cautious or is too exhausted for normal haste, but both would be lies. On the inside, his heart thuds, his fingers trembling enough that he has to clench everything with an extra tight grip lest it all wobble out of his hands and onto the floor. Before it fades, he savors the delicious aroma of Elio’s aftershave and the resonance of his own name in Elio’s throat.

But all he really can think about are Elio’s eyes, the way they make him feel exposed and overwhelmed and feral. And the thing that will keep Oliver awake long into the night is the fact that, when he had last sought them out, just before they turned their light away from him and the room
had dimmed, Elio’s eyes were glistening and unguarded, blatantly fixed on Oliver’s open mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Captain & Tennille was a soft rock duo reasonably successful in the 1970s; they're just cheesy enough, though, to be good fodder for Elio and Oliver's joking banter. If you're a fan of them, my apologies!
Lullaby

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio get to know each other a little better, and Oliver gets a surprise.

Chapter Notes

Oliver and I suffer similarly--chapter four has been a killer to write! I hope the result is satisfactory. Let me know what you think!

Before the door can swish closed behind him, Oliver sees what he’s waited all day to see: the artful thatch of dark hair atop the milky brow, bent in concentration behind the gleaming handles of one of the brewers.

Elio.

The sound of the door closing snaps his head up, and the green eyes connect with Oliver’s immediately, as if they had planned it, rehearsed it, as if they had been doing this for years. The corners of his eyes crinkle so Oliver knows he must be smiling though his mouth is not visible. Has he been waiting for this, too?

The intense gaze holds him in place for a moment, and Oliver can feel his shoulders sink away from his ears as the air leaks in a slow stream from his lungs, the easing of a tight swell of tension he’d built up after a day that had gone by like a cheese grater on bare skin: three classes and two hours in his office explaining to a steady stream of pampered youngsters that he absolutely cannot telephone their hovering parents and explain their grades to them. He has a sudden urge to kick off his shoes and loosen his tie, as if he’s just arrived home, Elio merely in their kitchen, preparing something to make the rest of the world fade away until there’s nothing left between them but heat.

Behave yourself. The last thing he wants to do is trash the second chance he’s been gifted by marinating in more of his ridiculous Romantic fantasies. Don’t fuck up.

Elio turns to grab something on the shelf behind him, an opportunity for Oliver to grit his teeth and refocus, deliberately closing the folds of his umbrella to avoid spritzing rainwater over the couple perched on a nearby settee who hold between them an enormous textbook of organic chemistry, arguing over some of the marginal notes. There is one other person left in line, so Oliver waits patiently, content to watch Elio move like a trained dancer to fulfill each request, the subtle sway of his hips teasing Oliver’s imagination in the best possible way. His own hands would fit perfectly there, he decides, like they were made for that purpose alone; he would love to wrap his fingers around those delicate bones, to dig into the soft flesh and absorb their warmth, follow their sensual motion, coax them closer and closer, sucking deep into his lungs the music of the quiet moan that—

Stop it.

He licks his lips and rolls his eyes to the ceiling, rocking back and forth between his heels and his
toes.


“Hello, Oliver.”

The soft tenor of Elio’s voice washes over Oliver and makes him shiver.

“Did you catch a chill out there tonight?”

Oliver sucks in air and nods furiously. “Yes. What? Yes, I did! The weather is…it’s really cold. Tonight. I mean, before today, I thought horizontal rain was just something made up for the movies. Joke’s on me, I guess.” Kill me now. He cringes and flips his fingers through his damp hair.

“Makes it the perfect night to get your hands around something steaming hot.”

Oliver chokes, clearing his throat several times before recovering his composure. “Indeed.” He coughs again. “I just…I really couldn’t agree more,” he rasps and grins sheepishly.

Elio holds up an indigo cup with a frothy Caffè macchiato already prepared, and Oliver accepts it from him, their fingers sliding slowly against each other in the exchange. It is automatic, then, to continue the upward motion, to lift whatever Elio has touched to his waiting lips and take down a long, full gulp.

Oliver’s eyes slip closed. It’s perfect, of course. It slides down his throat and swirls in his belly, lighting every nerve ending. He has been craving this all day—all week, really, since he’d first stumbled in here and sampled Elio’s brew—but it feels like a chord’s been struck, a longing satisfied that he has lived with always and can’t even name. He doesn’t even pause to think when his mouth opens again and he breathes out, “God, I love you.”

His eyes fly open in horror. Elio’s cheeks are pink, his face a bit dazed. Oliver struggles to keep the mug steady, the liquid sloshing back and forth against the rim. “Sorry, I—I mean—It—” The cup has started to sear his finger pads. “It’s delicious. Thank you,” he bumbles, sweat beading at his hairline.

Elio looks down and swipes a rag at nothing on the countertop. “Glad you like it,” he replies, biting his lip.

Oliver doesn’t even know how much money he lays on the counter. He simply clutches his cup in a death grip and scurries to a far table in the sparsely populated dining room, bumping several chairs askew with his bag as it swings on his shoulder. His heart is pounding violently. He drops into a seat and the bag falls with a heavy thud to the floor. He crosses his ankles and turns his face to the dark window, praying for the intense pressure of his blood to recede and the ringing in his ears to dull. The edges of his vision are dark. His thumbnail worries an indentation in the wood tabletop.

Luckily, Elio had not seemed upset with him at all, more amused than anything else. Thank God. But that’s not what is unnerving him. He is rattled, utterly petrified, by how natural it was to say it in the first place, how right it felt on his tongue. Oliver doesn’t use that word. “Love” is not a part of his normal lexicon, despite the way pop culture throws the word around, applying it to granola bars and automobiles and tennis shoes until it is rendered meaningless. As a rule, he doesn’t use it casually to show appreciation, and he has certainly never used that word to describe his feelings for another person. Not even his parents, at least not in any of the memories that he is able to unwrap, nor the ones that bubble up like sewer gas and find him at vulnerable times, the ones he has tucked down deep and has no desire to recall.
Yet the word had flowed out of him just now without a thought. He’s is hesitant to wander too far into his subconscious to determine what that could mean. Hesitant? Try scared to death.

His index finger follows the circle of the cup’s rim, round and round, until it dips into the foam. He licks it clean and does it again as the beginnings of a smile push at the edges of his mouth.

Chapter 4 will be the death of me, he laments. The brief spate of creativity he’d experienced has withered, and tonight the words will just not come. It is beyond frustrating to know how it should read by the end but to be woefully incapable of assembling the proper verbiage to make that vision a reality.

“Having difficulties?”

Oliver jumps and whips his head up to see Elio bending over his table, one eyebrow raised. “You could say that,” he chuckles ruefully. “Just my luck, too.”

Elio slides into the other chair. “How so?”

“When I think I’m on a roll, I curve into a brick wall. One of the fabulous reasons that I’ve recently discovered why sleep deprivation makes such an effective torture technique.”

Elio’s lips purse, and he nods. “That sounds like every artist’s nightmare; when the work lets you down, there’s nothing that can fill its gap.”

Oliver sits back. “Sounds like you’ve been there.”

He sighs, absently dragging his hand through his hair. “Many times.” His fingers strum rhythmically on the tabletop. “I wish I knew the formula to creating on demand, to producing even when inspiration deserts me. It would save me a lot of headaches. And paper.” He gives a lopsided smile.

“Are you a writer?”

“Sort of.” Elio’s head tilts to the left, and his right hand trails slowly down his throat as he thinks. Oliver feels his nostrils flare as he follows the motion. He has a flash of his own hand replacing it, stroking that perfect ivory column, feeling the undulations where his heartbeat pushes through the skin. He licks his lips and looks away, grabbing up his cup and taking a sip of the tepid liquid.

“What have you written?”

Elio smirks and rolls his eyes. “A bunch of crap I’m not happy with, mostly.”

Oliver laughs and points at his pad. “Hey, thanks! You’ve just come up with the perfect title for this!” Elio laughs then, full and relaxed, and Oliver has that sensation again, the one where it feels familiar and safe, the one that makes him feel like now that he’s come in from the storm, like now he’s finally come home. It warms him enough that he snatches up the notebook, “Here, tell me if this makes any sense to you: ‘For the early Greeks, Heidegger contends, this underlying hiddenness is constitutive of the way beings are, not only in relation to themselves, but also in relation to other entities generally. In other words, they do not construe hiddenness merely or primarily in terms of
entities’ relations to human beings.’ Does that make any sense to you? At this point, it makes zero sense to me, but I’ve run out of ways to rephrase it without ending up with the same syntactical nightmare.”

He throws the pad back on the table, and Elio picks it up and reads the paragraph silently. Eventually, the pad lowers slightly so that the emerald eyes peer over it. “I’m sure it made perfect sense when you wrote it.”

“That might be the kindest thing anyone’s said to me in months.”

“Kind?”

“Yep.” He dares to connect with the center of the deep pools of green, long enough that he sees them slowly darken. “Kind.” The gaze holds, and he can’t stop his lips from quirking in a smile. As the pad lowers, it reveals that Elio’s are doing the same.

Elio’s head shakes. “You’re too hard on yourself, I’d say.”

Oliver stretches his shoulders and scrubs the back of his head. “Maybe.” He angles his head. “I’ll bet anything that you are, too.”

“Maybe.”

“You said you were a graduate student. Where?”

He hesitates before answering. “Juilliard.” It comes out as a sigh. Oliver’s eyebrows shoot up, and Elio sag a bit in his chair and his cheeks pink. “Composition,” he mumbles.

Oliver has a million questions, but he doesn’t want to push too hard. He picks a neutral one. “What’s your primary instrument?”

“Piano.” Elio smiles shyly, and his posture improves. “I started by transcribing different works for years, since I was a little kid, to give myself something more challenging to play. I’ve always loved performing. There’s something grounding about it, you know? No matter how awful people are or how terrible the world becomes, I can just close my door and sit down at the bench and play whatever needs to be heard—whatever I need to hear—to make the rest easier to bear.” He turns his head just enough that his eyes glint in the soft light, a playful smile flickering across his pink lips. “Now, does that make any sense?”

Oliver nods, enchanted. “Absolutely, Elio.” His voice has dropped to a near whisper, as if they were telling secrets to one another across the table, each a priest and parishioner in equal measure. “I know what it’s like to rely on that kind of focus, that kind of healing. More often than I’d care to admit.”

Elio’s keen gaze darts around his face, and what he sees there makes him lean forward, stretching his torso and resting his crossed arms on the wood. “My mother once read a story to me about a knight in love with a princess. She’s in love with him, too, but seems not to know it. They become friends.”

Oliver’s throat fills with splinters. “But?”

“But the friendship humbles him, makes him speechless, unable to confront her about the one thing that he needs to say.” Elio’s fingers have started to pick at the edge of Oliver’s napkin. “Until one day, he can’t take it anymore and asks her point-blank, ‘Is it better to speak or to die?’”
Oliver drops his eyes, hands going around the mug in front of him so they have something to hold. He scoffs, “I’d never have the courage to ask someone a question like that.”

Elio’s fingertip brushes against his. “I doubt that. You’re stronger than you want to believe you are.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“Easy. You’re here.”

Oliver can only gape at him in wonderment.

Suddenly, Elio stands. “Let me warm that up for you. It’s dreadful when it’s cold.” He slips the mug from Oliver’s grasp and disappears. The shop is empty except for him, but he’s no idea what time it is. He looks blankly at his notebook, mind unable to move forward from the discerning glance and soft caress that have set his skin on fire. In a few minutes, Elio returns with another blue mug freshly steaming and a plate with a chocolate croissant. “I thought you could use this.”

“Wow, that’s—thank you. How much—“

Elio waves him off. “Forget it. I was going to have to pitch it anyway.”

It is flaky and warm, the center molten. “Perfect,” he groans around a second bite. He takes a drink to wash it down, then raises the mug to Elio as if making a toast. “So is the blue mug the secret?”

“The secret to what?”

“This magic potion you brew. You always put it in a blue mug.”

“No, no magic. It’s just…well, a bit of…symmetry.” Oliver cocks his head, and Elio busies himself gathering up some trash and pushing in his chair. Finally, he compresses his mouth and looks up at Oliver through his thick lashes. “It matches your eyes.”

When Oliver gets home from Insomniac, he tosses his bag onto a chair and starts to unload its contents, making room for the supplies he would need for class tomorrow. As he unzips the back pocket, he freezes. There is a disk inside. He pulls it out slowly and turns it over in his hands. There is nothing written on the casing, save a post-it note scrawled hastily in pen: *Sweet dreams.*

Oliver lays it carefully on the table, and though he is not even remotely sleepy, he pops the disk into his stereo and stretches out on his bed.

For an hour he listens to it on repeat. The disk has a whole collection of songs: “The Berm” and “Bike Rides in Summer” and “A Swim at the River” and “Afternoons in Heaven.” The melodies are captivating, beguiling with a simple beauty that manages to evoke layers of complex response. They tell a story, each its own scene in a drama that requires no words. The whole of it leaves Oliver with an odd sense of longing, a need to recapture a memory that was never his to begin with, a feeling of a love departed that he’d never even met. It’s like a window into a parallel life, one allotted to his other self, the one who had traveled and experienced and faced a world unafraid of what he might lose in the end.
As he drifts off, it occurs to him that maybe it was Elio. Maybe Elio had lived that life. Maybe Elio is the one who had lost in the end.

Maybe Elio had decided not to speak, and instead, chose to die.
Oliver goes to thank Elio for the disk of songs and ends up getting another surprise.

The morning arrives by nudging aside the darkness in a hush. Oliver rises to consciousness slowly, like a diver moving up through layers of deep ocean. When finally he reaches the surface, he floats through placid waves that nudge at the sides of his body, cradling him gently until he is ready to move on his own through the air. He works his way to the edge of the bed and rubs his eyes, and in the darkness there, he can still see the lines of the music passing through his mind like ribbons, twisting and fluttering, still beckoning him to follow, to feel their silken threads brush against his face, in one side of his body and through it to the other side.

It is a brand of peace he’s never known before. He’s not even sure he understands it, that sensation of finding an object he had not known was lost but was always meant to have. He wants to hold tight to it, tuck it away inside of himself before it can be taken away again, but he is not certain it is his to claim. The music has awakened something in a part of his brain that had been dormant, as if he has just discovered the existence of a sixth sense, and it has left him amazed and fascinated, satisfied but off-balance.

Oliver gets in the shower before turning on the water, seeking the shock of cold to jostle him out of his fugue, to try to reset the tumblers that now seem to be tuned to a completely different combination. *How is this possible?* He doesn’t know if this feeling will last, and he doesn’t even know how to label it. He doesn’t know if it is the aura of Elio himself or the mystique created by the somber lilt of the music; he doesn’t know if it is the timing or the timbre or something even more ethereal causing his brain to slosh heavily in his skull.

As a student of philosophy, Oliver is used to not knowing. He is accustomed to paradoxes, to intricate questions the pursuit of which leads only to more questions, not to answers. His field is one that creates puzzles with no edges, kaleidoscopes instead of crayons of specific colors. He’s made a living by reveling in the innumerable shapes and shades of grey.

But as he twists off the water and steps out of the shower, he is filled with two absolute certainties. The first is that while he does not even have confirmation of the origin of the music, he doesn’t need it. It has to be Elio’s. He is as sure of this as if he had been behind Elio’s eyes and watched the dots and lines form from nothing on the page, or if he’d had those perfect lips cupped to his ear as every note thrummed from the cords of Elio’s throat.

The second thing Oliver knows for sure is that he needs more—more of the story, more of the context, more of the fantastical melodies that live as memories he’s yet to experience. He craves more of that rush, more of the ensuing calm.

He has to have more of the young man with the old soul who has managed to soundly capture Oliver’s own without even trying.

Just *more.*
The rasp of his own breathing scrapes against his eardrums. He’s been walking for miles with long, purposeful strides, a man on a mission, and he pauses one block away to peek at his watch. 7:17 p.m. Too early? Too eager, he chides himself. He fiddles with the compact disc in his grasp, hastily trying to buff out the sweaty fingerprints from the clear plastic by fogging it with his breath and rubbing it against his pant leg.

What now? Should he take a few laps of the block? Go home and venture back later? Slink inside and perch like a creepy gargoyle until Elio appears? Oliver rolls his eyes, galled by the amount of ridiculous tooth-gnashing he’s done in the last couple of weeks. There once was a time when he could make decisions without collapsing upon himself like a deflated balloon. Major life choices like where to study, where to work, and where to live had been made in relative ease compared with the degree of suffocating doubt he’s been crippled by lately. He’s sure he had once been a functional adult. What had happened to that Oliver? When is that guy going to swoop in and return the scattered fragments of his psyche to their rightful places?

But as Oliver stares down at the thin plastic case, he realizes that the doubt is only on the fringes; below the surface, that’s not how he’s feeling at all. His chest is solid in the certainty that had been with him since waking. It is that which has spurred him on, the absence of confusion, making him pursue with vigor that which he needs to have, that other part of himself that he’d only just come to know, a reality that he could not avoid for even a moment longer.

He slips the disk into his bag and straightens his spine. Into battle. But by the time he crosses the intersection, he’s brought up short by the door of Insomniac momentarily disappearing to be replaced by a slender figure emerging onto the street.

“Elio?”

He freezes in the process of zipping up a black leather jacket. “Hi, Oliver.” His face slides into a warm smile, and he walks a few more steps over to where Oliver has stopped, hands resting in his pockets.

“Are you leaving for the night?”

“Yeah, I worked an earlier shift today. For Marzia. She had an appointment or something and needed to swap.” A shrug.

“Oh.” Oliver can hear the dripping disappointment in his own voice. He sounds like he is seven years old again and finding out the hard way that the Tooth Fairy won’t leave money tucked under your pillow if your tooth had been knocked out in a fight with Brian Cruikshank in the school cafeteria.

Elio glances around them and chuckles. “You know, it’s weird. I’m not used to being out here when the sun sets. All I ever get is afternoon glare and dark of night. This is…”

“The best time of day, as far as I can see,” Oliver supplies quietly, savoring how Elio’s skin shines golden and perfect in the slanting light, memorizing the amber flecks that shift forward in his irises when he tilts his face skyward.

Elio hums and looks at him carefully for a moment. Then, his mouth shifts to the side and hijacks the smile that has started to bloom. “Yes. Yes, it seems to be.”

You’re beautiful. It’s right there, almost out of his mouth, before Oliver throws his head down at his
shoes. “Well, I…I don’t want to keep you if you’ve finally got a free night.”

“You’re not,” is the quick reply.

It draws Oliver closer. He inches a few steps forward, close enough to murmur his words, to keep them in their private bubble, apart from the drone of the city around them. “I just wanted to…well, to thank you for…that music was…truly amazing. Phenomenal.”

Elio leans his head away a bit, shrinking as if bracing for a blow. “You…did you really listen to it?”

“Yes! Of course I did! Well, really it was a couple of times…Lots of times, actually. It was lots of times, yeah. Almost all night.” Elio’s face officially turns from pink to red then, and he bites into his lush bottom lip. “Were those…they are your songs, right?”

“Yes.” It’s a sigh, as if he’s apologizing.

“I knew it.”

Elio grimaces.

“Because they are so…eloquent. Soulful.” Oliver can feel his cheeks heat, but he ignores it. He keeps his face open so Elio will have no doubt about how much he means it.

Elio must see it because his cinched muscles relax a bit. “Thank you.”

“And it absolutely delivered as promised.”

Elio’s eyebrows merge. “How’s that?”

“With sweet dreams.” Oliver takes a deep breath. “I think I woke up a new man.”

“Really? I hope not.”

“You’d rather I didn’t dream?” A quirk of an eyebrow.

“No, I’d rather you didn’t change.”

“Well, I don’t mind being flexible.”

“Can’t say that’s a bad thing. It’s pretty useful to be able to bend. In many directions.” The flicker of a smile.

“Could get me out of a tight spot.”

“Or into one.” Elio’s eyes glint in the orange light.

Oliver realizes all at once that he is looking down into Elio’s face, so somehow he has closed the gap between them and invaded the other man’s personal space without even being aware that he’d moved. He can feel the puff of Elio’s breath hit his chin, smell the rustic aroma of roasted coffee beans and a hint of a softer scent that must be Elio himself, and he inhales deeply to keep that locked in his memory to call up later when he is alone in the dark and needs to remember that he’d come this close to the sun.

Oliver shifts backward abruptly and looks away, scuffs a foot against the uneven pavement, makes a production of transferring his bag to the opposite shoulder. Is this too much? Is he pushing too hard? Yes. Maybe. Well, probably. He wipes at his nose and clears his throat. “I, um, I’ll miss
you tonight…no, I—I mean, your coffee. I’ll miss it. If you’re not here. Or there, I guess. You’re—it—it’s good…so…well, good.”  
*God, will you just shut up?*

Elio’s hidden fists pull his coat tighter around his frame while his eyes assess, raking over Oliver’s body from top to bottom. Suddenly he turns and heads down the sidewalk. He takes several steps before throwing over his shoulder a quiet, “Follow me.”

For about three seconds, Oliver cannot move a muscle, save the ones which slacken in his face to allow his jaw to hang loose like a dog’s. Then, he lurches forward, trailing behind Elio’s long strides. They go around the corner and down a couple of side streets to a red door next to a music store. Elio flings the door open and holds it for Oliver. They tramp up a steep flight of stairs to another door, and Elio fishes out a jangling key.

“Is this where you live?”

Elio nods. “The owner of the store gives me a big discount in exchange for tuning his pianos.”

“Don’t tell me you have perfect pitch.”

“Ok, I won’t tell you.” Elio flashes a grin before pushing the door open and flicking on a light.

Oliver had expected something sleek and trendy, given Elio’s stylish appearance, but when he enters the flat, what he finds is more Old World charm than New York modern. A cracked leather sofa, a threadbare armchair, and a quilted ottoman were surrounded by several bookshelves that were stuffed full. More titles were stacked up on the floor next to the sofa and on the expanse of the large wooden desk in front of the single window. It was as if the entire place had been transported directly from a Tuscan estate. The only thing in the entire room that screamed modern is the sleek cappuccino machine on the counter in the small galley kitchen on one end of the large room. Interesting. It’s not just a job, then; it’s a passion. Or maybe it just reminds him of home.

Elio takes off his coat and drapes it across one arm of the sofa. “Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll make you my favorite.” He heads toward the kitchen and starts opening cupboards.

Oliver slips out of his coat and lays it next to Elio’s, then wanders over to scan through the contents of the bookshelves. There can be no better way to get to understand someone than to size up his choice of reading material. Oliver pours over some of the titles—lots of novels, classics in various languages, as well as some textbooks on musical theory and analytical technique, including one on textual analysis of 20th-century films.

“So how many languages do you speak?”

Elio sifts some beans into the machine. “Only three.”

Oliver chuckles, “‘*Only* three’? Hell, I’m still trying to learn English.”

“My mother’s tried to teach me German, but I’m not very good.”

The desktop had several composition books and airmail envelopes stamped Milan. Tucked in the corner was a small framed photograph of a middle-aged man and woman; they were facing each other, holding one another around the waist, wearing beaming smiles. “Are these your parents?”
Elio’s head swivels around. “Yeah. That was taken at our villa in northern Italy.”

“They look very happy.”

“Yes, they are sickeningly in love.” Despite his derisive tone, Elio’s face is fond.

Oliver looks closer at the picture. They really are—it shines through the lens, and Oliver cannot help but be charmed by it. They look kind, happy. Content. That is not an expression he is used to seeing. It stabs him then that has no family photos, and he would be quick to say that it is because he chose not to keep any of them, but really, he cannot remember anyone ever taking any. They never had the traditional family holidays where Grandma insisted everyone group up while she snapped dozens of images and made everyone blind from the flash. Oliver never hovered over the candles of a birthday cake with an expectant grin so that someone could capture the moment. The happy occasions were far too ephemeral to be captured on film.

Oliver shakes himself free of the cobwebs of the past in which he refuses to get mired. He moves to the CD collection on the other side of the desk, next to giant Denon stereo and speakers. Everything from recordings of the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra under George Szell to the Beastie Boys and The Police. Elio’s musical tastes run as wide a gamut as his literary ones. Oliver smiles to himself. Apparently, flexibility really is a trait he appreciates.

He hears a churning as the coffee machine works over the beans and a metallic whirring as it steams the liquids. Elio adds a couple of ingredients and turns to hold up the small cup for Oliver, offering him the handle to grasp.

Oliver takes a whiff. “Mmmm…what’s this one?”

“Caffè anisette. It’s infused with an anise-flavored liqueur.” Elio watches his face as he takes a sip. “Do you like it?”

“No.” Oliver angles over the top of the cup. “I fucking love it!”

Elio laughs and takes a sip of his own. “It’s Mafalda’s recipe.”

“Who’s that?”

“My parents’ housekeeper back in Italy. She’s the best cook in the world, and kind of an annoying second mother.”

“So are you saying it takes back-up to keep you in line?” Oliver clucks his tongue. “I’m shocked.”

A single eyebrow climbs. “No, you’re not.”

Oliver tries to hide his smile by taking another sip. “So you really meant it.”

“What’s that?”

“You really are Italian—as in, you actually live there, it’s not just your heritage.”

“Well, I have dual citizenship. My father’s American. He grew up here and met my mother when he went to study abroad. He’s been there ever since.”

“That sounds like a fairy tale.”

Elio shrugs. “I suppose.” He sits on the edge of the desk. “But just because it had a happy ending, it doesn’t make the story less real.”
“Isn’t there a saying that happy endings are for stories that aren’t finished yet?”

Elio pushes off the desk and crosses over to stand directly in front of Oliver, eyes alight, locked on Oliver’s. He has to fight not to shrink back, leave a safe distance between them. “That’s not a saying; that’s a death sentence,” he murmurs. “If the happiness is there, why not savor it?” He clinks his mug with Oliver’s like he’s adding an exclamation point and finally breaks their gaze, moving around him to place the cup on the kitchen counter.

Oliver’s heart is racing. The hand that lifts his cup tremors slightly. He stares dumbly at the bottom of the drained cup. “Are those coffee beans?”

“Espresso beans. They’re supposed to symbolize health, happiness, and prosperity. You can chew them to complement the anise flavor of the liqueur.”

Oliver obliges, letting the sharp flavor of the beans tame the anise. “Oh!” he breathes. “That’s amazing!”

Elio smirks. “Some people call this drink fire and ice. It’s a balance of opposites.”

Oliver steps around to the kitchen and stops in front of Elio, trapping him between the cupboards and Oliver’s body. He leans forward, reaching an arm around the slender waist to place his cup down next to Elio’s. “So they’re perfect for one another?”

“I guess you can say that.”

Oliver crosses his arms. “Sounds like a happy ending.”

Elio nods slowly, green eyes intent on Oliver’s. “Yep. They’re everywhere.”

“Thank God.” It comes out as a whisper that drops his gaze so that it is recklessly aimed directly at Elio’s mouth. He feels it so strongly then, the acute need to ease forward just a few more inches, enough for his lips to press against Elio’s. He wants so badly to lean into him and insinuate himself between those perfect pink lips, to fall into the cavern of his mouth and probe every corner until its dimensions are mapped forever on Oliver’s tongue. The desire is so strong it makes him lightheaded.

Elio waits, supported by the countertop, breathing in shallow puffs through his nose. Oliver can see his heartbeat through the delicate skin on his neck.

Finally, Oliver steps back. “I guess I should go. Not take up all of your night off. You probably have…you know, plans…or, um, things to do.” He stumbles slightly as heads toward the door and takes up his coat.

When he turns back, he realizes Elio has followed him, expression suddenly blank, eyes blinking away an emotion that Oliver can’t quite discern. Oliver smiles at him. “Thank you so much for the coffee. It was perfect.”

“My pleasure.” His luscious pout flicks up at the corners.

Oliver grips the door frame with white knuckles to keep from reaching out for him. He clears his throat. “Tomorrow,” he croaks.

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s Saturday. You—do you work then?”
Elio shakes his head.

“Um, I was going to...well, there’s a theatre production that I was going to see. *Sunday in the Park With George*—do you know it? Well, anyways, I didn’t know if... well, if you might want to...”

Elio just stares at him.

Oliver’s face flames. He feels like a prize moron. “Right. Sorry, I just...I’ll be going now.”

Elio surges forward. “I’d love to.”

“How?”

“I’d love to go. With you.”

“Yeah?”

He nods, lips compressed, mouth twisted up at the side.

Oliver is flooded with relief. “Great, that’s...I...well, I could, you know, I could pick you up here, or...we could meet there, if you’d rather.”

Elio shakes his head. “Here is fine.”

“Seven o’clock?”

He nods. “Sure.”

“Excellent. See you then.” Oliver’s smiles so wide his upper lip feels stuck to his teeth. “Good night, Elio.”

“Good night, Oliver.”
When Words Fail

Chapter Summary

The boys see a play and manage to cross a bridge at the same time.

Chapter Notes

I can say with complete honesty that I wait to unwrap your comments with more breathless excitement than I approach presents at Christmastime. Your thoughts are the greatest gifts I could ever receive!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Five.

That’s how many different clothing choices Oliver has gone through before he scowls at his reflection and points a finger in his own face to remind himself that he is not, in fact, a sixteen-year-old girl going to a Homecoming dance. What is the matter with you? Suddenly he has determined that every stitch of clothing he owns is either too scruffy, too formal, or too ridiculous for him to be seen wearing it in public. He settles on a light blue shirt, which truthfully tends to get a bit puffy when he wears it loose, so he tames it with a navy jacket and slacks, and as he runs his fingers through to untangle his wet hair, he swears in no uncertain terms that his choice has nothing to do with a blue coffee mug nor the color of his eyes.

It is twenty minutes to seven when he finds himself staring blankly into the front window of the music store, which blessedly had closed already, or the management would probably have phoned the police about the twitchy man stalking their storefront. That would definitively provide Elio the last clue he’d need that he should run as far away from Oliver as he can get and never look back—the image Oliver conjures then of himself, squawking like a loon that he wasn’t plotting a heist, that he really was here to take that perfect creature upstairs out on a date, and pleading frantically that it was absolutely true that a man so gorgeous he could make angels weep had agreed to go somewhere with the manic, disheveled disaster being shoved into the back of a police cruiser.

Is this a date? Is that what Elio would call it? Maybe he shouldn’t think like that. Maybe Elio’s just a theatre buff and he’d have said yes if Mussolini had offered. Or that little French girl he works with—they probably do this kind of thing all the time.

He spends the next ten minutes pacing the street before summoning the courage to pry open the red door and go up. The scrape of his shoes echoes hollowly in the tight space, and by the time Oliver reaches the upper landing, he has not shaken the desperate impulse to flee before he can ruin this, before he can open his mouth and say something stupid and watch Elio turn away from him in contempt, distaste souring the smooth contours of his face. Nevertheless, the knuckles which rap on the door sound convincingly solid.

Oliver knocks twice before the door is ripped open so quickly he nearly hits Elio in the face with the third. “Oliver, you’re here!” he says breathlessly, still pulling on his jacket with one arm.
“Yes! Hi, Elio. Am I too…?”

He trails off. *Oh, dear God.*

Elio’s face is flushed like he’s been running, an infectious grin beaming beneath the casually perfect twist of his dark hair that dips low over his right eye. He’s dressed in a camel tweed blazer over a soft pattern shirt and a forest green undershirt. The combination is casual, understated even, but it complements his features to a startling degree. His mouth has become a deeper raspberry bow, his eyes now pixelated jewels of green and hazel and amber, the strands of hair that catch the most sun framing his face in knots of spun gold.

Oliver’s lips feel numb. He stares helplessly, praying that drool is not collecting in the corners of his useless mouth.

Elio disappears for a few moments behind the open door to slide on his shoes. His khakis sag slightly on his narrow hips so that the cuff of them scrapes the floor. Luckily, he fills in the gap left by Oliver’s shorted brain. “No, no, it’s fine. I’m all set.” He grabs his keys and dumps them into the jacket’s pocket, pulling the door shut behind him. “I don’t think it’s supposed to rain tonight. How’s the traffic?” He trots down the stairs, thankfully not waiting for a reply.

Oliver follows slowly, gripping the handrail to keep from tumbling after him like a wordless bowling ball. On the street, he busies himself trying to flag a taxi. It’s not terribly far to the theatre, but he doesn’t want them to have to rush, and in his current state of distraction, he is not confident he could successfully navigate there on his own. Wouldn’t that be just his luck to screw up the night of a lifetime by leading Elio in hapless circles around the city? In his mind, he could see himself leaning against a lamp post, face smudged with grime and clothing in tatters because they have missed the play, gotten mugged, fallen through a sewer grate, and been knocked down in an intersection by a rogue group of tourists from Iowa. By then, they’d be so debased and exhausted, all Elio would have the strength to do is to flip him off with both hands before disappearing into the cold mist of the night.

Mercifully, he nabs a cab at the corner. He holds the door open for Elio and follows him inside, reversing the process nearly twenty-five minutes later a block from The Booth when the blanket of traffic that had kept them to a crawl finally stops them dead. They follow the slow stream of people into the theatre, and Oliver leads the way to their seats in the front row of the mezzanine.

Elio sinks into his seat, head on a swivel, taking in the details. “Do you do this often?”

Oliver freezes halfway into his chair. “Do what?” *Date? Sweat? Watch the way your hips move as you walk?*

“Come to plays.”

“Oh! No. Hardly ever.” He raises an eyebrow. “You?”

Elio scoots forward in his seat to peer into the orchestra pit. “Not as much as I’d like.” He squints. “I think I know a couple of the brass players,” he says absently. “Wait, is that Larry on piano?” He nods approvingly. “Yeah, he’s really good.” The grin returns as he settles back and looks over at Oliver. “This is going be good.”

In truth, Oliver usually despises musicals. It irks him to constantly have the storyline interrupted for some ridiculous song that only marginally relates to the conflict and is invariably overblown and silly. But when he’d read the premise for this particular production in the newspaper one Sunday morning, he’d been intrigued enough to order tickets. He’s had them for months, and he never really
understood why on a whim he’d bought two when there was no one he’d even remotely thought he’d want to bring along and be forced to sit next to in the dark, someone who would no doubt be tiresome and invade his thoughts and distract him from his private dissection of the work as it unfolds before him. In an eerie tickling down his spine, it suddenly occurs to him that perhaps he’d known all along, that somewhere in the neglected layers of his subconscious, somehow he must have known that an Elio was out there, like the ghostly sensation of a phantom limb he’d always needed, and that one person would fit perfectly into the space beside him like he was always meant to be there.

All he needed to do was to keep a place open.

And now, here he is.

As the house lights dim, Oliver murmurs, “It’s already been that.”

The opener is simple, but it claws at Oliver. It offers a blank canvas and the artist’s mantra, his process in the endless struggle to bring order to the whole using principles upon which he has come to rely, like design, tension, and balance. But there’s something about that white space as he stares at it, the emptiness of it, engulfing the length of the stage. Oliver’s been there himself so many times, the intimidation of that starting point, a blank page, the space waiting for something to fill it, the seeing of the whole without feeling capable of marshaling the tools necessary to craft the parts. For some reason, in this moment, it’s more than just an intellectual dilemma. It feels like scar tissue, the throbbing of old wounds, those that fester and mar his whole life, blank and empty and waiting.

As the first act unfolds, Seurat’s devotion to his art, at the surrender of all else, mocks Oliver. The painter finishes that bloody hat, and he is able to break through to something new; the vision is realized. But that’s all he gets because genius consumes. It is revered in retrospect, but rarely in real time, and it devours the painter’s life like a cancer.

Is it really possible, then? Is it really possible to have both, the art and the life? Or could it be enough just to live through the work? After all, the pure pursuit of ideas and forms can outlive the mind that furthers them—Georges Seurat is proof of that; his influence changed forever what would come after him, and humanity is the better for it.

Is that the more advantageous route?

Does that mean the space next to Oliver has really been empty because if it hadn’t, he’d be back in Akron working at a video store with barely a high school diploma hanging on his wall, picking up his dad from yet another bar fight on South Arlington before the cops could pinch him again?

And for any version of Oliver’s life, if given the choice between staying with him and leaving for something—anything—new, who in their right mind would choose to remain with him? Who would choose the man who could never find the right words, not the ones that everyone seems to need? It is obvious to Oliver from the first scene that Dot would end up leaving George, that immortalizing her in a work of art could not take the place of the daily comforts that she could see and feel and hear. But if he had changed for her, if he had shrunken the canvas and made room for her in his studio, if he had carved out and discarded big chunks of himself to let her into every part, what’s to say she wouldn’t have left anyway? Then, he would be more empty, more alone, than he had been before she’d come into his life.

All of this hits Oliver like a punch to the gut he hadn’t seen coming, as if he has leapt into the air off of a diving board before realizing that the pool below held no water. His limbs go rigid, and he sucks in a breath, gripping the armrests like iron. His mouth forms a tight line to force down the tears that threatened to swell in his eyes.
Abruptly, he feels a soothing warmth, and he looks down to see Elio’s hand draped across his own, long thumb stroking soft circles around Oliver’s wrist. His eyes flash up to Elio’s face, ivory skin glowing in the ambient light, expression calm and attentive to the action on the stage. He doesn’t ogle and strip Oliver’s naked with a prying stare, doesn’t crowd in and pepper him with questions; he merely squeezes his hand gently, like he understands, like he just gets it, then continues the easy strokes with his thumb when Oliver’s tension visibly bleeds away and he relaxes back in his chair.

Elio’s hand remains there, giving another small squeeze before receding as the lights come up at intermission.

They go down to the lobby to stretch their legs and get a glass of wine, both standing to one side to casually survey the room while they drink. It’s really too boisterous for conversation, so Oliver is able to float, contenting himself with watching Elio watch others, taking advantage of the packed room to stand closer to him, to stare down at the soft point of hair at the nape of his neck and wonder how it would feel against his nose, how warm the flesh is there compared to the temperature of his own lips. And whenever he feels the green eyes turn his way, he’s far too dazed to do more than exchange a smile and look away, feigning a nonchalant air that his thudding heart is quick to contradict when he leans forward just a bit and his chest presses against Elio’s arm.

When they return to their seats, neither speaks. They settle in, and Elio skims through the Playbill while Oliver admires some of the architecture of the room. But as soon as the lights go down, their hands immediately find each other and lay tightly intertwined on Elio’s knee until they stand to applaud at the end of the show.

As they wait to wade out into the lines of departing people, Elio twists around and gazes at Oliver steadily. “I’ve never experienced anything like this.”

The entire production was phenomenal. He isn’t talking about the play.

Oliver leans down to the shell of Elio’s ear and whispers, “Sometimes, there really are no words.”

Chapter End Notes

“Sunday in the Park with George” is a great show, and for someone like Oliver who has a need to question everything about his choices, it really would shake him to his core. If you’ve not seen it, it is definitely worth it!

The date is not over! In the next chapter, the boys will continue to grow closer...much closer...
When they reach the sidewalk in front of the theatre, most everyone has gone. Oliver slides his hands into his pockets and looks down the street, watching the waves of people scatter in different directions, the blinking of headlights from traffic cranking unsteadily in both directions. He doesn’t know what to do. Several taxis swish past, and he supposes that he should grab one and take Elio home, release him from the evening without the obligation of having to tend to Oliver and his mortifying existential crises any longer. He’s probably exhausted. He’s probably bored. He’s probably itching to meet up with some friends and actually enjoy himself, cut loose and do things like dance on tables and slurp shots from the bellybutton of a Brazilian swimsuit model who magically loses the top to her bikini as soon as Elio steps up to the bar.

But he can’t bring himself to lift his arm.

He keeps feeling the tingle on his wrist from the motion of Elio’s thumb. He keeps seeing the white tips of Elio’s fingers atop his knuckles as he clutches that soft, strong hand like a lifeline.

Oliver turns to look at Elio. “Hungry?”

Elio tries to compress his grin, and it twists adorably up one side of his face. “Starved.” He hesitates, then gestures the other way with his head. “And I know the perfect place, too, if…” His body follows the motion of his head, twisting back and forth almost bashfully, to finish asking the question.

Oliver feels caught in the gravity. He sways closer with narrowed eyes. “You’re not vegan, are you?”

Elio smirks. “One way to find out.”

Oliver falls into step next to him. The night is warm for this time of year. A thick blanket of clouds reflects the glow of city lights, making the whole avenue shine golden. He takes surreptitious glances at Elio’s elegant profile. It’s a face that belongs in rarified surroundings. Oliver imagines him at some estate in Italy, laying back in a chaise, bare-chested and sun-kissed, sleeping behind dark glasses. He imagines him in a drawing room hunched over the keys of his piano, fingers moving fluidly while the room adores him, the private concerts that he graces upon his friends and family.
He imagines him climbing ruins in the morning and bursting to the surface of the green waters of a river in the afternoon. He imagines him tucked away in a private pool, reading a stack of novels and chewing on an end of sprouted grass, with only the rustle of leaves to disturb him.

When they stop at a crosswalk to wait for the light, Elio looks over, and Oliver doesn’t even try to avert his eyes, to play it off as an amusing coincidence. Elio’s eyebrows flick together. “What?”

Oliver scrambles for a proper response. He thinks perhaps something mysterious, just a shrug and an enigmatic smile? Or he could ask some kind of probing culinary question, show off some refined tastes that might coincide with their destination? No, wait—he’ll parry with some kind of a sizzling one-liner that will make Elio sparkle with laughter and roundly admire his wit. Maybe brush the end of his nose with his thumb and throw in an up-nod? There we go—smooth, manly. Perfect.

“I’m glad you came.”

The simple honesty spills out, and Elio’s face goes slack with something soft, something that could be nerves, but comes very close to awe. For a moment, Oliver feels like they are alone on a balcony at midnight, a secret rendezvous at the edge of a precipice. Before either can say more, the red changes to green and the tide of pedestrians pushes them forward.

Eventually they come to a small ristorante tucked into a side street, no doubt the kind of jewel that this city keeps hidden from the dulled vision of the average eater, one of those places that conceals its brilliance beneath the veil an unassuming exterior. Elio leads the way inside the dimly lit interior, and when a man in a light grey suit sees him, he smiles broadly. “Ah, Elio! Come stai? Vieni qui, vieni qui!” and waves them to a table in the corner.

The two exchange pleasantries in Italian before Elio gestures toward him. “Questo è Ulliva.” As the manager turns toward Oliver, Elio clarifies, “This is Lorenzo. He owns this place.”

Lorenzo examines Oliver with obvious curiosity, looking him over silently as if he were a museum piece. Oliver hopes he’s not done something bizarre or offensive; he gives the man an uncertain smile and offers his hand. “Hello, pleasure to meet you.”

Lorenzo is at least a foot shorter than Oliver, and his bald scalp glistens. He takes his hand and shakes it slowly, saying almost to himself, “Un ospite, Elio?” He sees Elio’s ears pinken before Lorenzo bustles them into their seats and places menus in front of them, disappearing into the kitchen.

Oliver watches him go, then leans forward. “Do I have a bird on my head or something?”

Elio chuckles. “Just ignore him. He’s not used to—well, I usually come alone.”

“Usually?”

Elio sighs, keeping his eyes glued to his menu. “You’re the first.”

“Oh.” Oliver sits back and tries to read the appetizers, willing away the jolt of satisfaction. Don’t get ahead of yourself. That’s the moment that Lorenzo reappears with a bottle of cabernet and a lit candle. He positions the candle with care, directly in the center of the table, and pours out their glasses. Oliver’s not sure if he wants to hide under the table or stand on it and cheer.

Elio looks over the top of his menu. “Do you trust me?”

The answer is automatic. “Yes.”
He hands their menus to Lorenzo and orders for them in Italian, and when they’re alone again, he says, “Lorenzo’s gnocchi is a thing of beauty. You won’t be disappointed.”

*Disappointed?* Oliver gazes at Elio’s face, made even more statuesque by the flame’s glow. *Lorenzo could put his shoe on a plate, and I wouldn’t even come close to that.* “Do you miss Italy?”

Elio’s lips compress. “Sometimes, sure. My parents, mostly. I mean, I love it here, but…”

“That’s home.”

He nods and takes a sip of his wine. “How about you? Are you from New York?”

Oliver’s eyes widen, and he inhales sharply. “Ah, no, I’m—I—I grew up in the Midwest…in Ohio.” His voice drops, like he’s apologizing, like he’s just revealed a shameful secret, the unnecessary confirmation that he is, in fact, an uncultured hick who’s been feigning his limited refinement and is grossly out of his league in this town and with this company.

To his shock, Elio’s face brightens. “Oh, yeah? I considered the Cleveland Institute of Music when I was deciding on graduate schools. The orchestra there is one of my favorites.” He studies Oliver for a moment. “Something tells me you don’t miss it.”

“No.” He turns his glass in his fingertips, watching the burgundy liquid swirl. “I grew up there. I can’t say that I think of it as home.”

“Any family?” Elio’s voice is gentle.

Oliver barks a laugh. “More like *relatives.* My parents divorced when I was a kid, apparently so they could more actively pursue their own vices, which typically revolved around whiskey and pills. I haven’t spoken to either of them in years.” Oliver cannot tamp down the wave of bitterness. “I guess I should thank them at some point for teaching me to rely on myself. Not like I had a choice.”

Elio’s eyes glisten. “Sure you did. You could have become them, but instead, you chose to succeed.”

Oliver swallows thickly. “All I’ve ever had is my work.” He’s always known it was true, but saying out loud right now, to Elio, makes him feel small and alone.

A circuit closes in Elio’s head. “Like Seurat.”

“And look how well *that* turned out,” he returns drily.

“I don’t think you’re like him at all.”

He blinks. “Why not?”

“His art is great, but it destroyed him. Yours *uplifts* you. He turned people off, but you draw everyone in.” Oliver stares at him in wonderment. “He ignored the people who wanted to be with him, and you?” A smile ripples across Elio’s face as Lorenzo places two steaming plates before them. “You’re here.”

The gnocchi smells divine, and they prove to be little fluffs of heaven, causing Oliver to make a nearly pornographic noise when he samples one. Elio laughs, his eyes crinkling. “See what I mean!” They eat in a companionable silence, and the empty bottle of wine is replaced with a fresh one without a word.
By the time Oliver sits back from his plate, he is feeling warm and loose, both of them wrapped up in relaxed smiles and bubbles of laughter. Elio tells him about falling off the bench during his first piano recital, and Oliver confesses to peeing in the trashcan when his first-grade teacher wouldn’t give him a pass to go to the bathroom. They talk about Montag and Beatty and the cyclical nature of human evolution, and they settle on *Moonraker* as the worst Bond film of all time.

After a bit, they come back to George. Oliver sighs, “Really, I think I empathize most with his descendant, the present-day George, and that feeling that his talent has staled.” He takes another drink.

“How would you say that?”

“Let’s just say I think I’ve seen the moment of my greatness flicker.”

Elio cocks his head and squints. “Ummm…Eliot?”

Oliver winks, then fiddles with his napkin, folding it into smaller and smaller triangles as he talks. “It’s my book. It is…not working out as I’d planned. I just can’t seem to get the flow I was hoping for, and the publisher is getting fed up.”

“I understand. Too well.” Elio inches forward. “You know those songs I gave you, the ones on the disk?”

“Oh course! They were superb!”

Elio winces. “No. No, they were…kind of average. I mean, I can’t help thinking that…that they’re just missing something, something I cannot seem to get.” His fingers fold into a fist. “It’s so frustrating. I worked on them all last term, and they’re not any better.”

Oliver suddenly realizes that his fingers are brushing the edge of Elio’s sleeve. Elio has lapsed into silence, watching the motion of Oliver’s hand. When he raises his eyes to Oliver’s, they are dark and enchanting, circling his face with an unreadable expression. Oliver eases his hand back and raises an eyebrow. “Should we get out of here?”

Elio’s answer is more of a breath. “Yeah.”

They decide to walk the rest of the way back to Elio’s apartment and revive in the night air. The traffic has thinned, and the unseasonable weather has muted the streets in a dense blanket of fog. It makes the whole journey more private, more intimate. Oliver feels vaguely like he’s walking on a cloud, rather than in one, so he takes advantage of the situation to blither on about how the horror genre ultimately hinges on a basic fear of the unknown to distract himself from the way Elio’s curls thicken and sag in the humidity and the tantalizing patterns his hands create in the air while he bubbles about how a composer could destroy a good horror movie simply by changing the theme music from a minor to a major key.

Oliver clears his throat and adopts his best professional brio. “So let me get this straight, Mr.Perlman.”
“Yes, Professor?”

“Mr. Perlman, are you suggesting that one simply has to trade out a few notes, and Jaws—the terror of the sea—would cease to be an untenable, unstoppable predator and become, what, a domesticated dog?”

“No, not at all, sir.” Elio shakes his head soberly like a dutiful student.

“Then, please explain to the class just what heresy it is that you are positing.”

“It is my contention, Professor, that Jaws would not be a dog; he would, in fact, be a fluffy, puffy, face-licking Bichon Frise puppy with a pink belly and a wet nose and little floppy ears.”

Oliver laughs hard, falling against Elio’s shoulder. “That’s—no way!”

“It’s true! I’m totally serious!”

“How can that be?”

“Give me a keyboard, and I’ll prove it to you.”

Oliver pats his pockets. “Dang it, and I left my piano in my other coat.”

“That’ll teach you.” Elio slows to a stop and shakes his head ruefully. “Too bad. Now you’ll just have to take my word for it.” Elio scrunches his face. “But I guess I could offer you a consolation prize.”

Oliver smirks. “Oh, yeah? And what would that be?”

“A cup of coffee, perhaps?”

They’re standing in front of the red door. Oliver’s face flushes. He hadn’t even realized where they were. How did we get here so fast? He clears his throat. “Caffè anisette?”

“Whatsoever you want,” Elio says softly and pulls the door open wide.

Oliver sinks into the end of the leather couch, and it envelops him like a worn baseball glove. He struggles out of his jacket and tugs on his shirtfront a couple of times. Is it always this hot in here? With fumbling fingers, he undoes his cuffs and rolls the sleeves a few inches, then wipes his forehead with his exposed forearm.

There. Much better.

He glances over as Elio lets his coffee machine work and takes a moment to wriggle out of his patterned shirt like a contortionist, leaving only the form-fitting dark green t-shirt.

So much for that. Oliver fluffs his shirt furiously. He hops up and randomly grabs a book off of the shelf and tries to lean casually against the desk, but he knows he’s not really pulling it off given that it is really holding him up.
A few minutes later, Elio tiptoes over with a brimming cup in each hand, putting both gingerly on the desktop. “Want to practice some anal technique?”

Oliver chokes on his own saliva and bobbles the book in his grip. “What?” He slams the book shut and holds it against his chest. “Wh-whaaat did you say?”

Elio points, face blank. “That textbook. *Analytical Technique.* The class is a pain in the ass, so that’s its unfortunate nickname.”

Oliver nearly sags to the floor. “Oh. Okay.” He shoves the book back on the shelf and takes a deep breath.

Elio slides one cup over toward him with a wiggle of his eyebrows. “La tua pozione, signore.”

“Grazie.”

It’s delectable, as always. Elio lifts his to his face a second time before he puts it back on the desk. Oliver looks around at the bookshelf again and takes another quick drink. He places his cup next to Elio’s. “Hey, on the top shelf, is that—“

“Why?”

A smile.

“What?”

“You…you’ve got—“

Elio looks down and slaps at his shirt. “Crap, did I spill it or something?”

“No. No, it’s…” Oliver moves closer and raises a tentative hand. “Let me just—“

His index finger wipes the foam from Elio’s bottom lip and dips into his mouth where Elio’s tongue laps it clean.

And clearly Oliver’s not thought this through because now that he’s started, he can’t stop touching him. His finger traces around the red circle of his mouth, followed by Elio’s tongue, which tries to pull the digit back inside. He circles again, one direction and another, passing the rest of his fingers against the underside of Elio’s chin, coaxing it up to him, being drawn down to it.

Oliver uses the last fragment of self-control he has to stop himself from moving another inch. He exhales hard, breathes deep, and waits for Elio to come the rest of the way, to move forward that last little bit. He can’t look. It’s too much. He squeezes his eyes shut and feels Elio’s knee graze his as it shifts. The outline of Elio’s nose brushes his cheek. Then, he feels the tip of Elio’s tongue split his face in two with a calculated strip of fire.

Oliver snaps.

His hands reach out and knit into Elio’s hair to grab around his skull and pull him forward. God but his lips feel softer against his own, all thick and soft and open. Oliver’s tongue curls around Elio’s, along the smooth line of his teeth, again and again. The roof of his mouth, the inside of his cheek. Oliver wants it all, wants to taste it and live in it and own it. He wants to devour the soft whines that slip from the back of Elio’s throat and the whispered gust through his nose when his jaw clicks wider to accept more of Oliver into it.
Oliver finally pulls back, just a little, soaking in every detail of Elio’s swollen lips and glassy eyes and flared nostrils, massaging slowly into the disheveled curls. *God help me!* He wants to throw him onto the sofa and cover his body with his own, to make him moan and shiver, to unwrap him like a sinuous present, strip by strip, and savor every delicious bit.

Instead, he bites his lip and steps back, running his hands down the column of Elio’s throat to his chest. Elio tries to follow, lips seeking his again, Oliver holds him back gently. “No, no, no,” he whispers. “Elio, I—please, I’ve got to stop.”

Elio’s hands fall to Oliver’s waist while his voice falls between them. “Why? Are you—was that not—not good, or—”

“Holy shit, Elio, no,” Oliver murmurs, nuzzling his neck, his ear. “You are—God, you’re perfect. You’re unbelievable.” A kiss to his cheek, his jaw, the corner of his mouth. “But I don’t want you to regret anything.”

The hands clench around Oliver’s torso. “I won’t! Oliver, I know what I’m doing!”

Oliver searches the green eyes, pleads with them. “Yeah, me, too. And I want you to be sure. You need to be sure. Because it would kill me if—I—I couldn’t—” His eyes slip closed for a moment, and he exhales a shuddering breath. “I’d never recover, Elio. You have to be sure.”

Elio’s shoulders sag. “Okay, okay. I get it.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes, really.” He takes a deliberate step back and smirks. “Finish your coffee.”

Oliver swallows down the remains and chews on the beans. Then he takes both of their cups over and puts them in the sink. “It is ridiculously late. I should let you get some rest.”

Elio nods and follows slowly as Oliver gathers his jacket and makes his way to the door. “So, is it too forward to ask if you’re busy tomorrow?”

Oliver raises an eyebrow. “Is that an offer?”

“Could be.”

He bends over the side table and scribbles out his phone number on the pad. “When you are up and about, call me.”

“All right.”

Oliver opens the door. He pauses at the threshold to thank Elio for going with him, for being amazing, for giving him the best night of his life by far. But before he can utter a word, a strong hand shoves him against the door jamb. Elio’s hips grind into him, hold him in place, while he gives his mouth a blistering kiss, one that ends with teeth marks in his lower lip and no air in his lungs. Then, Elio sighs, “Sweet dreams, Oliver,” and gives him a gentle shove, knocking him out onto the landing so the door can swish closed behind him with a soft click.

Chapter End Notes
The Eliot quote that Oliver uses is from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Oliver and J. Alfred need to talk, but at least Oliver KNOWS that he wants to eat a peach, right?? :-) 

If you've never heard them, go to YouTube and search horror movie themes from minor to major. It is HILARIOUS!

Believe it or not, Cleveland actually does have an excellent orchestra. Elio knows his stuff! [P.S. If you're from Ohio, please don't think I'm bagging on your home state--it's mine, too!]
Sunday, Part One

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio plan to share the day together. But will they make it to the end without derailing their own progress?

Chapter Notes

Oliver's look for today I am imagining as that picture of Armie Hammer for a Hollywood Reporter article in which he has on an ivory sweater and dark jeans (the one where he's standing by a stucco wall holding his jaw meditatively). If I had a clue how to do it, I would add the picture here, but here's a link: Sunday Oliver

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s just a purr, muffled by a downy fluff of kitten fur, curled against his chest.

Twitch.

Metal scraping, shaky keys poking at a car lock, skidding across the paint, over and over.

Flop to his stomach. Hide beneath the pillow.

The shriek, a shrill anomaly. Sirens, again?

Ring.

Phone.

Phone ringing.

A clumsy hand flops on the bedside table. “Mmmello?”

“Good morning.”

“Hmmm?” Oliver flops onto his back.

“I’m up and about.”

He rubs at his eyes to pry open lids thickened with sleep. “Elio?”

“Yep.” A rustling of fabric. “You said to call when I was up and about. I am.”

“What time is it?”

“10:00. Almost. Maybe a quarter to. Well, it’s…it’s 9:25.”

“Did you just get up?”
“Sort of.” Oliver practically can see the pale cheeks grow pink.

A low chuckle. “Why, Elio Perlman, are you a *morning* person?”


“Yeah, you did, but—"

“Shit, I’m sorry. I knew I should’ve waited. Go back to sleep. I—I’ll you call later.”

“No! Elio, it’s fine, really! Don’t hang up, please.”

“I’m sorry—"

“And you certainly shouldn’t apologize.”

“You—you said—"

“I know what I said, and I meant every word of it.”

A hesitation. “You’re not mad?”

“Mad? Are you kidding me?” The vestiges of sleepiness have lowered his usual inhibitions. He shifts his legs under the sheet. “I’d kiss you if I could.”

“Oh.” There’s static, a breath released. “That’s…that’s good.”

Oliver grins up at the ceiling. Something about the anonymity of the telephone makes all of this easier to say. “Good doesn’t begin to cover it.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll go with something in the ‘transcendent’ department.”

A huff of laughter.

“And any twenty-four hour period that has me kissing you good night and waking up to your voice is already one of the best days I could imagine.”

“You should know that…well, that I do a lot of imagining, too.” Elio’s voice is deeper, like he’s closer to the phone.

“I should know?”

“I *want* you to know.”

“You do?” Oliver slides his left foot up the inside of his leg and exhales slowly. His hand draws slow circles around his abdomen. “Dare I ask you to clarify that statement?”

Elio hums. “You think you could handle it?”

“Positive.” Oliver laughs unsteadily and bites into his bottom lip. “But I’m really trying not to.”

“And why is that?”

His voice is a rumble. “Because I’d much rather you did.”
"You—" He hears a thud and a distant, "Oh, shit," and prays to all that is holy that it is because Elio’s phone has fallen to the floor.

Oliver smirks and eases up onto an elbow. "But if that were the case, then I’d never get out of this bed, and I haven’t even had my coffee yet."

Elio coughs. "Oh, I, um—I haven’t either, and lucky for us, I think there’s a place nearby that can solve that problem."

"That is lucky, isn’t it?"

"Meet you there in an hour?"

"You’re on."

All the way to Insomniac, Oliver thinks of Arthur Dimmesdale. Leave it to Elio to give him a new understanding of a character he’d long ago written off as a coward, a worthless invertebrate. After many years of tucking himself away in his study and bowing down to his sorrows, Dimmesdale’s given a new view by a dark-haired beauty who offers him a chance at a life, a chance to save him from himself across the broad pathway of the sea. When the pastor relents, when he finally gives in and follows the passion instead of the pain, it takes little more than a kiss to have him virtually skipping back to town on ground he could barely navigate only hours before.

"Is this joy?" Oliver mutters aloud, looking up at the sharp blue sky. He shakes his head and chuckles. What kind of a stupid question is that, Arthur? This is the very definition of it. Were it not for the looming presence of the husband, perhaps he would have been able to figure out the answer to his question all on his own. Perhaps.

His steps slow when a thought passes through him like a dark shadow. What would he have done? How would Oliver have fared if he’d met Elio, after years of keeping himself safely on the fringes of humanity, and the Italian god already belonged to someone else? The mere idea burns his gullet with bile. Someone else saved by the warmth and protection of Elio’s hand? Someone else savoring the taste of espresso straight from the tip of his tongue? Someone else driven mad by the silken feel of his hair and the way he strokes his throat when he’s thinking?

A few weeks ago, Oliver had never heard of Elio Perlman. The sun managed to rise and set on its own, and the universe maintained its order. Oliver looks around him now. Nothing’s changed. The city is no different. The clouds move, the traffic comes and goes. The planet revolves as ever. But somehow Oliver cannot even imagine any of this continuing to exist if Elio were not a part of it. How had he suddenly managed to become essential to Oliver’s world? How is it that the idea of moving forward without him would send Oliver crashing into the leaves of the forest floor to marinate in his own despair, right alongside the miserable priest?

He rounds the next corner and sees Elio, the latter leaning against the building next to the door, hands in the pockets of his burgundy suede coat, plain white t-shirt lighting his face from beneath, aimlessly watching two pigeons peck and fight for half a bagel sitting on the curb.

*God, he looks good.*

Oliver marches up to him, trying not to let his hand shake. When he is close enough to be swept up
by his peripheral vision, Elio turns toward him and smiles broadly, removing his perfectly tousled hair from his eye with a flick of his head. Oliver waves and returns his smile. “Good morning—again,” he winks, feeling his face heat. Now that he is in front of Elio, subject to the keen gaze and expressive face, he finds that his earlier boldness has waned. Thus, the impulse to trap Elio against the prop of the bricks and kiss him breathless stays tucked down deep.

Elio’s own face flushes. “Hi, Oliver. You—God, you look good.”

He blinks, caught between flattery and disbelief. “Th-thanks.” He rubs a bit self-consciously across his jawline. “You don’t mind the scruff? Sometimes I just can’t bring myself to shave.”

Elio’s head bobbles. “Ah, no. I—not at all. No.”

Oliver moves in closer, relishing the way Elio’s head raises to look at him, elongating his throat and making his eyes sparkle in the sun. He smells of sandalwood and leather, and it is all Oliver can do not to lower his nose to the bend of Elio’s shoulder and fill his lungs until he swims in that aroma.

“You’re not married, are you?”

The bobbling stops. “Huh?”

“Never mind. Shall we?” Oliver holds open the cafe door for Elio.

Insomniac is fairly full for a Sunday morning, the pleasant weather apparently pulling people out of their niches to enjoy it while it lasts. Only a few tables are empty. Elio puts a gentle hand on his lower back. “You go ahead and have a seat. I’ll get our stuff for us. It’s busy enough in here.”

“Oh, sure.”

Oliver slides into a seat nearby as Elio ducks behind the counter to grab a couple of mugs. There is a tall girl at the cash register with a brunette bob and a heart-shaped face. She’s pretty, and she makes the most of it with a bubbly effervescence that motivates every one of her blatantly coquettish smiles, charming giggles, and swaying movements. Her voluptuous curves are barely contained by the tight pink sweater she wears atop bright yellow jeans that could very well have been painted on. When Elio passes her, she squeals and wraps her arms around his waist, whispering something in his ear. Oliver’s hands grip the edge of the table. He watches the girl plaster herself against Elio, balancing on her tiptoes to style his hair with her fingers while her mouth moves non-stop. At this point, the only clear thoughts Oliver’s mind can formulate are two very pertinent questions: Who is this girl, and what the fuck does she think she’s doing? With enormous effort, he swallows down the impulse to rush over, leap the counter, and pry the girl off. But what good would that do? It’s not like he could throw Elio over his shoulder and stalk out the front door.

Or could he?

No. That would be totally inappropriate, right?

Well, maybe totally is too strong of a—

Then, he sees Elio blush and duck his head to respond to the girl’s endless commentary, toothy grin lighting his face, Oliver’s stomach lurches and his limbs go numb. The two of them clearly share an easy closeness, their attentions to the other not seeming unusual or uncomfortable. Or unwelcome.

Oh, no.
Is she the real reason why they’re here? Elio wanted Oliver to see this. He wanted to stop in and see his girlfriend to draw his line in the sand about what (and whom) he really desires? Or is he just rubbing it in Oliver’s face, showing off this woman and her endless assortment of pastel charms, making it clear what he really finds appealing?

Oliver feels nauseated, dizzy, the fingers that raise to his face trembling as they smooth his eyebrows and rid them of their sheen of cold sweat. How could he not have seen this coming? He tugs at the ivory cables of his wool sweater, now itchy and claustrophobic.

It is then that the girl cranes her neck to look over at Oliver, biting her cheek, all giggly curiosity. Their eyes connect, and she claps her hand over her mouth and turns back to Elio, positively beaming and spluttering some nonsense with an emphatic grab of his upper arms, something which makes Elio shake his head firmly, jaw clenched.

Is she gloating? Does she want to come over and preen, but Elio took pity on him? How nice.

A few minutes later, Elio navigates out to their table with two mugs of coffee and a small plate of croissants balanced gingerly on top of them. “Sorry that took so long.” He busies himself moving the plate to the center and placing mugs on either side. “Bet you’re starving by now. I know I am.” He snatches one of the pastries and rips off a chunk, gnawing it to one side of his mouth so he can take a swallow of coffee.

Finally, he notices Oliver hasn’t moved. “You okay?” He looks around at the items on table. “Oh, wait, did you want a muffin or something? I think there are some blueberry over there.”

“Who is that?” Oliver’s voice sounds harsh, even to his own ears.

Elio twists to look behind him. “Who?” He turns back to Oliver, nose crinkled. “See someone you know?”

“That girl, your colleague.”

Around another huge bite of croissant, Elio says, “Oh, her? Her name’s Chiara. Just a friend.”

Oliver barks a laugh. “Friend?” He crosses his arms tightly across his chest. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Elio’s jaw slows. “What’s wrong?”

“You were practically wearing her as a coat, Elio. Is that how all of your friends greet you?”

He doesn’t answer, occupying himself with wetting his finger and picking up the flakes from the pastry that have fallen on the table.

“What did she want?”

His shoulder’s sag. He sits back in his chair and looks out the window, right leg jostling up and down under the table. “Nothing, really. It’s not important. Please, let’s just forget about it.”

Oliver can feel the discomfort ooze across the table, and it makes his heart race even more, the cold panic settling in his chest. “Is there something I should know?”

Elio covers his face, and Oliver wants to vomit. He braces himself for the inevitable. *Oops, I’m sorry, Oliver, did I not mention my hot girlfriend when I was kissing you last night? Or What, did you actually believe I would be interested in you? Hahahahahaha!* Why is he at all surprised? It had
been only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped, and this one managed to kick him in the
temple on the way down, at the exact moment when he was foolish enough to think it was safe to
look the other way.

Oliver shoves back in his chair. “Look, I think I should just—“

“She wants to meet you.” The words barely make it past the hand still shielding Elio’s eyes.

“What?”

“She wants me to introduce you two.” His hand drops and he gives Oliver a pained look that reeks
of defeat. “She begged me to.”

“I don’t understand.” He doesn’t. At all. What in the hell is he talking about?

Elio leans forward, his face pinched. “Oh, come on! Of course you do! She wants to meet you,
Oliver. She saw me come in with you, and she went nuts, asking me if you and I were dating, if you
were my boyfriend, going on and on about it. And I didn’t know what to say because I didn’t want
to make assumptions or make you uncomfortable, so I fudged, said you were just a friend and to let it
be, but she’s Chiara and she never lets anything be.” He’s talking so fast, it’s nearly a stream of
consciousness, and the more he says, the thinner his voice gets, the chords straining to keep out the
tears. “And when she got a good look at you, she really lost her shit and practically demanded I
bring her over here.”

Oliver’s forehead ripples. “Why? What does she want?”

“Yeah, right, like the guy who looks like he tripped and fell off of Mount Olympus doesn’t know
every girl wants to fuck him.” Elio flaps a dismissive hand.

Oliver can only blink owlishly, opening and closing his mouth like a hooked fish.

Elio goes very still. “Wait, you really don’t know, do you?” He rolls his eyes and huffs a laugh.
“Unbelievable.”

Oliver has no clue what to do now. He feels like a complete idiot, so he waits, playing with his
sweater sleeve and trying to piece together a proper response. Before now, he never would have
considered himself a jealous person; before now, he’d been immune to it, because before now, he’d
never had something of value to lose that was not within the chambers of his own mind. And it
seems that the closer he gets to Elio, the closer he gets to the edge of that cliff, the tighter he clings to
his only foothold on solid ground.

Without looking up, he husks, “I’m sorry, Elio. I hope—please understand that it is not you that I
doubt.” He clears his throat. “When I saw you together, I just thought—“

“I know what you thought.”

Oliver ticks his head up, and their eyes meet. The irony is not lost on either of them. As their gaze
lingers, the mood shifts, the crackle of a slow burn. A sly smile snakes from Elio’s mouth to his.

“What did you tell her?”

“If she came anywhere near you, I’d shave her head.”

“You really thought I’d blow you off for her?”
“I’ve known her for years, Oliver. I’ve yet to see a man say no to her.”

“It would be a learning experience for her, then. Maybe you should bring her over.”


“Oh, why not?”

“I’m not taking any chances.”

“Sure you are.” Oliver gives him a soft smile. “We both are.”

Elio bites his bottom lip. “Fair enough.”

They are quiet for a while, slurping and munching while the chatter of the room swirls around them. Bit by bit, the plate empties itself and the mugs refill.

Oliver relaxes against his chair back. “Just the girls, huh?” A slight frown.

“What?”

“According to you, just the girls want to fuck me?” A long sigh. “How disappointing.”

Elio’s tongue peeks through at the corner of his mouth. “So, you’re saying that you need all the boys to want that, too?” He tips back his chair to balance on two legs. “Isn’t that a tiny bit greedy?”

Oliver shakes his head slowly. “No no no, Mr. Perlman, not all.” He stares at Elio over the rim of his mug. “Just one.”

Chapter End Notes

Arthur Dimmesdale from Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" is probably my least favorite character in all of literature. Oliver is far kinder to the minister than I ever would be. If you've not read it, the references here are from the forest scene between Hester and Dimmesdale, followed by Dimmesdale's return to Boston once they've made their plan to escape to Europe via boat until Roger Chillingworth (Hester's husband) learns of it.

Part Two of their day should be coming soon!
Sunday, Part Two

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver grow closer as they enjoy their afternoon together.

Chapter Notes

To those of you who have been generous enough to leave your feedback, you are amazing, and I am forever in awe of your kindness!

They spend the afternoon wandering for miles, different paths in what Elio dubs “Sunday in the Park with Oliver.” In one venue, they stumble upon an impromptu Harlem Blues and Jazz performance. The group is sensational, and Oliver’s own enjoyment of their talents is enhanced ten-fold by witnessing the fluctuation of Elio’s body as he experiences it. He doesn’t just listen to the sounds; he lives it. His whole body becomes immersed, from feet which subtly slide and tap, knees and hips that ghost in dips and bends, fingers which flutter in anticipation of the melody, his own accompaniment formulated on a keyboard only Elio can see. Even the lines of his face morph back and forth between that of a serious professional dissecting individual notes and a kid tumbling on a trampoline.

They end up traipsing through manicured gardens, which always makes Oliver feel as if he’s entered a time warp, a protected domain where the clock has slowed, and he is somehow trespassing on a previous century and its mellowed energy that life in the city rarely allows. At one bend, they find a bench in a quiet alcove and decide to relax for a while. The sun glitters through the changing leaves like paparazzi flashbulbs, warming the air in columns from above, accenting the yellow leaves of the trees until they appear lit from within.

Oliver ambles out into the bright rays and lets them warm his face. He laces his fingers behind his head and lolls it backward, eyes closed.

“Trying to get a tan? They say that’s bad for you, you know.”

He glances back at Elio, who is lounging on a wrought iron bench, long legs stretched out in from of him, ankles crossed so that the soles of his thick black boots tilt up. “Stargazing.”

“Interesting choice of activity for the middle of the day.”

“Got to take advantage of my opportunities, and this happens to be the only star that’s visible in our vast urban colossus. Unfortunately.”

“But I’m pretty sure gazing at that star will end with you carrying a white cane.”

“I guess you’ve got a point there.”
Elio doesn’t answer, but Oliver can hear him scrape to his feet. A few seconds later, he feels a tickle on his arm, and a smooth voice next to his ear, “What if I told you that I know a way to fill up on astronomy without overdosing on ultraviolet or burning out your retinas?”

“I’d tell you to prove it.” Oliver peeks open his eyes. Elio is standing perpendicular to him with his head angled between Oliver’s bicep and skull. It is a very simple matter to drop an arm and let it fall around Elio’s shoulders, to pull all of him in even closer. “What if I told you that your lips taste like a raspberry fizz?”

The corner of Elio’s mouth lifts. “I’d tell you to pr—“

Oliver captures his upper lip in both of his, skimming his tongue across it before tilting his head slowly to do the same to the bottom. The kiss is tender, reverent. He feels Elio’s hand come to a rest against his shoulder, his fingers drawing hazy patterns in the fringes of Oliver’s hair. Their lips move together, soft tugs and gentle licks. It fills Oliver’s veins with warm honey and his brain with one improbable realization: I could spend the rest of my life like this. I could spend my life with him, in a beam of sunshine, my eyes totally shut, one arm coiled around him.

“Well?” Elio murmurs against his lips.

Oliver hums, “Fizzy. Delicious.” His words mumble out amidst the kisses that he cannot seem to stop, the near continuous movement of his mouth with Elio’s. “I win.”

Elio breathes a laugh against his neck. “I’m not sure about that.” He twists away, blinking rapidly, and mutters something into his sleeve that sounds like, “Damn.” Then, he looks up at Oliver again and lays a palm on his chest, rubbing it in a slow circle. “Ok, so, I guess it’s my turn now?”

“All right. Let’s go.”

Elio barely takes one step before Oliver snatches his wrist and tugs him back. Elio goes to him without resistance, leaning into Oliver on the tips of his toes, his lips finding Oliver’s instinctively, both hands on his neck, fingers dipping below the collar of Oliver’s sweater.

“Why are you like this? Why are you so perfect?” Oliver whispers into his skin, not caring if it is too much, not worrying if the blatant awe in his voice is revealing too much of himself. He can’t help it; it’s right there at the surface, all of it. He can’t stand not to kiss Elio. It’s addictive, and the more he does it, the more he wants.

Elio massages Oliver’s trapezius muscles with his fingertips. “Why are you so tall?” he jibes, scratching his nose in the scruff on the underside of Oliver’s jaw. “Most people.”

“Oliver,” Elio murmurs, ‘most people’ bore me. Usually, I find the effort of conversation is not
worth the reward when there are far better things I could be doing.”

“But not with me?”

A wicked smile smolders around the classic curves of his face, and he grabs Oliver’s chin between his thumb and index finger, gaze fixed unabashedly on Oliver’s mouth. “Especially with you.” He pushes forward to kiss him again, sliding both hands back to hold the rough of Oliver’s jaw like he’s tipping a chalice to drink his fill.

Elio walks with long strides, intent on his destination. Oliver trails a few feet behind, intent on watching the toss of Elio’s curls in the slight wind. They walk about a quarter mile west and stop in front of the history museum. Elio points to the sign, “Well?”

Oliver grins. “Really?”

“Best galactic view in town, I promise.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a genius?”

The planetarium is soothing and dim. They sink into leather armchairs and push them back to recline. Attendance is sparse, so they have the row to themselves. They both stare up at the neutral blue dome of the room like they’re waiting for the actual sun to set so that the show can begin. Oliver feels ten again, laying in the tall grass on the hills in the Cuyahoga Valley, waiting for the blue to fade to black so that Scorpius and Aldebaran and the Summer Triangle could reveal themselves. Those long nights were some of the few memories from his childhood that didn’t leave a sour taste in his mouth, ones he’d lost touch with in the painful quicksand of the times he cannot bear to recall.

The program is simply entitled “The Autumn Sky,” and the dulcet tones of the presenter lull Oliver into a peaceful and passive state. The familiar names and shapes wash over him like a baptism, welcoming him back into the fold of the universe, allowing him to feel the gossamer connection that had etched itself into him as a kid, the singular sense that he belonged to something greater than the broken version of life as he had known it—greater than an empty fridge and bruised ribs and a graduation day that was not important enough for anyone else to attend. It was the certainty that there had to be magic and ideas and discovery waiting for him somewhere, out there.

At some point he realizes that one of Elio’s feet is resting on the edge of his recliner, so Oliver bops it playfully with his own. Elio turns his head and gives him a wry smile, but when he starts to pull his leg back, Oliver sandwiches it within both of his own and shakes his head. He holds it prisoner for the rest of the show, a sad substitute for holding Elio’s hand, but Oliver will take what he can get.

Maybe it was him. Stretched out in the weeds, staring at pinpoints of light that give no hint to the scale of the fire behind them, maybe it wasn’t the universe Oliver had felt calling him. Maybe it didn’t take a galaxy of worlds for him to understand that random occurrences, when viewed at the proper distance, take on a distinct pattern. Now that Oliver’s had the perspective of years, maybe he’s quite literally seen the light.

It doesn’t take all of the stars in the night sky. It just takes one. Just one.
The program ends too quickly, so Oliver insists on staying long enough to watch the dawn return to the room when a faint orange radiates from its artificial horizon. Elio lounges until he sees Oliver move his seat back up to a sitting position.

Oliver slides to the edge of his seat and leans his elbows on the tops of his knees. “Thank you, Elio.”

Elio catches the seriousness in his tone, and he gives him a crooked smile. “For what?”

“For giving me the stars.”

Elio’s smile softens, and he automatically reaches out and rubs his fingertips around Oliver’s knee. “You haven’t done this before?”

He shakes his head, “This? God, no.” Oliver is glad that the muted, ethereal surroundings shield the tears that have surfaced from nowhere, glazing his eyes every time he blinks. “This is given to us only once.”

They are the last ones to leave.

The wind has picked up a bit when Oliver steers Elio toward some of his favorite Greek street meat. “Come on, you’ll love it. Trust me. It’s all the rage on Mount Olympus.”

Elio’s head lolls backward as he laughs open-mouthed, eyes shrinking to crescents. “Souvlaki of the Gods? Who could say no to that?”

They amble and eat for a short time until Oliver hops up on a low brick wall along the sidewalk to finish the rest. “Saving myself the laundry bill,” he explains, patting the spot next to him.

Elio joins him on the perch. “Smart. I could bathe in this tzatziki sauce. Be a shame to waste it on my shirt.” When he finishes, he balls up the foil and licks the excess from his fingers. Oliver watches, biting the inside of his cheek to keep “Need help with that?” from bubbling out of his mouth.

Abruptly, Oliver hops down. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back,” he says, darting across the street before Elio can respond. He ducks into a bodega and returns a few minutes later with a white paper bag.

Elio eyes the bag. “What’s that?”

“Dessert.”

“Well, bring it on, then.” He holds out his hands and wriggles his fingers.

Oliver tightens his grip on the bag. “Actually, it’s getting kind of chilly. Mind if we take it indoors?” He motions with his head to the building behind them. “I live here.”

Elio’s head twice swivels from the building back to Oliver, jaw hanging loose. The beats of silence are enough for Oliver to shrivel, pulling the package against his body and crinkling the rolled top tighter in his grip. “I—I’m sorry. We don’t have to. Let’s—why don’t we—“
Elio leaps off the wall and stalks into the courtyard before finally glancing over his shoulder to where Oliver remains unmoved. “You coming?”

He snorts and follows, pulling his keys out with clammy hands. He’d thought himself so clever, guiding Elio here in increments, wanting to bring him home but too afraid to ask outright. Now that he’s here, all Oliver can think about are the dishes he forgot to wash and laundry that is likely strewn all over, the mess of crumpled papers on his desk and coffee table, as if Elio would care. Why would he? Oliver didn’t care about them either. Not really. His pulse thrums, and he worries that he won’t be able to hold back. He worries that the moment the door closes, he’ll fall into Elio like the unfettered visions of a blind man.

They take the stairs to the third floor, and Oliver lets them in, plopping the white bag on the counter which divides the kitchen from the living space. “Counter or couch?”

Elio rolls open the bag and gasps, “Oooooh, you must have been reading my mind,” as he pulls out the tub of chocolate gelato. He pries it open and waves the lid at Oliver. “Forget the bowls. Let’s share.” His eyebrows dance as he flops down on the couch.

Oliver fishes for utensils and grins internally. You must have been reading mine.

Elio looks around. “Did you just move in?”

“I’ve been here two years.” Oliver hands him a spoon and settles in beside him. “Why?”

“No wonder,” Elio murmurs, dragging the spoon across the top of the gelato, watching it curl over itself.

“What’s that?”

He gestures to the blank walls and the empty window, too high to actually see the trees and flowers in the courtyard. “No wonder you decided to work at the coffee shop at night.”

Oliver follows his hand, and Elio has a point. It’s depressing. The apartment is more like a cell, lived in but impersonal, no real traces of Oliver at all. Elio’s apartment is rife with his character, comfortable and warm and eclectic. But Oliver’s is anonymous, incomplete.

Perhaps it reflects more of him than he wants to believe.

Oliver hums, eyes flicking from Elio’s face to the window. “Yeah, ah, the coffee shop does have a much better view.”

Elio shrugs, pulling the spoon from his mouth slowly. “Not by much, I guess. It barely has a view of the street.”

“Doesn’t matter. The best view was inside.” For a moment, Oliver’s mask wavers and allows his face to show the hunger he feels all the time, the consuming desire that simmers just below the surface.

Elio’s eyes dart around his face, blush blooming when he realizes Oliver’s meaning. He nestles a bit tighter against Oliver’s side and takes another scoop of gelato. He smears the back of the spoon across his mouth until his lips are a dark brown and murmurs, “Uh-oh. Um, Oliver, I think I may have gotten something on my face. Think you could—“

Oliver’s tongue silences him, laps at his mouth before the clatter of the spoon hitting the table can register in his ears. Elio’s lips are cold, but the inside of his mouth is hot and inviting. He works his
jaw around and sucks on Elio’s tongue with a gradually increasing pressure until Elio groans, and it’s such an amazing sound, Oliver nearly falls off the couch. He turns his head and pulls Elio’s right earlobe into his mouth, strokes it gently with his lips like its the petal of a flower, making Elio exhale heavily against his cheek.

Oliver pulls back slightly. “You okay?”

Elio’s eyes abruptly focus, and he makes a gurgling noise as he surges up and knocks Oliver back against the arm of the sofa. He climbs him like a felled tree until he sits with his knees on either side of Oliver’s thighs so Oliver has to look up to see his face. He ratchets his fingers into Oliver’s hair, scrubs at his scalp, and leans down to stare directly into his eyes. “Me okay,” he whispers.

Elio pushes Oliver’s head backward as he kisses him deeply, running his hands down his body to Oliver’s legs and massages them, working his nimble fingers up into the crease of where his hips meet his thighs. Just as Oliver is certain he’s going to hyperventilate, Elio scrapes something metallic, and he sits back.

“Is that—”

Oliver drags the penny from his pocket. He holds it up and looks Elio square in the eye. “I carry it with me everywhere.”

Elio stares at it for several long moments, then looks up at Oliver, eyes deep, swollen red lips ajar. Finally, he swallows thickly. “Well, I—I think it’s working.”

“How do you mean?”

He extends a finger and runs it slowly around the coin’s rim as it lies face up in Oliver’s palm. “Something tells me you’re about to get very, very lucky.”

Oliver’s heart misses several beats, and he traps Elio’s hand and squeezes it to ground him, to keep him from spinning off into space. It makes him think of the dark theatre, the strong assurance, the seamlessness of their connection. Oliver knows he is already there, all of him. He is already utterly, hopelessly gone on Elio. He’s never wanted to give even a sliver of himself away to another person, but he is certain there is no part of him he would not gladly carve up and offer to Elio, as a gift, as a sacrifice. And somewhere deep within him has known this since the first kiss. Or since the disk? No, since the coffee. Hell, he’s known since he’d slid the penny into his pocket and joined his own warmth with Elio’s.

But he needs more than that. “Are you sure, Elio? Are you really sure this is what you want? It’s okay to say no. It’s okay to tell me that you—”

“Oliver.” Elio wraps his free hand around Oliver’s. He seems to hold all of Oliver’s body in the amber flecks of his eyes. “I’m scared, too.”

“You—you’re scared?”

“More than I’ve ever been in my whole life.”

Oliver tips his forehead to rest it on Elio’s. “I want you so much, I can’t even think straight anymore.” It is a quiet confession, whispered into the small space between them. “I don’t want to…”

When he trails off to silence, Elio squeezes his hand gently. “Don’t want to what? Tell me.”
Oliver sighs through clenched teeth. “Overwhelm you, annoy you.” His voice turns bitter. “Basically fuck it all up.”

Elio rolls his head a bit, caressing Oliver’s cheek with his own. “You won’t—you can’t. Oliver, you’re not in this alone.”

“I don’t even know what that means, Elio! I’ve never—I—I’ve been alone in everything I’ve ever done.”

His hands come up, and Elio’s palms rub circles on the sides of Oliver’s neck. “Not anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

Their Sunday is not over--Sunday night is yet to come! In the next chapter will pick up where this one leaves off.
Sunday Evening

Chapter Summary

How can Elio and Oliver end the perfect day?
Yep!

Chapter Notes

Both my original and revised plans for chapters have proved to be unreliable since the characters have taken control of their story. Thus, I'll stop embarrassing myself with faulty number counts and just go with it. For those of you who have been tremendous enough to come with us, you keep my heart alive!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I’ve been alone in everything I’ve ever done.
Not anymore.

Oliver should shrug it off as mere words. He should keep his skepticism firmly in place, that thick wall which has long protected him from the casual grenades of intimate human relationships. It was well-earned, built brick by brick as a fortress to shield the occupant inside from ruin. Who is this kid, anyway? What information does Oliver have about him? Realistically, they are veritable strangers. Everything Elio’s ever told him could be a lie, and Oliver would never know. He could be a grifter, a player, a nightmare cloaked in smiles that conceals a blade. Oliver has no logical reason to trust a single thing Elio has ever said.

But he does. Down to his marrow, to his most threadlike capillary, he does.

It is doesn’t make sense. It is far from conventional wisdom for Oliver to be willing to offer himself to someone met at random, someone he’s known for little longer than an antibiotic cycle. But the circumstances of his life have forced Oliver to understand that “conventional wisdom” is the most outrageous of oxymorons. Merely having a majority of the clueless population agree on one concept does not make it true. Time is relative, and a calendar alone is not a reliable barometer of genuine insight. They may be few, but every moment he has spent with Elio has been the only truth he has ever known, as if all of the years before him were a hazy deception, a lie he’d told himself continuously in order to breathe because no one else was going to save him from suffocating in the empty vacuum around him. That is how a person survives when he is alone.

But Oliver isn’t alone. Not anymore.

It’s a revelation.

Elio leans down to kiss him, soft and gentle. A seal, a promise.
Something inside of Oliver tears free.

He crushes Elio to him and deepens their kiss as he twists his feet to the floor, slides his arms possessively around Elio’s shoulders, and rises, pulling him up, too. Elio’s breath through his nose accelerates and hisses into Oliver’s ear as a single word: “Us.”

_is this how it's supposed to feel?_ He hadn’t realized how it had affected him, the solitude. He never understood the profound weight of it dragging on him, compounded by the years of adding to it in successive bitter layers. Not until he found someone to release him from it, to melt the ice that had trapped him in suspension, his own personal circle of Hell, held there as punishment for treachery worked upon himself.

Now, Oliver is on fire.

Under his skin, beneath the bone, smoke billowing from his chest. His heart is finally unfettered, cut loose and colliding with his ribs, set aflame by an exhilaration he has never felt in his entire life. It oils his joints, and he thinks desperately that he can’t let go of Elio, or he’ll fold up and collapse to the floor. It resonates through his fingertips as one hand curves beneath the white t-shirt and quivers against the hot skin as the other grabs a fistful of curls, making Elio suck in a breath and moan deep, straight into Oliver’s throat.

Oliver stumbles backward, walking Elio blindly around the corner into his bedroom, their mouths still connected. The backs of his legs strike the end of the bed and knock Oliver onto the mattress. Elio follows without hesitation and reclaims his spot on Oliver’s lap. His arms circle Oliver’s head as his hands thread into his hair from every direction, his pelvis dragging against Oliver’s chest as he raises himself up to gasp at the ceiling.

Oliver buries his face in the folds of fabric at Elio’s stomach, hand splayed across the narrow expanse of his back. He rucks up the soft cotton, and Elio helps, yanking at his shirt from the back of the collar and ripping it over his head, muttering, “Off, off, off, off, off.” And suddenly Oliver has his hands full of Elio’s skin. It undulates with his rapid breaths, soft ivory for Oliver’s lips and tongue to worship, to heal after the stubble of his beard scrapes it raw.

“Elio, Jesus…you’re so amazing…fucking gorgeous…” The words pour out of him unchecked. They are like the oxygen burning in his lungs, present and necessary, and he’s held his breath and kept all of it in for so long, it has infiltrated all of his systems, soaked into every cell.

Elio bends, grabbing at Oliver’s face to kiss him again, to pull the words out with his tongue and swallow them down. “_God, Oliver, you are…you…oh my God…”_ he breathes against his cheek. It’s the most erotic thing Oliver has ever seen: Elio kneeling above him, red marks dotting his chest and teeth marks in his neck, hair wild and eyes clenched shut, gasping for air. Oliver might combust at any moment, disappear totally in a ball of flame.

Elio’s head rolls and their eyes click together.


Elio’s eyes slip closed for a second before he growls low in his throat and claws at the back of the wool sweater. “Get this off. Get all of this off _now_,” he commands, and the feral bite in his voice makes Oliver feel lightheaded. He has never been harder in his whole life.

The wild motion of Elio’s hands cause him to tip to the side and fall off of Oliver’s lap. Oliver rips off the sweater and twists around, pursuing Elio as he backs himself up the bed. His black eyes bore into Oliver’s as his tongue makes a very deliberate circuit around his mouth, and Oliver has to steady
himself against the mattress as his blood surges. He balances on his knees and rips off his belt, and all four of their hands grab at the waistband to undo the button and zipper. Elio gives up in favor of wriggling out of his own until finally, gratefully, wonderfully, there is nothing between them but the rasping of their breath in the silence of the room as it fades to blue in the soothing twilight outside.

Suddenly, everything changes. Elio’s face softens, eyes large and round, and he bites at the inside of his lip. “Oliver?” His voice sounds small, searching.

_I’m scared, too._

Elio’s words echo in his head, and it fills him with determination, with a sense of absolute clarity. All along, Elio’s been the brave one. Elio’s been strong and persevered, each time coaxing Oliver out of the rafters when a gust of wind would blow, and he had assumed it was really a tornado waiting to strike. Now he needs Oliver to step up and take care of him. He needs Oliver to hold his hand tightly and protect him. And Oliver needs him more than his next breath.

Oliver reaches out and pulls Elio into him. “It’s okay. I’m right here.” He lays Elio down on the pillow and kisses him, long and slow, as his thumb draws invisible lines across the ridge of Elio’s cheekbone. He feels the tension bleed from Elio’s shoulders, hears the soft curls swish against the sheets as his head settles deeper. Elio’s hands drift up and down Oliver’s sides, leaving trails of gooseflesh across his skin.

Oliver kisses his jaw, his cheek, his forehead. “So beautiful…so beautiful…” He presses the words into the pale skin like a benediction. Elio sighs deeply and runs his nose along Oliver’s, dragging his fingers through the hair on Oliver’s chest with one hand while the other grips around his thigh. He opens his eyes, and Oliver wants to gasp, gazing down into their prisms. He wants to press his lips right onto his eyelids and feel his eyelashes brushing against his mouth.

Elio’s hands massage his stomach and run over his neck, nudging Oliver’s head up so he can lean in and leave a trail of open-mouthed kisses from his shoulder to his ear. Oliver stares up at the blank ceiling and sees the stars, sees clouds and heaven and dreams. Hovering on his elbows, caging Elio within his stretched limbs, stroking his hair with both hands. He lowers his head, and Elio’s gaze holds him. His chest expands sharply.

_How can I explain it to him? How can I find the words to tell him that a piece of him has always lived within me, the resilient part that allowed me to feel hopeful even when I was terrified, the part that I’d try to keep clean and whole and safe from the poison darts that pierced the rest of me so that it could save a place for the rest of him, a beacon so he could reach me when the time was right? And how can I make him understand that he has always owned a part of me and that I never understood why I’d felt so incomplete for so long, until I met him and all the gaps filled themselves in at last?_

“Call me by your name, and I’ll call you by mine.”

Thick eyebrows flicker, and a soft hand lands on his cheek. “Elio?”

The tip of his thumb grazes against a lush bottom lip. “Oliver.”

A long finger points at his chin, and the voice drops an octave. “Elio.”

By the time he relents and finally allows his hips roll down with successive clicks of the bones of his spine, he is weak with want and has to struggle even to remember how to breathe. “Oliver.” He barely recognizes the sound as his own voice. It’s rough and hoarse, churned up like the rapids of a river.
He shifts and rocks down, again and again, relishing the whimper that floats up at him as their hips slot together in just the right way, spiking his fierce arousal. Elio arches up into him, pants wet, hot breaths onto his sweat-soaked skin. Distantly, he hears moaning—curses and oaths, their names, back and forth, until he can no longer tell the difference between them anymore. Then, Elio reaches around and grabs Oliver’s buttocks firmly in both hands, pulling him forward hard, and Oliver feels himself explode in a white-hot flame.

Oliver is warm and content, hovering in the ethers between waking and sleeping. He stretches slightly and finds soft flesh beneath his limbs, his arm draped across a silken chest and one leg fitted between both of Elio’s. He rubs his nose in Elio’s hair and inhales deeply, grinning wildly when he feels lips press into his shoulder followed by a kneading of fingers pushing into the muscle.

“How long did we sleep?” he murmurs.

“Not sure.”

“You know what time it is?”

“Nope.”

“Do you care?”

“Nope.”

Oliver snorts. “Yeah, me, either.” He tightens his arm, stroking across Elio’s nipple with his thumb.

Elio hums, cold toes trailing down the back of Oliver’s calf.

“Okay, so let’s talk about something that does matter. Tell me something true about you.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. The first thing that pops into your head.”

“I secretly want to wear your underwear as a hat.” Elio kisses his cheek as Oliver laughs. “Okay, now you—tell me anything.”

Oliver plans to tell him that he is afraid of monkeys or that he looks like he’s having convulsions when he dances. But when he takes a deep breath, he ends up telling Elio about the coffee he’d brought home from Insomniac, how he’d licked it from his wrist believing truly that would be all of Elio he’d ever get.

Elio puts a palm on his cheek to turn Oliver’s face to his. “Show me.”

Oliver’s lips curl, and he obeys, dipping his head down to lick a wet stripe up the tendon that runs the length of Elio’s throat, lavishing most of his attention on the single freckle at its center, grazing it with his teeth before smoothing over the spot again with the flat of his tongue, relishing the way Elio seems to melt into his touch, the way his groans of Oliver’s name barely make it past his lips before it is joined by his own.

*He remembers. I didn’t dream it.*
Elio tugs gently at Oliver’s hair to pull his head back up, fighting to calm his thready breathing. “Okay, okay, okay! I get it, I get it!”

Oliver smirks. “Well, I had to be sure. I’m an overachiever—I like to be thorough.” “I can tell. Mission accomplished.” He clears his throat. “What else? Tell me more. What are you thinking about right now?”

The hair raises at the back of Oliver’s neck. He almost tells him. It’s right there. It almost bubbles out all on its own, those words that have been knocking around in the periphery of his mind for a while, the ones which almost rolled off his tongue earlier that night at the very moment when Elio’s warm skin was laid bare and melded with his own from head to toe. He was so close to confessing everything. So very close.

But he just can’t do it. Not yet. It feels too soon, which could merely be code for it feels too real. In either case, he does not want to ruin the ease of the moment by leading them down a path that Elio may not want to follow.

Instead, he carefully folds those words back down inside and asks smoothly, “I think I have some straws—you want some more gelato?”

Chapter End Notes

Dante’s "Inferno" had the ninth circle of Hell reserved for the sin of treachery; the guilty found themselves frozen in ice, and before Elio, Oliver apparently relegated himself to be right there with them!
Sunday Night Picnic

Chapter Summary

Picking up where chapter 10 leaves off, Oliver and Elio continue their blissful Sunday with talk and touch and food, and they conclude the day on their own unorthodox timetable.

Chapter Notes

All of you who've been reading this story, you are the greatest, and I am so thrilled and floored by your generous feedback!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver’s fingers move of their own accord, exploring the surfaces of Elio’s torso. He turns his face to wedge it between the pillow and Elio’s head, keeping his eyes in darkness and allowing Oliver to read Elio’s skin as a text of touch. The pebbled circle of his nipple that spreads its nubby texture across the smooth alabaster nearby when it’s caressed just so; the velvet hills and groves of his ribs, the exact width to nestle his fingers into; the indented button of his navel and its trail of silky threads of hair. It’s as if he is mapping the details of a priceless sculpture unearthed in a blue Italian lake, a treasure that has risen up because the layers of silt and sand could no longer keep it from the surface. All the passages of this secret diary are only for Oliver to interpret, and the soft sighs that Elio breathes in response onto his temple translate every stroke into their own shared language.

“A puddle of gelato won’t do it for me. I need…” Elio’s voice trails off as Oliver’s ministrations overtake his senses. He inhales and tries again. “I think that…that I need something more…” He cuts himself off with a gasp and shivers all over when Oliver’s thumb dips into his navel and the big palm flattens firmly on Elio’s abdomen and expands in every direction the reach of the searching, reverent fingers. His cheek circles against Oliver’s as he turns slightly toward. “I—I need more,” Elio breathes.

“I can do that, I can do more. No matter what. I will always have more to give you,” Oliver murmurs, swirling his hand lower into the thicket of hair at his groin. That wins Oliver a broken moan and a fresh slick of sweat rising from Elio’s pores. He couples this with a kiss to the chiseled cheekbone and the shell of the ear he’s been pressed to, penetrating the canal with his tongue while his fingers twist and probe in deeper and deeper circles below Elio’s waist.

Elio arches his glistening body, held snugly with Oliver as its anchor. Elio’s legs slide against Oliver’s as he hitches his knees slightly higher, opening himself up. Oliver tightens the leg still positioned between Elio’s and angles his upper body over Elio to look down into his face, flushed and unfocused and perfect. His fingers brush at Oliver’s mouth and cheeks before he raises them above his head and grabs at the pillow. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes. “Yes, Oliver…yes…yes…yes…”

Oliver is awed by the courage inherent in the vulnerability Elio is able to show him, the
unquestioning trust that he offers to Oliver so quickly, so easily. Part of this still feels like a fever dream, an exceptionally masochistic version of the deceit that he could reserve only for himself. He’s spent so many nights alone in this bed, staring into the darkness and seeing shapes and movement that never existed, all mere tricks of the shadows on compromised vision. Sleep rarely came to him here, and wakefulness rapidly became its own brand of torture, forcing him constantly to bear witness to the emptiness in which he lived, daring him to try to find the courage to fill it, laughing at him when he could not.

But right now, that silent void feels distant. It is as if it belonged to another self, a false Oliver who skirted the shadows because he feared the light, feared seeing what was true in its truest form, feared risking what little he had for something he did not believe could ever be his. That Oliver, though, did not seem to realize that what he had could not sustain him, so he convinced himself that the jewels which sparkled just beyond his grasp were ones he had no desire to own, and he mislabeled the whole process as Control.

*Please.* He prays silently for this to be the real Oliver who thrives in the parallel life that the other could never have imagined, the one he had not even glimpsed until dumb luck allowed him to stumble into the orbit of Elio Perlman.

*Please let this be real.*

The hitches of breath as Oliver’s hand slows and speeds its rhythm.

The subtle churning of his hips as he looses himself in the sensation.

The gnawing of his teeth on his bottom lip as his eyelids flutter.

The obscene rumble from his chest when Oliver’s mouth attaches to a spot the ivory column of throat and sucks at it like he’s removing poison from a snakebite.

The wanton cry that flies from his mouth when his hips levitate and his pleasure overtakes him.

But as Oliver wraps him up in his arms and covers his face with featherlight kisses, murmurs a blend of his own name and utter nonsense into the trembling and steamy skin, he sees it all. He knows.

*This is the only reality.*

Elio folds into him and kisses Oliver’s neck, muttering, “Elio, Elio, Elio, Elio, Elio,” into his hair. Oliver runs his hand up and down the bumps of Elio’s curved spine, and Elio exhales a long breath and stills. Oliver keeps him close and lets him doze, and it is not long before he drifts off as well.

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Oliver is drug from sleep by the snarl of a cougar, its tail flicking him in the arm at regular intervals.

“Oliver?”

The cougar knows his name.

It snarls again. And licks his face.

“Earth to Oliver…”
He slits an eye open. Elio is crouched on his knees, bending over him with his hair loose and disheveled, a mischievous grin flickering in the corners of his mouth. “There you are!” He swoops in to kiss his cheek.

“Elio,” he yawns, scrubbing at his face, “what’s wrong? Were you—why’re you growling?”

“Can’t help it.”

“Whaddaya mean you can’t—” He is interrupted by the same rumble, emanating from the soft folds of Elio’s stomach, and Oliver’s eyes bug. “Never mind.” He stretches his back and sits up. “You good with Chinese?”

“Oh, so he actually does have a weakness? He may speak 600 languages, but our genius is ticklish?” Oliver coos. “Duly noted.” Without a twitch of warning, he launches at Elio and drags him back to the middle of the bed, diving into the soft spots on his body. “This drastic enough for you?” Oliver taunts.

Elio tries and fails to deflect Oliver’s hands, and pretty soon they are rolling around like honey badgers, various screeches and yawps encircling the tumbling knot of them.

“Okay, okay! Mercy, Oliver!”

“No good enough. You must offer your unequivocal surrender.”

A momentary pause.

“Never!”

The ruckus reinvigorates briefly.

“Wait! Fine, I surrender!” Elio forces out between giggles.

Oliver’s arms stop moving, though his grip on Elio’s wrists is still iron. “You promise?”

“I do.”

“Well, all right, then.” He lets go and flashes a smug smile. “And now I’ll take my trophy, please,” he demands primly, then licks his pinky finger and wipes it through Elio’s ear. “Thank you!”

Elio dives under the sheet for protection, and Oliver gets up and slips on a pair of running shorts and grabs a button-up shirt hanging on the back of a nearby chair. While Elio heads into the bathroom, Oliver goes out to the kitchen to call for the food and clean up some of the mess. At some point as he is rinsing out old soda cans and washing utensils, he realizes that he is humming, and he abruptly flips off the water and leans the heels of his hands on the counter’s edge. What is going on? This isn’t him—Oliver doesn’t hum. It always had seemed such an inane activity, one for glazed crackpots tucked in the corner on a subway car or people who’d paint large pastel flowers on the sides of a van. The last time Oliver can remember that he hummed anything was when he was a sophomore in college and his roommate conned him into eating Jello that he later learned had been laced with LSD. For two hours, Oliver had hummed every song he knew from The Sound of Music while trying to scrub the ceiling in the dorm hallway with his Pirates baseball hat soaked in Pine-Sol.
He shakes his head in disbelief. Really, it is not a dissimilar sensation, that racy, indomitable feeling saturating him, but without all of the unpleasant side effects. He’s high. He is high as a fucking satellite, and it’s the kind of authentic natural high that he thought only existed in cheesy songs and television commercials. He knows that of all the substances he’s seen used over the years, Elio is by far the most addictive; he’s the only one that Oliver himself has any interest in consuming, and he’ll gladly snort, lick, and swallow to the point where the seesaw tips and Oliver is the one who is consumed.

When the delivery arrives, they flatten out the bedspread as a makeshift picnic blanket and arrange the cartons of food in the middle. Again, they dispense with plates or bowls and just dig in, trading the cartons back and forth between them.

As he slurps down the last of the noodles, Oliver realizes Elio is staring at him with a peculiar light in his eye. He gulps audibly. “Please don’t tell me I have a spider on my shoulder. I wouldn’t want you to have to hear my super manly scream.”

“No, nothing like that.” He smiles, but his voice is vague, contemplative.

“Thank God.” Oliver’s eyebrow raises and he bites the inside of his cheek. “I wouldn’t want such an intimidatingly macho display to deter you from staying here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Elio wraps his arms around his folded knees. “And I would be that frightened?”

“Are you kidding—you’d be absolutely terrified!” He tips his head slightly. “More so if I jumped up and ran around the room shrieking ‘Get it off me! Get it off me!’”

Elio flops onto his side, laughing into the pillow, and Oliver’s heart soars. He stacks up the empty containers and rolls them up in the bag, then he shrugs, holding his arms to the side. “So, short of that, I guess you’ll have to remain, and quite frankly, I prefer it that way.”

“You do?”

“Of course! Why do you sound surprised by that? I don’t want you to leave.”

“And how long should I stay?”

Oliver taps his cheek as he pretends to think. “Hmmm…how about the rest of your natural life?”

“That would make going to work difficult.”

“Not to worry. I’ll go. You stay here.”

“In bed?”

Oliver nods slowly, wiggling an eyebrow.

Elio’s smiles. “I’ll agree on one condition.”

“Anything.”

He gestures with his chin. “That shirt you have on. You were wearing it when we went to the theatre. Will you give it to me before you go?”

Oliver grimaces. “Might be better laundered.”

Elio’s smile grows lascivious. “Don’t you dare. I want it to positively reek of you. It has to have
your sweat, your saliva—every fluid that has come out of you in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Is that pun intended, or…?

Elio’s eyes disappear as he shakes with giggles, cupping his mouth to keep the mouthful of water he’s just taken from spewing out.

Oliver pinches Elio’s toe and winks. Gradually, his smile fades, and he fiddles with a packet of soy sauce in his hand before looking up at Elio wistfully. “I don’t want you to leave,” he repeats quietly.

Elio wipes his mouth. “What do you mean? Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I don’t know. I—I know I don’t make much sense. I just—“ Oliver moves in closer, cups his cheek, and Elio answers by turning into his hand, kissing the inside of Oliver’s wrist. “I don’t want you to have a life that I’m not a part of. I mean…I don’t want you to leave my sight and become someone different, someone I don’t know, someone I’ve never met.”

Elio searches his face for a moment, uncertain. “I—I don’t—I’m not Sybil or anything, you know.” He gives a halfhearted chuckle.

Oliver does not smile. Instead, he slides forward and wraps his legs loosely around Elio’s waist, then hides his face into the soft crook of Elio’s shoulder. “I don’t want the rest of the world to know something about you that I don’t. I want every version of you to be with me. I don’t want to lose you.”

Elio rests his head on top of Oliver’s and is silent for a while. “That’s not possible, Oliver,” he finally says quietly, “because there’s not a version of me that doesn’t contain you.” He turns his head and kisses Oliver’s hair. “Not anymore.”

The words jolt Oliver, and he inhales forcefully, as if they were a cue for him to breathe again. Truthfully, though, that’s exactly what they have been. “I feel like…well, I think if I were to meet someone on the street who’d known me a year ago, they wouldn’t recognize me today.”

Elio hums, sliding his arm around the small of Oliver’s back. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Oliver smiles. “Good. A very, very good thing.”

“What’s changed?”

“You fishing for compliments, Perlman?” He leans up and kisses Elio’s jaw.

Elio huffs a laugh and grips his waist. “I just want to understand.”

Oliver is not sure if he can do that, to make Elio understand the way he has made Oliver whole, how suddenly everything that had been closed off in himself is alive, how everything is possible.

Where were you in my childhood, Elio?

“I dream now, Elio. I can dream again.”

Elio exhales noisily and tightens his arm to pull Oliver closer. He turns his head kisses Oliver’s lips, pulling at them tenderly with his own and adding subtle brushes of his tongue. It is enough to make Oliver fill with warmth and melt into him, and he lets Elio lay him down with his head secure on the pillow, still working his lips like soft taffy, stroking his hair away from his forehead with delicate fingers. “What do you dream about, Oliver?” he whispers in a low voice that turns Oliver’s warmth
up to a rolling boil. “What do you dream about when you are alone in this room in the middle of the night?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Elio throws a leg over him and nuzzles his jaw. “You know I do.”

Oliver swallows thickly. Elio’s fingers skim his neck, his shoulders, the hair on his chest with a light, teasing touch that drives Oliver mad. He’s feeling reckless and daring and hopelessly turned on “Guess.”

The purr that rolls from Elio’s throat is more felt than heard. He sinks his tongue into Oliver’s suprasternal notch and twirls it around. Then, he runs his hands down and massages the outside of Oliver’s hips. “How am I doing so far?”

“You—oh, God—you are—you’re getting warmer,” Oliver chokes out.

Elio’s fingers knead and ripple in his flesh, constantly in motion, working down the outside of his thighs. “I’ll try harder, then,” he murmurs, and digs his palms underneath Oliver’s legs and plants a gentle kiss to the peak of each hip bone.

Oliver’s eyes close and his legs fall open “Shit, Elio,” he mumbles, licking his lips.

Elio settles into the cradle of Oliver’s legs, gentle hands working the flesh of the inside of his thighs. “Want me to stop?”

Every part of Oliver’s body is taut as a hangman’s rope. He pants a high pitched, near frantic giggle. “Don’t…don’t you dare…you…you’ll kill me if you stop.” He crooks his head and looks down at Elio’s face, which is burning with a mixture of tenderness and lust. Then, Oliver drowns, lost in the warm darkness of Elio’s mouth.

He takes a cab. It would take too long to walk, and he can’t wait any longer.

It still had been dark, inky hints of dawn just forming, when he’d felt a soft kiss to his cheekbone and a gentle voice float through his brain. “I have to go and get ready for a seminar at 8:00, so come by the coffee shop on your way home tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” he’d mumbled, unable to focus his eyes in the dim light.

“Sleep now,” the voice had whispered.

Another kiss had been pressed to his temple, but by the time his alarm had rung and Oliver had been focused enough to sit up and look around, he was alone.

“Here!” Oliver shouts at the driver. “I’ll just get out here.” He throws money over the seat and hops out, jogging the last two blocks to Insomniac.

He rips open the door and makes the bell jingle frenetically, drawing the irritated glances of the three students snugged down on one of the settees, apparently critiquing the image of a painting that the person in the middle now holds. Marzia is tending the counter, and she beams at him. “Allo, Oliver!”
“Hi there! How are you?”

“Ça va.”

“Good, good.” He looks around. “Is he…?”

“Elio’s in the back for inventory.” She winks at him. She knows.

Did Elio say something? Is she surmising? Is Oliver just that transparent?

_I could not care less._

Oliver nods a quick thanks, easing behind the counter and flipping through the curtain. He stalks toward the storage room at the end of a hallway in the back of the store. There are boxes stacked up and metal shelves, dutifully labeled and organized by product. Elio is peering into a large box in the corner, a clipboard held aloft in his left hand.

Oliver does not slow his stride. He snatches the clipboard from Elio’s hand, making the latter wheel around in surprise. Oliver walks him backward until he’s flat against the wall, fingers plunging up into Elio’s hair, pulling at the strands to bring his mouth to Oliver’s hard and deep, sheer want driving him and the hips that now pin Elio to the wall, the thin fabric of his trousers leaving no doubt about how much Oliver has missed him in the hours they’ve been apart.

Elio digs back into the kiss, snaking an arm around Oliver’s chest and another behind his neck, sealing them even tighter. He shudders and groans into Oliver’s mouth, and Oliver swallows it down every bit of it, letting his hips grind with Elio’s because he absolutely cannot make them stop.

“Good morning,” Oliver pants. “_That_ is the good morning we deserved.”

Elio’s impish grin spreads wide, and he licks his puffy lips. “Well, _good morning_, Oliver! So...does this mean that you had a good weekend, then?”

Oliver’s hands fall flat to the wall on either side of Elio’s head, while Elio’s snake around Olivier’s waist and clasp together at his lumbar. He rests his cheek against Elio’s and sighs. “Good? Yes, well, not exactly.” He leans back to look directly into Elio’s eyes. “It was, without question, the best time, I have ever had, in my entire life. I—I need you to know that, Elio because I don’t want you to—to—”

His fingers brush over Oliver’s lips, silencing him, slithering down to stroke his neck while his green eyes glitter, riveting his gaze. His voice is smooth and dark and deep like water. “I don’t. I _won’t_. And if you’re willing to have some coffee and hang around a half-hour until my shift ends, I will take you to my apartment and make it my personal goal in life to turn Monday into your new favorite day of the week.”

Oliver’s eyes slip closed for a moment, then a smirk opens at the corner of his mouth. “If there’s a bottomless cup of caffe macchiato in it for me, you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“I just washed some blue mugs.”

“Then I’m all yours, Perlman.”

Elio bites his bottom lip and takes Oliver’s hand to lead him out to the dining area. “_God, I was hoping you’d say that._”
"Sybil" is the name of a 1976 film starring Sally Field; she plays the title character, a woman who suffers from multiple personality disorder.

By the way, I don't Tweet or Tumble or Snap or Gram or anything like that, so if you've somehow found this story and like it well enough, I'd be grateful and honored if you'd share the love and pass on a link to others!
Run For It

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio meet for a jog, and their brand of sweetness and stumbling ensues, with a promise of more.

Chapter Notes

We’ve fast-forwarded the action a little bit as their professional lives have interfered with the boys and their flourishing romance, but we’ll get them back on track here and in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Guess who.”

Oliver registers the warmth of the body pressed against his back and smiles into the sudden darkness. He twists his shoe strings around his fingers to keep from grabbing the hands that have been thrust over his eyes and placing them somewhere obscene, right here in the middle of the street.

“Ummm, Timothy Hutton?”

A huff. “Not quite.”

“Oh, so sorry—how about Patrick Dempsey?”

“Get serious!”

“All right—Ralph Macchio?”

There is an appalled gasp, and the hands retreat, sliding down Oliver’s back to rest lightly around his waist, both thumbs anchored at the base of his spine. “If you don’t want me to start calling you Johnny Lawrence, you better watch yourself.”

Oliver smirks and finishes off the knot on his sneakers. He twists to look behind him, down into Elio’s impish grin and upswept eyebrows. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Elio’s dark chuckle rumbles through Oliver’s skin. “Try me.”

It has been a long couple of weeks. It is that point of the semester when work from all angles hems Oliver in, so between his schedule and Elio’s, they’ve not gotten to do much more than speak on the phone a few times. Finally, they agreed to meet early this morning for a jog before the rest of the day and their various obligations would drag them apart once more.

Oliver had wanted to play it cool, to show up this morning with a casual air and a smooth delivery, to hold himself aloft so he could gauge at a distance how Elio was behaving, to see if he’d been affected by the time apart as much as Oliver had. He didn’t want to be the only one who had longed,
who repeatedly had to beat back his desires to be able to function—listening to Elio’s music on a small player in his office, just to have part of him close by; nearly ditching a committee meeting to catch Elio before his shift at Insomniac, for just five minutes to be able to taste his soft lips, feel the weight of him in his arms and the push of his warm breath against the hair at Oliver’s temple; dreaming of his touch so intently in the middle of the night that he’d snap awake with his desperate hand between his legs and an empty dissatisfaction cleaving him in two.

But now that he sees him—his soft mussed hair, the glint of his eyes in the thin light, the dimples that carve into his cheeks when he resists his grin, the soft scent of his rumpled t-shirt, one that looks like he’d slept in it and wore it right out the door, feels the press into his skin of each individual finger still hovering over his hipbones—Oliver is powerless to stop the smile that overtakes his face, the kind that thrusts itself to the surface when the emotion is too overwhelming to contain it. “Oh, Elio,” he clucks, dipping his voice an octave, “I fully intend to.”

Elio’s nostrils flare slightly and he bites his lip. His eyes float from Oliver’s eyes to his mouth and back again. The fingers tighten reflexively. “Wax on?”

Oliver swoops his head down, eyes blazing, holding Elio’s gaze as he licks his lips, mere inches from Elio’s own. Elio’s eyes widen, and Oliver can hear his throat work as he swallows. Oliver angles his head and drifts forward. “Wax off!” He pivots and takes off down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

Oliver giggles madly as he hears, “What the—“ and the ticking of Elio’s rapid feet as he catches up to him and matches his stride. He glances sidelong and sees Elio shaking his head, reluctant smile nestled into the corner of his mouth. They run in sync through the empty concrete tunnels of the streets, still cloaked vaguely in a thin grey mist held in pockets that have yet to see the sun. Elio moves with ease, tireless, like a dancer who leaps endlessly across a stage, higher and higher each time. His light silver hoodie jostles against his neck, and his hair blows back from his face to reveal the small freckles around his hairline. Oliver quickly matches his lungs to the regular swish of Elio’s breathing.

It has been a while since Oliver has gotten a chance to do this, and he has missed it. He used to jog frequently, but it was never about some kind of fitness goal that he had for himself; rather, the motion of running had a restorative effect on him. It was his time to think, to work through his ever tangled thoughts without the constant distraction of their sources staring him in the face. While his body was occupied with the effort of propulsion, his mind was freed up to contemplate, to explore. He relished it as his private time, alone in his head, unreachable for one precious hour by the rest of the world.

He never thought he would enjoy running with someone else. Once, he would have considered it an invasion, an irritation. But somehow, having Elio by his side has only enhanced its calming influence. He feels lighter, more energized. It’s glorious. It strikes him then that if he were alone right now, if he were pounding the pavement with only the hollow slap of his own feet to keep him company, there would be one thought clouding all of the others, one aching need keeping him from all else: Elio. Just his being here makes Oliver’s mind feel more at peace, and Oliver is not sure what to do with that because he still cannot wrap his head around the idea that, all along, the protective bubble he had carved for himself may actually have been meant for two.

As if by some unspoken agreement, they’ve zigzagged their way to a path along the water. The wind is stronger here, and Elio seems content to watch the stray gulls dive drunkenly over its murky surface and a trawler churn toward deeper water. He hasn’t said a word, as if he already understood that Oliver prefers the quiet and didn’t want to rob him of it.

Oliver glances over at him, at his serious profile, eyes upturned to follow the line of a plane as it
descends toward the airport. There is a slight flush on his cheek and the strands of hair around his neck are laden with sweat.

Elio must feel his gaze and turns his head toward Oliver. He smiles faintly. “What?”

You are the most amazing person I’ve ever met, and I almost forgot how devastatingly gorgeous you are. “Nothing.”

His eyebrows flicker. “No, really, what?”

I’ll never get tired of the way your nose crinkles when you’re embarrassed or the way you scratch behind the dollop of your earlobe when you’re about to say something bold. You’re brilliant and funny, and I think my skin is wasted if it doesn’t have your fingerprints on it. “Nothing.” He goes a few more strides before adding, “I’ve missed you.”

“Yeah?” Elio’s lips compress and pull to the side. He turns his head to look forward again. “Good.”

“And what exactly is good about that?”

“Everything.”

“No, it’s damn distracting. It’s a real pain in my ass.”

Elio’s head whips back to him, eyes wide.

“I mean, do you know how long it’s been since I’ve felt that way about someone?”

“How long?”

Oliver squints as if concentrating while he pretends to count on his fingers. “Well, let’s see… it couldn’t have been more than, ummm…three, eighty-six, divided by…carry the one, makes it…”

He throws his arms up and snaps his fingers. “Oh, that’s right!” He shrugs. “It’s never.”

Elio huffs and bops him with his elbow. “I’m serious, Elio.” He tries to swallow, but his throat has gone bone-dry. “I’ve never missed anyone in my life before.” His lungs are burning, but he keeps going. “And after only a few days, I miss you.”

Elio looks up at him and slows his pace slightly. They round a bend where the path juts in a lookout, obscured by a thick line of trees, and Elio eases to a walk and goes out to the barrier and hooks his hands behind his head to catch his breath.

Oliver curses himself for being so out of shape. He’s puffing for air more than he’s proud of, though some of it could very well be the influence of his company. He wipes his forearm over the slickness forming across his brow, blocking his sight so he can’t watch Elio’s nylon exercise pants cling to the backs of his thighs as he bends to stretch his hamstrings. He stares at the ground until Elio stands upright again. He can feel Elio’s deep emerald eyes on him, furrowed in thought.

“I have no mojo around you,” Elio finally says to the sky.

Oliver frowns. It’s the last thing he expected Elio to say. It feels like an accusation, another thing standing between them, and he feels a prickle deep in his gut, but he forces himself to scoff a disbelieving laugh.
“It’s true. God, I always think in my head that I’m going to be clever and erudite and just dazzle you with my witty repartee, and then…” He rolls his eyes and scrubs his hands against the mop of his dark hair before wrenching them over his face. “And then you say something that is so…so…pure and sincere and incredible, and I realize how monumentally stupid all of that was, and it makes me want to either crawl in a hole or just throw myself at you and stuff myself under your arm like a teddy bear.”

Oliver is frozen in place. He has no clue what to say or do. Elio seems genuinely anguished, and Oliver cannot wrap his mind around how that is possible. It had never entered his head that a man as innately charming and talented as Elio would feel that he has to try to impress anyone, especially Oliver, or that he would ever think he has to do anything other than be himself for Oliver to be so saturated with adoration that he can barely function.

Elio seems to interpret Oliver’s silence as derision because he groans and turns his face to the water, sinking his forehead down to the railing. He hisses something to himself that sounds like, “Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

Oliver takes a few steps forward because this won’t do. This is beyond outrageous. Someone like Elio Perlman is not permitted to berate himself and fold inward for the crime of showing himself to be human. He raises his hand, but he’s too afraid to touch him. He inhales deeply. “Elio, you—you are wonderful.”

Elio whips his head up, face red and scowling. “Yeah, sure. Right. A wonderful idiot, maybe.”

Oliver purses his lips. “You’re nothing of the kind.” He bends down until he can catch Elio’s eye to give him a small smile. He waits until he sees Elio’s lips curl up at the ends, then turns toward the water. “I like the way you say things. I don’t know why you’d ever put yourself down like that.”

“So you won’t, I guess.”

Oliver’s stomach churns. “Are you really that afraid of what I think?”

He doesn’t answer, which is answer enough.

“I’m sorry, Elio.” His voice is strained. In his peripheral vision, he sees Elio look at him, brows furrowed. “I’m sorry if I ever gave you the impression that you had to do anything—be anything more than who you are.” He rotates his hand on the rail to cover Elio’s delicately with his fingers. “Because who you are is wonderful.”

“I wasn’t sure…I want you to think I’m…” A sigh. “I guess I just want you to like me.”

Oliver nearly tips over the railing and falls into the river. “Like you? Like you?” His mouth hangs open for a few seconds before he grabs both of Elio’s shoulders and pulls him around so that Oliver can stare down into his face. “Elio, I—I really—“ He bites his lip and adjusts his grip on the bony joints. Say it. Tell him. “I cannot believe you’d ever think something so preposterous. Of course I like you! I liked you the moment I met you. If you want to know the truth, I—I—” Come on, do it. Do. It. “I’ve always liked teddy bears.”

WHAT?

For two seconds, Elio just stares at him, and then his head drops, chin hitting his chest, and Oliver can’t breathe because he is sure that he’s not just ruined this moment, but he’s ruined his perfect chance, his only chance—he’s ruined the whole goddamn thing. He’s sure Elio will see straight through him; he will shoot him a look of painful, wasted disdain and bolt in the opposite direction
and never look back. *For the love of God, why couldn’t I just—*

Oliver is overcome with horror when he realizes that Elio’s shoulders are shaking. *Is he crying? Fucking hell! Oliver, you absolute piece of—* Elio’s face tips back up, and there are tears in the corners of his eyes, but it is because he is laughing so hard. There is no sound coming from his gaping mouth. Oliver releases him, and Elio folds down onto his forearms on the metal bar, hoarse coughs and snorts bubbling out of him.

Oliver is so relieved his legs feel rubbery. He turns his back to the river and leans his hips into the railing next to where Elio is slumped, wiping at his eyes and honking like a goose, trying not to hyperventilate. Oliver can’t help but join him, chuckling and shaking his head in complete amazement. Leave it to Elio to see the best side of it, to follow the brighter path whenever doubts plague him. Leave it to Elio to save Oliver from himself once again.

*How are you real?*

Elio pushes himself upright, waving a hand in front of his nose to dry his face, blowing a long, calming breath through vibrating lips. “Okay, okay, I get it.” He sighs, still grinning helplessly. “I’m sorry I’m such a dork sometimes. I can’t help myself.”

Oliver drapes a melodramatic hand onto his forehead. “Oh, muh gawd, how can I ever put up with you, sir?” he squeals in his best imitation of a Southern belle. “You are positively givin’ me the vapors!” He sounds like an idiot, but if it keeps Elio laughing, he’ll twirl and throw in a fucking curtsy.

Elio rolls his eyes and whacks Oliver lightly in his belly. Then, he flexes out his arms and legs and brushes back his hair, looking like a new man, like he’s molted a layer of his insecurities and is ready to continue on refreshed. “Should we head back?”

“I’m ready whenever you are.” He pulls at his arms for a brief stretch. “And on the way, you can fill me in on how the conductor reacted to the score revisions that you were telling me about the other day.”

“Oliver?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve really missed you, too.”

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When they’ve finished their jog, they stop into Insomniac for a quick drink. There’s a young man working this morning, one Oliver’s never seen before. When the man sees it is Elio who’s entered, he just gives him a bored wave and goes back to the edition of *The Economist* that he’s reading, bent at the waist with his elbows on the counter.

Elio hands Oliver a small bottle of juice. “What, no iced coffee?”

“Oh, that’s horrid!” Elio scoffs. “Bite your tongue.”

“You first.” He wiggles his eyebrows.
After he downs two gulps of liquid, Elio wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, watching as Oliver takes a cautious sip from his, then polishes the whole thing off in one go. Then, he leans to the side to toss the empty bottle into the trash and looks back at Elio. “Whoa, what kind of juice was that, anyway?”

Elio grins. “Apricot. Did you like it?”

He licks his lips. “Delicious.”

Elio chuckles and clears his throat. “Listen, the rehearsal I was supposed to have tonight has been canceled. Any chance you are free for dinner?”

“I am. What’re you in the mood for?”

“I’ll cook. Come to my place around 6:00?”

Oliver slides over to him until their toes are nearly touching. “A tasty Italian meal from a tasty Italian? I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he murmurs.

Elio’s cheeks flush. He bites the inside of his lip for a second, then pushes up on his tiptoes and kisses Oliver on the mouth. It is a relatively chaste, close-mouthed press of lips, but it churns Oliver’s blood more than any sprint ever could. Elio lingers just a few moments longer than he needs to, nuzzling against Oliver’s cheek before reluctantly stepping back. “You better get going so you’re not late,” he tells Oliver softly. “See you later.”

Half-dazed, Oliver can only nod and repeat vaguely, “Later,” before he stumbles to the door and heads out onto the street.

Chapter End Notes

Oliver teases Elio with the names of actors who, in the mid-1980s, would be pretty good matches for Mr. Chalamet. If you're not familiar with them, here are some links you can visit to see for yourself:
Timothy Hutton (who won an Oscar at age 20 for his portrayal of Conrad Jarrett in "Ordinary People")
Patrick Dempsey
Ralph Macchio (from the 1984 film "The Karate Kid")

The character name that Elio teases Oliver with (Johnny Lawrence) is the rival to the title character in The Karate Kid
A phone call before dinner frees Oliver in some ways, but in others, he remains frozen.

It's my birthday, so this is just a small gift to celebrate! :-) 

My undying gratitude to those of you who continue to read and make the most AMAZING comments. I've fallen behind thanks to an insane time at work, but I promise I'll try to reply soon. You are all THE BEST!

When the phone rings, Oliver feels a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. It's him. He can feel it in the warmth of the purr that pours through the quiet of the room, pours into his thoughts that were already swimming with his soft smile and piercing gaze. He's just pulled off his tie and slid out of his trousers, ready to get into something more comfortable before heading over to Elio’s place. He sits down on the bed and throws his legs up, reclining against the headboard.

“Hello?”

“Oliver?”

“Hi there.” Oliver’s voice deepens itself automatically, his smile settling fully onto his lips. “I was just sitting here in my underwear, thinking about you.”

A pause. “You—you were?”

“I was.” He releases an exaggerated sigh. “It’s odd, really. I cannot seem to get undressed in my bedroom anymore without thinking of you. Now, what do you make of that, Mr. Perlman?” He bites his lip. It’s happening again, that bizarre fever that comes over him as soon as he hears Elio’s charming tenor stream through the receiver.

There’s a long exhale. “I—oh, I think that’s—what did you—I mean, what were you thinking of, exactly?”

“How specific should I be?”

There’s a sharp slurp, like Elio’s sucked at his lips through clenched teeth. “Very,” is the hoarse reply.

He closes his eyes. With nothing but the phone line connecting them, Oliver unmoors, struck with a insistent need, a willingness to indulge in the dormant part of him that is hungry and utterly debauched. “I see you above me, Elio. Straddling me, holding me down, and your eyes—your eyes are wild.” Oliver's hand drifts down, brushing his hip and the waistband of his boxers, as if feeling
Elio’s knee there, tight against him. “Your nails are sharp, and they dig into me, but your skin,… your skin is so soft…so pink and raw…”

“Why?” Elio’s voice is like melted caramel. “Why is it like that? What’s happened to it?”

“Me, Elio. It’s all my fault. My face has scrubbed every inch of you, marked you all over.” Oliver’s hand flattens across himself, and his fingers bend under the elastic.

A hum. “Yessss, I—I like that. That’s—God, that’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

“Now you’ve overpowered me. You’re going to take what you want. You want more. And I can’t say no to you, Elio. I would never be able to say no to you.”

Elio’s breath crackles in the phone, quickening, until it is cut off by an audible gulp. “Please, Oliver…please let me…”

“You’re ready. You hold me down with both of your hands, pressed right onto my chest, fingers reaching up to my throat. And I’m staring at you. Just staring because you’re so goddamn beautiful…when you…when you arch your back and just…sink…down…”

In the darkness behind his eyelids, Oliver is lost. Now that he’s started, he can’t stop talking. The very thought of this, the images he sees, are ones that visit him often, tucked constantly under his skin, rolled up in the folds of his sheets. To actually give a voice to them, to let them out into the air of the room, to press them into Elio’s ear, moves him closer to the edge; it brings them to life, and Oliver along with them.

A broken moan. “Oliver…”

“You are—oh, Elio—you—do you feel that?” Oliver’s hand slips on the receiver, damp with sweat, as his other hand works himself steadily, relentlessly.

“God, Oliver…yes…”

“Take it, Elio…So tight…you…”

A stuttered succession of moans

“Just take it. Take it, Elio. Take it all.” Oliver’s head presses deep into the pillow, his hips loosened, moving on their own toward the phantom of the body that they crave.

He vaguely hears strained panting, “Oh, God…Oliver…Oliv…oh, fuck!”

That’s too raw. It shoves Oliver over the cliff. He bites back a yell, and then in a hot rush, he’s flying high, wrapped in a wet darkness, clutching tight to the phone that keeps Elio’s feverish gasps moving in and out of him like ocean waves.

Oliver is unclear how many minutes pass before he smirks. Before he snickers. Before he rolls his head and laughs, laughs until tears stream down his cheeks.

Elio huffs in his ear, “Oliver? What are you doing?”

“Elio, I—I’m so—I don’t even know what to say.” He wipes his eyes against the crook of his arm and sits up. “I’m so sorry.”

There’s a sharp rustling of fabric. “What? What for?” He chuckles lightly. “Oliver, that—that was exactly what I needed.”
“I just—I’ve never done this before. Never. I’ve never even considered doing this kind of thing with anyone! And I—I don’t know what happens to me—what always happens me every time I hear your voice.” He grips the phone until his knuckles whiten. “Jesus, you’re so amazing. Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

There’s a pause, then a soft snort as the voice softens. “Yeah, I think I do…Elio…”

Oliver’s heart soars, and he squeezes his eyes shut. “Oliver…”

Then, a sudden thought pops into his head. “Wait, why did you call me? You didn’t call to cancel on me, did you?”

“What? No! No, I just—I realized I should’ve asked—you don’t have any allergies, do you?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“So, is shrimp all right for dinner?”

Oliver can almost see his face, the earnest expression, the ghost of uncertainty passing his eyes, oblivious to the fact that, when Oliver thinks of seeing Elio, of being near enough to smell his skin, of watching his fingers move subconsciously as his mind works in an opposite direction, of drawing next to him as he gesticulates to explain a part of his day, of witnessing his cheeks grow pink when Oliver can no longer look away and openly devours him with eyes that incessantly covet, dinner is altogether, one hundred percent beside the point. “That’ll be perfect.”

“Great!” He inhales sharply. “Oliver?”

“Yeah?”

“Get here soon. As soon as you can. Okay?” He clears his throat. “I mean, come early, you know, if you want to.”

Oliver grins broadly up at the ceiling. “My dear Elio, I am pretty sure I just did.”

Elio laughs. “Yeah, well, guess that makes two of us. All the more reason, then, right?”

Now. Do it now. “Elio?”

“Hmm?”

He opens his mouth, but there’s nothing. After everything they’ve just done, after all of the other words have fallen from his tongue so easily, these words lock his jaw tight. He grits his teeth.

“Oliver?”

“I—I have to—I wanted to tell you that—“ His throat rasps like tinder.

“Yeah?”

“I—I’ll be there soon.”

“Ok. I’ll be waiting.”

As he hangs up, Oliver scratches his head and lays his forehead in his palm. Just as you said, Elio—that makes two of us.
Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, dinner is served, and progress is made on the things that matter.
The Main Course: Blood and Confessions

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio eat well, get messy, and make progress on the things that matter.

Chapter Notes

Per their conversation during the morning run in chapter 12, Elio teases Oliver about looking like Johnny Lawrence from "The Karate Kid."

P.S. callmemaybyyourname, re your reply: your wish is my command! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as he opens the red door, he hears music, the faint strains of a jubilant piano, rolling over him like a sudden memory. It draws his feet over the threshold and up the stairs before his brain can register the eager roiling in his stomach.

There it is again, that strange feeling that comes over him, for just a few seconds like a sensation of déjà vu, that he’s walking down a familiar path, that he’s entered that door and trod these stairs many times, naturally, for years. Carrying groceries or lugging his bag and an armful of books, shaking out an umbrella and cursing the traffic or racing up two steps at a time because Oliver has to see him, in a rush to deliver some news and make the rest of his day real by passing it through Elio’s ears, changing everything from black and white to technicolor. To burst through the door and throw the book from Elio’s hands and spin him around the room just to see how his eyes close and his mouth opens to let out the music of his laughter. And as his feet take each individual riser, it chisels more of the exhaustion of the day away. Comfort awaits him; safety, care, relaxation. Excitement. Bliss.

It’s good to be home.

Oliver stops on the landing and stares at the door, its carved wooden panels, the smooth brass knob, polished by years of wear. Before he knocks, he makes a promise to himself, and it is breathtakingly simple: he’s not going to hide anymore. He’s going to show Elio who he is, who he really is, and he will face the consequences of that. He owes it to Elio, the honesty. He owes it to himself, for all the years of leaden retreat from all of the luxuries that the people around him indulged in, like furtive glances and warm hands and shared chuckles over glasses of wine. Elio has given these to him, the simple pleasures of one heart to another, and now that they come from Elio, Oliver wants them desperately, wants every gesture, every sigh. And somehow Oliver needs to slice open his chest and show Elio the inside of his heart, let him see how perfectly he fits into it, how he’s the only person who has ever been allowed to close to it, and now he owns it. It is Elio’s to protect or destroy.

A crack of his knuckles on one hand then the other, and Oliver raps on the door.

No response.

He knocks louder.
The muted piano music continues to reverberate in the small space of the hallway.

He can’t help it. A twinge of anxiety arrows his chest. What if something’s happened? Elio has to be home, else he’s got the most musically inclined housebreaker the city’s ever known. Could he be hurt? Could he be crumpled in a heap in a corner, unable to call for help? Just the passing thought is enough for Oliver to clench the knob and turn it hard.

The door pops open.

He pulls it just wide enough to lean his head inside. “Elio?”

“Hey, Oliver! Come on in!”

The sunny call pumps his blood once more. He cranes his neck around to see Elio standing in front of his kitchen sink holding a strainer full of shrimp, tails poking up above the rim and water pouring in thin lines from beneath it. Oliver slides through the door and closes it tight, putting down the bag in his hand and slipping out of his shoes. “It smells divine in here.” There is a sizzle from the stovetop and hints of garlic and lemon in the air.

Elio grins, shaking the strainer to get out the excess water. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just a quick *gamberetti con linguine*.”

Oliver comes around the counter and slips his arms around Elio’s waist from behind, pressing against the long line of his back and rubbing his face in his hair. “That sounds…” He kisses the bend of his neck, pressing into the muscle with his tongue. “…delicious.” He can feel Elio lean back against him, hears his soft breath of sigh when Oliver’s lips meet his skin.

There’s a metallic clatter, and Oliver peeks an eye open to see that Elio has dropped the strainer into the sink. “Oh, sorry, am I distracting the chef?” he whispers into Elio’s ear, wet lips pulling against its delicate shell.

Elio slaps his hands at a towel to dry them quickly, then rotates in Oliver’s arms and grabs at his head with both hands, dragging their mouths together roughly, breathing out a grateful moan as soon as their tongues meet. He hooks a leg around one of Oliver’s and compresses the rest of his body to him. “Missed you,” he pants, pulling Oliver’s upper lip into his mouth. “Missed you so much.”

“Sorry,” Oliver mumbles, pressing into him, kissing him deeply. “I’d have…been here sooner but…I got this phone call…” He chuckles low in his throat. “And I’m so sorry, but I had to take it. I *had* to.” He kisses a line up Elio’s jaw and nuzzles against the hair.

Elio’s arms drop and snake around his waist, letting Oliver’s upper body envelop him. “Well, sounds like it was important. Hope you handled your business well.” His hands come to rest on the back pockets of Oliver’s jeans, and he fits them inside, squeezing gently to knead the flesh beneath.

Oliver inhales. “I did the best I could.” He exhaled heavily, loosening his hips to circle slightly, following the motion of Elio’s hands. “And if you keep *that* up, you’re going to have to repeat the transaction for me, all on your own.” His teeth nip at the bend of Elio’s neck.

“All right, all right,” Elio sighs, cupping his hands around Oliver’s hips and putting a reluctant arm’s length between them. “How about I put you to work, then?” He nods at a tall pot on the stovetop as he crosses the room to turn the music down. “You can take care of the pasta, and I’ll sauté the shrimp.”

Oliver salutes him jauntily. “Yes, Chef.”
Elio grimaces as he reclaims his shrimp and shakes the strainer a few more times to rid it of the last of the rinse water. “That’s Mafalda. I’m stealing from her again.”

“Ok, how about Food Sensei, then?” Oliver bows slightly towards him and peeks at the water in the pot to see it just starting to boil.

Elio snorts, shoving a ceramic dish over to him. “Ok, all right. Here, salt the water first, Johnny.”

Oliver’s jaw drops. “I cannot believe you called me that!”

“I warned you,” Elio sings, biting his lip to keep from giggling. He adds a few ingredients to his sauté and shoves the mixture around with the flat of a wooden spatula.

“You really think I look like him?”

“Dead ringer.”

Oliver frowns and stirs the strands of pasta for a few moments. He knows Elio’s kidding. He knows he himself had started the whole thing that morning. But this feels off to him somehow. “But…but he’s the bad guy.”

“Hmm?” Elio’s concentrating on adjusting the flame under the pan.

“Johnny Lawrence. He’s the antagonist, and he is a complete jerk.”

Elio glances over at him. “Why do you say that?”

“Not many good things one could say about a coward who exploits other people’s weaknesses for personal gain,” he grumbles. What is the matter with you? Lighten. Up.

“Nah, I don’t see it that way.” Elio is quiet for a moment, sprinkling in pinches of an herb and some capers. “He was just…unappreciated. Misled by the people he thought he could trust.” He switches his spatula to the other hand for a moment to lean up and kiss Oliver on the cheek. “In the end, he redeems himself.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“It’s the truth.” Elio reaches over and takes a few ladles of pasta water and adds them to the pan. Then, he dumps his shrimp into the thickening sauce, and they crackle. In seconds they transform from grey opalescence to an opaque white. “And I respect that about him. He’s stronger than he ever thought he was. He just had to believe it before he could act on it.”

Oliver blushes, feeling more than a little foolish, caught out once again. He should have known that Elio would read him easily, would sense where his mind would lead Oliver, down that same worn track of cautious uncertainty. Am I ever going to stop being twelve? He keeps his eyes on the steaming pot, arm moving in slow circles to baby the linguine noodles as they cook. “Ok. Maybe.” Let it go.

Elio reaches over and fishes out a noodle with a fork. He takes a bite and smiles. “Perfect! Al dente and just in time because I am starving!” He clicks off all of the knobs and drags over a large bowl.

“Would you mind opening the wine? I put some in the fridge to chill.”

“Of course.” He pulls out a bottle of pinot grigio. “Corkscrew?”

Elio fishes one from a drawer, an old-style twist-and-pull, and gives him an impish grin. “Here you
go. Consider it your test to see if you could survive in Italy—if you can open a bottle with this, you’re an honorary citizen.”

A raised eyebrow. “Is that so?” Oliver unwinds the foil and twirls the device into the cork like it’s made of butter, easing it from the bottle with a smooth pull and a satisfying pop in a matter of seconds.

Elio gapes at him, and Oliver schools his features to keep a triumphant smirk at bay. He’d used one of these so often as a bartender, he could practically do it blindfolded. “How’d I do?”

“Damn!” His face flushes, and he looks from the bottle up to Oliver’s eyes intently, like he wants to throw him to the floor and claim him right there in front of the stove.

“I can open a champagne bottle with a sword, too, if you’re interested.”

Elio swallows, throat working visibly, before a huge smile splits his face in two. “Well, benvenuto, my friend! Welcome to the family!”

Oliver laughs and fills their glasses while Elio tosses the pasta and shrimp together in the bowl. He plates their food with an artful twist, and they sit at a small wooden table in an alcove in the kitchen. At the first bite, Oliver groans. “Ok, and I thought coffee was your specialty, but this is obscene.” He takes another bite and washes it down with a swig of the wine. “So tell me about this wondrous Mafalda and how I can get her to adopt me.”

Elio nearly spits out his sip of wine trying not to laugh. He describes their family home in northern Italy, the long summers there, the time spent with his music and his reading, seemingly endless hours that had felt empty to him as a kid. “I had friends there, of course, but…I don’t know…it always seemed pretty lonely.”

“What about your folks? Were they not around much?”

“Oh, no, they were. Sometimes too much.” He smiles fondly, twirling his glass in his fingertips before taking another sip. “But they’re my parents. I know they love me, and they’ve never been anything but open and supportive. I always knew I could talk to them if I really needed to.” He winces. “I…I guess I was looking for…something else. I don’t know, maybe someone else. You know what I mean?”

*Better than you could ever know.* “It always felt like there was a missing piece...”

“...a missing person...”

“...to spend the time with, so it wasn’t like you were just passing the time…”

“...waiting for summer to end.”

They silently regard each other over their drained glasses. Oliver feels the hair raise on the back of his neck, like the air has ionized, like tectonic plates have shifted just right and settled the whole of the Earth’s crust into a solid, stable groove.

It isn’t long before the pan empties and the bottle along with it. Elio puts both in the sink and turns to Oliver where he sits, leaning back with his ankles crossed and fingers across his stomach. “Got room for dessert?”

“Depends. You plan on rolling me out of here?”
Elio’s eyebrow raises. “Rolling you?” He dips forward in an exaggerated leer. “That can be arranged.”

Oliver smiles. “All righty then, what have you got?”

“Strawberries and cream.” He shrugs. “Simple but delicious.”

“Two of my favorite words.”

Elio puts a bowl in the center of the table filled with whole strawberries, next to a separate bowl of whipped cream, and they use the leaves of the fruit as the holder to dip. Oliver dunks the large cone of red and swirls it around, drawing a figure eight in the white fluff. He holds it over his head to drop it into his mouth and ends up with a slick of cream down his nose. Elio laughs and tries to cover his face and the pink oozing through the gaps of his teeth and cupping on his tongue.

“What? Something funny, Perlman?”

“No! Not at all. You look gorgeous.” He narrows his eyes. “Oh, wait a minute. Hang on.” He angles his body over the table. “I think…I think you missed a spot.” He dunks his index finger into the white tip of cream and flicks it at Oliver’s face, leaving a thick dollop in the center of Oliver’s forehead. His smile is electric. “Don’t worry! I got it!”

Oliver somehow manages to remain unmoved. “Thanks,” he says calmly. “I needed that.” He casually reaches an arm forward and strums his fingers on the table. He clears his throat with his most arch professorial sobriety, tone affable and academic, like Richard Attenborough narrating a documentary about the ocean. “You know, this situation reminds me of an axiom, a valuable cornerstone to interpersonal relationships that all of us would do wise to practice in order to show the proper degree of respect.”

Elio purses his lips. “Oooohh, tell me, tell me!” He flutters his fingers and settles his chin on the heels of his hands before spluttering a high-pitched giggle.

Oliver walks his fingers forward and picks up the stirring spoon from the bowl of cream. “Well…Elio…It is better to give than to receive.” His wrist twitches, and Elio’s eyes and nose disappear in a white cloud with an audible splat. His perfect lips fall open with a gasp. “Oh, you are so dead!

They both dive for the bowl, scooping up handfuls and lobbing them blindly. They shout and dodge, both laughing too hard to form actual words. Oliver’s vision disappears behind a wet, white veil, and he drops to the floor and flops his limbs out. “You got me,” he gurgles. “Kill shot. I’ve been creamed!”

Elio groans. “Oh, God, that was terrible!”

“What do you mean? Who doesn’t love a pun?”

“Everyone.”

“Lies, Perlman, lies! You’re just jealous that you didn’t think of it.”

“You’re right. My eight-year-old self is totally pissed.”

Oliver sits up and wipes the whipped cream out of his eyebrows, licking it off his fingers and trying to reach his tongue to the tip of his nose to clean that off, too. Elio tosses him a dish towel and
Oliver somehow manages to wipe away his mess without immediately reapplying it to another part of his face, so he counts that as a win.

Elio slaps off the water faucet and grabs for another towel, but when he turns and lifts his head up, there is a thick red line of blood pumping out of his nose.

“Oh, shit!”

“What is—” Elio looks down and sees the drips on his towel. He shove the wad of cloth against his face and growls with irritation. He fumbles around in the freezer and bundles a rag with ice, then slumps down on the floor.

Oliver feels sick. He falls next to Elio and rubs his leg. “Are you all right? Is this my fault? I’m sorry, Elio, I’m sorry.”

Elio rubs Oliver’s shoulder, “Stop, of course it’s not your fault! It happens all the time.”

Oliver blinks and sits back slowly to give him some air. He swallows hard, feeling the burn of bile in his throat. He rubs Elio’s feet to try to soothe him, and also to distract himself from his spiraling nausea.

Elio is watching him. “You ok? You look pale. Do you hate the sight of blood?”

Oliver feels his teeth clench painfully, and he looks at Elio like a drill. “No, I hate the sight of yours. I know you’re not, but even the thought of you…of you being hurt is…” Oliver’s face hardens to a mask of stone. His mind flips, imagining this moment as something darker, something unthinkable in which someone has deliberately caused Elio’s nose to bleed, like in one of the dozens of fights he’d seen around the bars where he grew up, sucker punches from fragile egos desperate to be saved or pissed-off brutes who hate the world for their own shortcomings or whatever else drove buzzed, overheated men to pound on one another. One of those sweaty animals spinning Elio around by the shoulder and driving in with a fist, a piston that snaps his neck to the side and sends him crashing to the ground with spurts of red over his face. Kicking him in the ribs as he writhes vulnerable on the pavement, laughing down into his face. Elio’s blood pooling, dark and thick, matted in his hair and coughing out of his mouth…

Elio shakes him. “Oliver, please, it’s all right. Look, it’s stopped already.” He wipes his face clean and tosses the rag and ice in the sink. “See? It’s all right, really.”

Oliver takes Elio’s face in his hands, holding it gingerly, like a priceless artifact, inspecting it, absorbing every detail that he’d already committed to memory, confirming the slope of each curve, the tilt of each angle. His jaw is tight, and he can feel it, feel the pressure of desperate tears that he does not want to let go. He can’t. If he starts, he won’t stop.

Elio can see it, too. His features soften, and he raises a hand, covering Oliver’s where they cradle his jaw. “Oliver? Oliver, I—“

“I worship you.” It is barely spoken, more just a movement of his lips.

The dark emerald of Elio’s eyes glitters with its own light. “What did you say?” A whisper, a breath.

“I worship you, Elio,” he groans, face contorted, a pained expression that causes Elio’s hand to caress his cheek. “God, I worship you, and it’s so fucking hard to…so hard to say it to you, and I don’t even know why, I—I just…” He breaks off, burying his head in Elio’s neck.
Elio whispers in his ear, fingers trailing down his chest. “It’s all right, Oliver.”

“No, Elio, it isn’t! You’re good. You’re so fucking good. You’re kind and generous, and you always take care of me before I even know that I need help. And I cannot believe that you’re not sick of my shit already. You should be, you really should be!

“I care about you, Oliver!” He clutches his hands into Oliver’s shirt. “That doesn’t mean that I’m going to kick you out as soon as you have a difficult moment. This is how it’s supposed to go! This is how it works!”

“You deserve so much more, though. More than—“

“More than what?” Elio moves closer and holds him firmly, one hand gripping the back of Oliver’s neck, the other cupping his cheek, keeping his head from dipping. The green eyes whip back and forth between both of the blue, commanding them to stay, commanding them to see. “More than someone who is sweet and funny and smart? Someone who is thoughtful and protective and hard working? Someone who’s gorgeous and successful and should have the biggest ego in the city but who is humble to an outright fault? More than that?”

The tears swell in his eyes. “Elio…” It’s a protest and a plea.

“Oliver, you have shown me. You show me more every time I see you.” He kisses his temple, his cheekbone, then pulls Oliver’s head back so he can look into his eyes. “You have.”

*I’m in love with him.* Right at this moment, Oliver is certain. It pierces him through like an iron spike. He knows it. He knows it without a doubt, straight down to the bones that ache to enfold his narrow frame, and all the way up to the skin that shivers at his every touch. He doesn’t know what to do with this knowledge; the emotion has swirled nameless in him for so long, and now that he’s defined it clearly, he can’t process it. It feels too big to be contained, as if it’s going to come seeping out of his fingertips, bubble from every pore. He feels like he is ripping apart, atom by atom.

Elio stands, and as he does, his hands slide down Oliver’s arms until they reach his own. “And right now, I want you to show me again.” He tugs, and Oliver rises without a thought and follows him, through a doorway and into the darkened cool of Elio’s bedroom. Elio lets go and sits down on the edge of the mattress, his eyes pinned to Oliver’s, hands drawing lines, forward and back, on the grey duvet. His hands arc over his head, and he lays back and shuts his eyes. ”*Show me.*”

The rest of the night feels like a memory, a dream he once had, a premonition of the moment he would come closest to God before his bones make it into the ground. Peeling back his clothes, layer by layer. Tasting him, from the swell of his eyelids to bend of his elbow, the dip of his sacrum to the rise of his arch. Holding him securely around his shoulders to sink deep inside his body, finding a rhythm that curls his toes and sends them into an endless loop, giving and receiving, higher and higher. Savoring every moan, every gasp, every broken syllable of his own name. Waves of pleasure that build, strong and hot, crest in a senseless blur of euphoria, and recede, just to build again, and again, higher each time.

It *is* worship, worship in its purest form, and it takes Oliver to a realm he’s never shared with anyone in his life before. It is a degree of bliss that he never knew existed and could not have fathomed, heat and light on a scale unmeasurable except by the stars.

And when they finally rest, knotted tight around one another, one marvelous, bewildering realization carries Oliver into the ethers: *I could have this. This could be my life.*
My dedicated and sincere thank you to reader Wegiemom, who corrected my reference: the tagline that Oliver quotes ("Thanks, I needed that") is from Skin Bracer, not Aqua Velva! I'm so disappointed in myself and my commercial recall! 😞

They're getting there, bit by bit... :-)
Addiction and Recovery

Chapter Summary

Personal demons are the only ones we ever should fear.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I hope you're still with me. Life has not been cooperating with my writing ambitions these days, so I have been most eager to get this chapter to you. Take pity on my poor soul, and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The door sinks closed on pressurized hinges, the immediate hush around him more like a library than the lobby of a recital hall. The commons area outside the entrance is a geometric arrangement of squares, leather couches of a minimalist and modern flavor, lit with recessed fluorescent bulbs, leaving the rest of the area shrouded in shadows. Two blonde girls huddle together in one of the quadrants, notebooks open, whispering to each other as rises of a solo piano waft through.

Oliver checks his watch. 7:40.

The note Elio had left him that morning had been more than a little vague: *Morse Hall, 8:00. Just follow the piano sounds...*

The night before, Oliver had been close to sleep, foot ticking back and forth against Elio’s calf, one leg slung between his, one arm clutching his ribcage and the other cradling his head. He’d murmured into the hair behind Elio’s ear, “You busy tomorrow?”

Elio had hummed faintly. “Reception at the dean’s place.”

“Oh.” Oliver had gurgled. “Those are always dreadful...tell him you can’t make it.”

“What’s my excuse?”

He’d rubbed his nose in the soft curls. “Crisis at home...a naked man in your bed.”

Elio huffs and pushes back into him. “Don’t tempt me.” He had been quiet for a few moments before adding, “You could...come with me...you know, if you want...might make it tolerable...”

Oliver had stilled. “Really? You mean it?”

“No, I’m lying.” Droll, even on the verge of slumber. Oliver had sunk his teeth into Elio’s shoulder, making the latter snicker into their shared pillow. “It’s all right to say no. I won’t be upset. Like you said, these things are grueling.”

There was a fluttering in his chest. “No...I mean, yes, I...I’d love to come...with you.”
“Okay.” Elio had reached up and laced his fingers into Oliver’s where the large hand pressed into the flesh over Elio’s heart. “It’s a date. If it’s all right, we can meet up on campus, since I won’t have much time between my rehearsal and the reception.”

Oliver decides to sit down on one of the low couches and relax until Elio finishes. Perhaps he can recover enough of himself from the hectic day so that he will be able to make intelligent conversation within Elio’s professional sphere and not embarrass the hell out of both of them. He squeaks into the soft leather and stretches his legs out in front of him, crossing his ankles and closing his eyes.

Behind him, one of the girls giggles softly. “God, he’s so…Did you hear him in Boyd’s class? His lecture about that Haydn transcription?”

“What’d he say?”

“How should I know? I was just staring at his face the whole time! Those green eyes…” She groans and there’s a rustling of paper.

“God, I know! And those lips? They should be illegal. He’s so hot!”

“No, wait until he describes some of the dynamic markings for Respighi in Italian. I kid you not, your fucking ovaries will explode. I’m serious!”

A twinkle of laughter in stereo. Oliver laces his fingers together over his stomach and smiles to himself. He’d known immediately who the girls must have been talking about, and who could blame them? Elio’s assets were pretty hard to ignore. Damn near impossible, in fact.

“I don’t know how Marco can stand it. He would know better than anyone, I guess.”

There’s a demure gasp. “He’s shameless, isn’t he? Did you hear him at the last master class? All those questions about hand position?” Her voice tweaks low. “‘Ah, could you demonstrate, please?’” She snorts. “Give me a break! As if we didn’t know his hands have been all over that.”

“Yeah, really.”

Oliver’s eyes pop open.

“I can’t believe he didn’t jump him right there.”

“Why bother? That’s what practice rooms are for!”

A slap, probably a high-five, and shared laughter.

“But do you really know that they—“

“Well, that’s what Kyle said. He knows Marco’s roommate. Besides, you’ve seen them together. I mean, wasn’t Marco like an underwear model or something? If that ass is going after you—I don’t care who you are—you aren’t saying no, you know what I mean?”

“No doubt.”

A crinkling of paper. “They’re probably in there doing it on the piano bench right now!”

“God, I would pay to see that!”

More peals of laughter, muted, as if palms were clasped over mouths, smearing their pink glitter lipgloss. Oliver swallows and feels a bead of sweat follow his hairline around to his ear.
“Oh, let’s get out of here,” one of them finally whines. “I’m tired.”

“I need sushi.”

“Sure, whatever.”

There are some scrapes and thuds, books stacked up and stuffed into canvas backpacks, then the rip of a zipper and the groan of the leather as they rise. After he hears the click and hiss of the door to the stairwell, Oliver rises and paces jerkily back and forth on the long strip of patterned carpet. This is not happening. This. Is. Not. Happening. Please tell me this is not happening. He rubs a shaky hand over his face, trying to make up his mind what to do. Part of him wants to run, to bust out of the door and tear off into the night and not stop until his feet are bloody nubs at the ends of his legs. Instead, he goes over to the thick oaken door to the recital hall, and with a deep breath in, silently pulls the door wide.

The sloping fan of seats is empty. Oliver sinks down into one of the velour chairs in the last row. He wipes his damp palms on his pants before knotting them securely together, and letting his chin fall onto his knuckles, elbows driving into the tops of his thighs. The dark stage has only a single piano. Elio is sitting at the bench while a young man is draped over the top board, as if the Steinway is the only obstacle keeping him from falling into Elio’s lap. The student, presumably the fabled Marco, is wearing a light blue Oxford shirt, just tight enough to emphasize the thick, rippling muscles beneath. His grey Dockers do the same for his lower half, and based on the concave shape of his rear, Oliver is certain that the girls in the lobby were not exaggerating in their estimation of his appeal to both sexes. His black hair is slicked back artfully, and it falls to a perfectly trimmed point at the base of his skull.

Even from this distance, Oliver is hit with relentless waves of the man’s smooth confidence. He’s encountered so many like him over the years, the kind who know exactly how to fill up a room, how to own a space and draw every eye until he languidly chooses which guppy he wants, leaving the rest bereft and begging for more.

“…and it should be marcato into measure 32. Really push it; give it finesse. It has to make a contrast to the tenuto in—”

“In the rondo section?”

“Right. Try it once more.”

Marco whips around to the bench before Elio can move out of his way. “Oh, sorry about that,” the boy says when they collide, voice dipping deep. He turns his face to Elio’s so that there are barely two inches between their noses and angles it with a calculated precision. All it would take is the subtle shifting of a shoulder to bring their lips together.

Oliver sucks in a sharp breath and digs his nails viciously into his own flesh to keep himself from leaping to his feet. No! Stop! Please don’t do this! Please don’t do this to me! He wants to scream it, but he can feel the gaping hole where his vocal cords used to be before they had withered and disintegrated like dead autumn leaves. Until this moment, he had not truly understood the concept of “seeing red,” but Oliver’s vision swarms with fat drips of blood. His ears rush with it, and he wants desperately to close his eyes against it all and hide in the darkness, but he refuses to, unwilling to separate himself even for a moment from the apocalypse unfolding in front of him. He wants a good look at the turnip cloud before it rips through his foundation and destroys all traces of who he had almost been.

“Start at 25.”
It takes Oliver an excruciating amount of time to realize something singular about the scene on the stage: Elio doesn’t even seem to notice it. Oliver had been certain he was watching a hideous Tragedy, and Marco would no doubt swear he was in the midst of an epic Romance, but for his part, Elio had not bought a ticket to either show. His eyes remain steadfast on the sheets of music on the rack. When Marco slides into him, he simply scoots off the other side and comes around to stand behind, arms folded.

Marco places his hands, and after a momentary pause, pounds out a line of melody. Elio stares intently over the man’s shoulder, focused on the music. Oliver’s seen that expression many times before, the one where Elio is lost in his head, swarming thoughts overriding his speech. Now, it is as if he’s considering five rhythmic variations while the current version floats toward him. Marco trails off and twists his body again, brushing back against Elio’s leg before looking up into his face. “How was that?”

“Better, better,” is the vague reply, hand poised with a pencil at the ready. After a beat, Elio leans forward to make a couple of notations. Then, he looks at his watch and puts his hands on his hips. “All right, that’s enough for tonight. We’ll work on the second movement on Thursday with the whole ensemble, all right?”

“I look forward to it,” Marco gushes. Oliver watches with crawling, itchy skin while the young man inches toward Elio under the guise of slowly shuffling his music together to put into a black folio. Elio has stepped around the body of the instrument and is bent over a notebook, scribbling furiously. Marco slides from behind the bench and hesitates, eyes sweeping up and down Elio’s body. He shifts his folio to the opposite hand and leans back against the piano, a blatant play to try to get Elio to look up at him. When Elio slams the notebook closed and stands straight, Marco clears his throat. “Um, so, I was wondering if…”

Elio pivots toward him, shoving his papers into a black leather satchel, eyebrows folded together with a thorny mien Oliver has never seen him wear before. It looks like aggravation, annoyance. Antipathy. It is disconcerting, and Oliver slumps against the back of his seat, as if shrinking away from it. But then Elio's gaze sweeps far enough around that he sees Oliver up in the shadows, and his face transmogrifies, the unsettling severity melting immediately to his familiar warm smile, like a window shade ripping open to reveal the afternoon sun. Whatever Marco was going to propose remains unspoken.

“Have a good night,” Elio throws over his shoulder as he scoops up his bag and stalks off the stage, trotting up the aisle toward Oliver’s seat. “Hey, you found it!” He reaches Oliver’s side in only a few of his long strides. “Any trouble following my breadcrumbs?”

Oliver can’t move. He stares up at Elio—the lopsided grin, the loose curl of hair in the center of his forehead, the glowing arrow of skin between the tips of his shirt collar—and shakes his head dumbly.

“I’ll just drop my bag in the office, and then we can walk over. He’s not far from here, and it’s not like I want to be the first one there.” He moves on and holds the door for Oliver.

The stage is empty. Marco had slithered away through its wings. With effort, Oliver pushes himself out of his seat on creaky arms. His legs are numb, so he waits a few more moments before dragging his feet out into the aisle.

When he’s sure he won’t fall and break his bones by tumbling backward, he follows Elio to the doorway.

Elio’s eyes narrow. “You all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
Oliver exhales slowly through his nose, and his chest relaxes. It is as if he’d held his breath since entering the room. “I thought I had.”

“Uh-oh. So what happened?”

His head begins to clear. “Turns out I was wrong. I was wrong about the whole thing.” A thick swallow. “All I had seen were shadows.”

They pass over the threshold together.

They ride the slow lift to the top floor. Elio fidgets, tugging at his jacket and brushing his hair away from his face repeatedly with claw-like fingers. Oliver catches his eye in the reflection off the smooth metal, and he sighs, vibrating his pink lips. “I hate these kinds of things. I feel like a bug under a microscope.”

Oliver smiles quietly and turns Elio to face him. He flattens the collar and lapels, straightens the tie Elio had flung on as a reluctant afterthought. “There.” He meets the keen eyes. “You’re perfect.”

The mouth compresses and cinches to the side, and the eyes fall to his shoes. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

As he starts to turn away, Elio stops him with hand on his forearm. “No, I mean thank you. For being here. With me.”

Oliver stares at him for several moments before shaking his head. Then, he steps forward and leans down next to Elio’s ear. “There is never…a single place…in this entire world…I ever want to be more…than with you,” he whispers.

The carriage dings, and he steps back, folding his hands in front of him before the door sweeps open directly into the loft. It is a spacious corner property with a wall of windows and a roof deck lit with strings of lights. The space is sparsely decorated and tasteful, full of groups of people holding glasses and murmuring to one another. A short balding man in a cream-colored turtleneck and bright blue jacket waves at them. “Elio! So glad to see you!”

Elio smiles and shakes the man’s hand. “Hello, Dean Frazier, thank you for having me.” He pivots to allow Oliver to come beside him so he can make their introduction.

The man takes Oliver’s hand and gives it a few solid pumps. “Call me Wendell. Are you a musician, too, Oliver?”

Oliver likes him immediately. The man exudes a warmth and friendliness that is rare in these circles. Oliver senses that when Wendell asks a question, he actually wants to know the answer, rather than using it as a flimsy prelude to holding court about himself. “I wish I had that kind of ability, sir. What Elio does, I could never manage, regardless of any training I’d had.”

Wendell beams and pats Elio’s arm. “Well, Mr. Perlman is a remarkable talent. We were very lucky to get him.”

Oliver glances over at Elio as the latter stuffs his hands in his pockets and blushes furiously. He
makes sure to catch his eyes before answering the dean. “I couldn’t agree more.”

The next hour passes harmlessly. While Elio makes his rounds, Oliver nurses a glass of a fizzy Gewürztraminer and chats with an older gentleman whom he is surprised to discover is in charge of the New Music Ensemble.

“Really?”

The man smirks. “Don’t let the white hair fool you, kid. ‘New’ is a relative term.”

Oliver holds up a plaintive hand. “I wouldn’t dream of it, sir. I try not to underestimate people.”

“Sometimes that is hard to do when most everyone is a dumbass, though, right?”

Oliver’s grin widens, and he shrugs in response and takes a sip of wine.

The professor cocks his head slightly, and his gaze grows a bit distant. “The real kicker is the moment when you realize that the worst offender you’ll ever meet is yourself. Once you accept that, confession becomes your biggest ally.”

Oliver thinks of Marco and Elio and ghosts. “Is that right?”

The old man’s eyebrow quirks. “Acceptance is the twelfth step in the program, is it not? It’s the only way to conquer our collective addiction to disillusionment.”

Oliver’s mind is at war with itself on their way back to Elio’s. When they get inside, Elio hangs up his coat slowly and follows into the kitchen when Oliver goes for a glass of water. He leans in the door frame. “You’ve barely spoken five words in the last half hour. You sure you’re all right? Have I done something to upset you?”

Oliver washes his glass out and turns around, reaching behind his back to hold onto the edge of the counter. Elio’s forehead is crimped in the middle, teeth gripping one corner of his mouth. “You were amazing tonight,” Oliver says quietly.

Elio shifts his weight from one leg to the other, like he’s not sure if he should stand or run. Oliver reaches over and takes hold of his hand. “I know it’s late, but…” He winces. “Can we talk for a while?”

He doesn’t answer, just lets Oliver lead him through the other room to the bedroom. Oliver toes off only his shoes, and they climb on top of the covers on opposite sides and sit cross-legged, facing each other across a thin divide of blankets. “I have a confession to make.”

Elio’s mouth unhinges, and his dark eyes waver in the soft light. “What does that mean?” he whispers.

“I want to…I need to explain something to you. You deserve to know.” He shakes his head and plays with the hem of his pant leg. “You probably already do.”

Elio wraps his arms around himself and waits.
“The very first lesson I learned about relationships, about love, was that there was an indefinable quality to those who could be loved. And those people, those lucky people who had it? They were the ones who were admired and adored, the ones whose jokes always seemed to be funny and whose inane small talk managed to be fascinating. I mean, these people were magical! They got people to snatch their phone calls on the first ring and could practically dress in the dark in dirty clothes and make it a fashion trend!” He rolls his eyes to the ceiling and sighs. “They were the ones who were wanted. They were the ones who got people to stay, who got people to remember.” His gaze centers on Elio’s face. “I have never been one of these people.”

Elio clutches his legs tighter but says nothing.

“See, the gift they had, that indefinable spark, eluded me. I knew they had it because I saw its effects, but I never saw it. It was like a phantom, and if I tried to see it, tried to look right at it so that I could figure out what it was, it evaporated.” He snorts softly, eyes unfocused. “I tried so hard… too hard…but all of these people seemed perfectly ordinary to me. I didn’t know what made them special, but I guess all I really needed to know was that I was not.” He shrugs slightly. “In fact, that was the perfect word for it: not. Not bad. Not great. Not anything.” He looks directly into Elio’s eyes. “I was always a good student, so I made sure to remind myself of this constantly, that I held no interest for anyone, that I was in no way special. I was, and always would be, average. Bland. Unremarkable. Forever beige in a world of vibrance.”

Elio sniffs and swipes at a tear hovering on his cheekbone. Part of Oliver marvels at him, how he still knows exactly what to do, how he knows that words right now would be useless.

Oliver’s voice is raw. “You know me better than anyone, so I’m pretty sure none of this comes as a shock to you. But I had to tell you anyway just to…to let you see the worst parts of me, I guess.” He wipes his nose. “So you can see me as I do.”

“What happened tonight, Oliver?”

He tells him the rest, the girls and their conversation, Marco and his overtures. By the end of it, Elio’s hand is clenched in a tight fist, and his eyes could carve stone. “Ce petit bâtard… I knew there was something weird about that guy! I never liked him, but I thought I was just being unfair to him. Damn it!”

For the first time since they’ve sat down, Oliver reaches out and touches him, laying two fingers on top of the fist and burrowing one down into it to loosen the grip. “No, it’s ok, Elio. Kids talk shit all the time. No one would ever take him seriously.”

Elio’s lips purse. “Did you? Is that why you’ve been upset all night? Is that why you’re telling me this?”

Oliver gives him a closed-lip smile. You can’t back out now. “I might have…I almost did.”

“Almost’?”

He clenches the elegant hand tighter. “It’s habit, Elio. That’s why I’m telling you this. It’s my habit to think so little of myself. But what’s become as much a habit is trusting you.” He scoots closer, overlapping their feet, pressing their knees together. “When I went into the auditorium and saw you, I knew. I knew it was all bullshit. When I saw you, I remembered that I didn’t have to be afraid. Not anymore.”

The last words come out as barely a breath, but the phrase snaps Elio’s head up, eyes wide. Hopeful. Oliver leans closer. “I’m still learning, Elio. Please don’t give up on me.”
Elio kisses his forehead, his cheek, then pulls Oliver into his arms and lays down, Oliver tucked under his chin. His hand drags soothing lines through his hair. If he feels the small pool of wetness form beneath Oliver’s cheek, he doesn’t comment. It isn’t long before sleep takes them both together.

Chapter End Notes

Another step closer. Three words remain... :)


Masks

Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio attend a Halloween function for Oliver's work, and Oliver receives some surprising and encouraging support for his dreams.

Chapter Notes

I have to confess to a weird superstition with this story: Every chapter I've updated has fallen on an odd-numbered day; this one, however, has come on an even-numbered day, and it is making me very nervous...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I cannot believe I let you talk me into this.”

Oliver surveys his reflection as a muffled giggle echoes out from the depths of the triangle of light crowning the open bathroom door. “Well, I cannot believe you considered not going to an event hosted by the administrators of your college. How would it look if you’re the only one not there?”

“Like I’m the only one with a brain, that’s how.”

“Yeah, well, then I’ll congratulate you on being the brainiest guy in the unemployment line.” There’s a quick rush of water and a clink of something being tapped against the sink. “Plus, it’s Halloween. I thought all Americans were certifiably insane about Halloween.”

“No, Americans are insane for free candy. Any excuse to get it will do.”

“Then consider this gathering as your living Hershey bar.”

A huff. “I don’t do these kinds of parties, Elio. It’s just…it’s not my thing.” He grabs the brim of the hat and wrenches it back and forth to adjust the angle. “I look completely ridiculous.”

“No, Oliver. You look like a hero.”

His voice is closer, warmer, so Oliver raises his eyes to see that the triangle of light has vanished, replaced by the slender figure filling up the doorway, his left arm slanting against the molding, one foot flung in front of the other, entire body balanced perfectly by the tip of his toe. Holy shit. ‘Costume party’ may be a phrase that could make Oliver shudder with revulsion, but seeing Elio Perlman dressed entirely in smart black satin that hugs the angles and planes of his body, turning just snug enough around the curves of his shoulders and crotch, and capped off by glossy riding boots up to his knee is enough to make him quake for an entirely different reason.

And that was before he added the fucking cape.

“There’s not a thing heroic about me.”
“You’re my hero.”

His mouth lifts at one corner. “Why would you say that?”

Elio moves toward him like a panther. “Because you changed my whole world,” he says simply, “and all you had to do was smile.” He flicks a finger under the brim of the hat and switches smoothly to a French accent to add, “My dear Doctor Jones.”

Oliver tilts his head back and groans.

“What?” Elio’s eyes widen, and he blinks innocently. “Come on, with the hat…” he coos, tilting the brim an extra few degrees over Oliver’s left eye, “and this scruff,” scratching his fingers rhythmically against Oliver’s cheeks, “you should be out in the desert fighting Nazis.” He undoes the top button of the khaki shirt and pulls the collar away from Oliver’s neck by working his hands in between the fabric and Oliver’s heated skin. “There, now you look like you’re ready to grab a shovel and find the Ark.”

Oliver can’t resist him. He feels himself draw closer, his fingertips just grazing the smooth fabric around Elio’s hips. He shrugs mildly. “Well, I guess that…I do kind of like the whip.”

“I’ll bet you do.”

“You’re developing kinks in my debauched heart that I never thought I’d have.”

“You’re welcome.”

Oliver pinches him, and he snickers.

“I need to know something: do you plan to utilize that accent anymore or to speak any syllables of French after we leave here?”

“Pourquoi?”

His eyes drift slowly, indulgently, to Elio’s lips and back. “Because then your mouth becomes a deadly weapon, and I have to be prepared.”

“How deadly?”

Oliver forces his features to blankness. “It either drenches or vaporizes every pair of underwear within earshot,” he deadpans. “Could be problematic.” Elio lets his face fall to Oliver’s shoulder, muffling his giggles in the fabric. “Do you know how manic a room full of scholars will get without their skivvies? I’m not sure we’d make it out alive.”

It’s a moment before Elio can tame his laughter enough to speak. His cheeks and the tips of his ears are red. It makes him impossibly adorable. “In that case, you might need that whip sooner than you think. I am so relieved you’ll be armed.”

“Speaking of which, are you really going to carry that sword all night?”

“Ah, excuse me, it’s a rapier, and no self-respecting Zorro would go without one. Besides, I didn’t strap on this carrier for nothing, you know.” For emphasis, his thumb hooks under the leather double-strap fastened in his belt loops, and he tugs on it.

Oliver follows the motion with his eyes. He licks his lips and rubs his palm over the rough of his chin and cheek. “Dang, and I thought that it was there strictly for my viewing pleasure.”
Elio’s teeth flash. “No, but if you’re good, I’ll wear it when we get home.”

“What do you mean? How’s that a reward? You’ve already got it on.”

He leans toward Oliver’s ear. “I said I’ll wear it. I didn’t say I’d wear anything else. But, you know, only if that interests you at all…” His light, mocking tone is countered by the hot breath that puffs against Oliver’s skin.

“If?” Oliver closes his eyes. His mind churns up the long length of Elio’s leg, pure ivory as soft as the silk that now covers it, pursed by the tight leather bands pressing into it and leaving thick red grooves in the flesh, ones that Oliver can follow with the tip of his tongue, curving around the swell of his hip and disappearing into the crease of his thigh. He shivers and grabs the tip of Elio’s cape before he can pull away. “Are you sure we have to go?”

He hums, “We do. Forget the face-time with your boss; in the end, it’s for a great cause. Funding after-school enrichment programs is important. They are lifesavers for lots of public school kids whose programs have been cut.”

Oliver gurgles low in his throat, and the corners of his mouth pull down. “Oh, and how would you know that?” he grumbles peevishly. “You went to private schools. In Italy!”

“I volunteered at an arts program as an undergraduate. Taught violin lessons to fourth graders.”

Oliver sighs internally. Of course he did. Because he’s fucking amazing. And the best person I’ve ever met. Oliver wants to kiss him raw, to melt to the ground and bind his feet to the floor so he could never walk away. Instead, he narrows his eyes and tries to sound brusque, but the best he can muster is a gravelly adoration. “Wait, I thought you played piano.”

A deep chuckle, with the ripple of silken brows. “I do it all, chéri.” His impish grin could liquify steel.

Oliver exhales slowly as he slides an arm around Elio’s waist and grips him tight. “God help me, you do. Without even trying.”

Teeth sink into that lush bottom lip. “What makes you think I’m not trying?”

“Because all you had to do was smile.”

Both of Elio’s hands slide up Oliver’s neck and cup his skull to draw his face down. His tongue works its way into the corners of Elio’s mouth in successive swipes, each plunging deeper than the last, carving out a space for him to return to when the champagne and speeches and tacked-on smiles are done. When half of Elio’s face is blocked with his costume’s black strip of fabric, but his eyes still burn bright like a lighthouse in the fog. When the tether of Elio’s easy laughter is the only thing keeping him sane. When he can shut the door behind them and fall completely into the wet, heavenly darkness and pray that he never has to leave it.

By the time they arrive at the ballroom, the event is well underway. Community outreach was highly valued by the university as a whole, not merely for its public relations benefits, but for the push of donations it seems to inspire, feeding the monster so that the scholarship can continue elsewhere. It is the business side of the job that Oliver detests, but he knows that Elio had been right—not coming
would’ve been a huge mistake, especially given Oliver’s tenuous status right now. The new guy is not the one who should be rocking the department boat, or he will likely find himself tossed out in the water with the sharks.

“Wow,” Elio mutters.

The room is done up for the holiday in as fanciful as manner as it can be without being garish. There is a large cauldron drifting a dry-ice fog, surrounded by three bent and gnarled bodies, no doubt waiting to chat up Macbeth. In the far corner is an enormous shrouded figure that nearly spans from ceiling to floor, one large skeletal finger pointing accusingly from the folds of its black fabric to all who pass, the perfect embodiment of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come from Dickens. The centerpiece, around which a buffet of food is laid out, is a life-sized Headless Horseman atop his steed, pumpkin head shoved up under one arm. Oliver chuckles to himself. If it is one thing to be counted on from Arts and Sciences and the Humanities crews is that the decorations will carry far more cultural relevance than a bloody hockey mask or a laughing skeleton in cobwebs.

Oliver surveys the crowd with varying degrees of dismay. He is decidedly grateful that Elio’s costume ideas had not included some of the outlandish get-ups that other guests were sporting. If he’d been expected to dress as Humpty Dumpty or Chewbacca, even the seduction of Elio Perlman in nothing but a Tarzan loincloth could not have motivated Oliver to want to attend.

Elio points at someone on the edge of the crowd. “That woman with the picnic basket. Why is she wearing stripper shoes?”

“You mean the ruby slippers? She’s Dorothy.” Elio just stares at him. “It’s from an old movie.”

“And the straw man with her? What is he supposed to be?”


“Glad you could make it, professor.”

The glowering voice from behind makes Oliver flinch, and he spins around. “Doctor Lazenby, hello! How are you this evening?”

The man is about two inches taller than Oliver and roughly forty pounds lighter. His thin, angular frame and gunmetal grey hair is ideally suited for his costume, which looks to be Lurch from The Addams Family. “Encouraged by the attendance. The provost is counting on us tonight.”

“Yes, sir. This is a cause that truly matters, more so than greasing palms at a corporate gala. This is one that can actually remind us of why we do this job. It’s the soul of scholarship is not just to nurture one’s own mind but to foster a love of learning and ideas in others.” Oliver blushes at his own words, taken aback by his own degree of emotion. He hadn’t intended to reveal so much of himself until the words tumbled out. He glances quickly at Elio, who is watching him with a soft smile. He’s known all along.

Lazenby stands taller, arms grasped behind him. He nods with approval, as if he’d just been waiting for Oliver to show some kind of passion about anything. “Indeed. I couldn’t agree more.” He casts an inquisitive eye in Elio’s direction. “Is this a guest of yours?”

Oliver lays his hand on Elio shoulder. “Yes, sir, this is Elio Perlman. He’s a musician who actually has volunteered in programs like these. He’s one of the many gifted people who make them work so well.”

Lazenby’s eyebrows shoot up. “That so?”
Oliver looks over at Elio. “Doctor Lazenby is the head of my department,” he explains, really for Lazenby’s benefit because he’s sure Elio already has figured it out.

Elio grasps the man’s hand and lets his other come to rest on Lazenby’s elbow. “A real pleasure to meet you, sir. Oliver has told me how much he enjoys working with you, how strongly you respect what matters—hard work and dedication.”

That seems to surprise the older man, who blinks several times before saying, “Well, I…thank you. I must say it is mutual. Oliver’s drive has been admirable thus far.” He clears his throat and adds, “Welcome, gentlemen. Do enjoy yourselves.” He nods to both of them and takes his leave.

Elio waits until Lazenby is swallowed up by the crowd before he bumps against Oliver and gives him a knowing smile.

“What?” Oliver blushes.

“You thought he didn’t like you.”

“He’s never acted like he does.”

“But that was just because he hadn’t seen you clearly, the real you.” Elio shrugs. “Now, he has.”

One section of the hall has student work displayed, evidence of the good work being done when institutions support one another in a common goal, an incentive for all to pull out their checkbooks and write numbers in them with even more zeroes than the time before. For good measure, some of the students also flit around the tables, adorable sprites who all seem to have no sense of caution when approaching the guests. As he walks past, Oliver sees some race up to unwitting victims and drag them back to the displays, chattering and pointing incessantly until the hapless targets turn to one of the advisors and utter some version of, “Why, yes, I’d be happy to.”

“Hi.”

Oliver looks around, only to realize that the voice had come from below. A young girl, rail thin with sparse brown hair and a floral print dress, stares up at him, arms folded in front of her. “Hello there,” he replies. “Are you one of the student ambassadors?”

She nods. “I like to draw. I started taking art classes two years ago in a program at my school. When I went into remission.” Oliver’s eyebrows fly up, but the girl’s expression does not change. She just keeps staring with her sharp, dark eyes. “You noticed my hair. You already knew I’d been sick.” Her voice is flat and matter-of-fact. She couldn’t be more than ten or twelve, but clearly, she has seen more hardship in those few years than most in the room had in four times that. An old soul. Oliver would wager that it has given her no tolerance for sham behavior, no time for adult niceties and charms.

“Yes, I did. I’m glad you are better now.”

“Why?”

Oliver returns her gaze steadily. “Because I can already tell you’re smarter than most of the people in this room, myself included, though you’re constantly underestimated due to your age. I’d say you
want to scream every time some simpleton gives you one of those oh-you-poor-dear pouts because you have no interest in their platitudes and less in their pity. And I like that.”

After a beat, the girl smiles broadly. “I’m Vimini.” She holds out her hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Oliver.”

“I like your outfit.”

“Do you? You sure it’s all right?”

She examines his face. “You hate it. Why did you wear it if you don’t like it?”

“It’s a costume party. No choice.” He raises his glass and takes a sip of punch.

“Did your boyfriend pick it out?”

Suddenly the liquid is hijacked by his trachea, and Oliver buries his mouth in the crook of his elbow to cough and prevent a spray of fruity red from soaking Vimini’s dress. “What’s that? What did you say?”

Vimini puts her hands on her hips and tilts her head to the side, derision compressing her mouth to a thin line. “That man in the black outfit. You keep staring at him when you think no one’s watching. He does the same thing to you, and a few minutes ago, he smiled at you. And before that, he brought you that drink.”

Oliver stares at the girl, evenly divided between admiration and agitation. “Boy, I was right. You don’t miss a thing, do you?” He clears his throat. “All right, then—yes.”

“Yes, what?”

It’s Oliver’s turn to smirk. “Yes, he’s my boyfriend. Yes, the costume was his idea. And, yes, I’m unnerved that you figured all that out before you even knew me. Am I that transparent?”

Vimini shrugs. “Kind of, but that’s good. It means you’re honest. You don’t automatically hide stuff like most people do.”

“The problem is that most people would not…well, let’s just say that some things are better kept to ourselves. Sometimes our survival depends on it.”

“Yeah, I know that, Oliver. Do you think people would be mad if they found out you had a boyfriend and not a girlfriend?”

Oliver swallows. “Yep.”

“But you’re not really trying to hide it, are you?”

Oliver thinks for a moment. He has always been a private person. It is simply not his way to chat about his interests or to share his weekend plans or to blither on about himself and lay out his life story for the amusement of others, just to have something to say. Is not sharing the same as hiding? Something shifts inside his chest. No matter the circumstances, no matter the consequences, he would never deny Elio, never shrug him off and pretend that he is nothing of importance to Oliver’s life. Even the passing thought of it is enough to sour his tongue and knot his stomach. He could no more do that than bite off his own finger or hold his breath until death claimed him. Nature simply wouldn’t allow it. Something that destructive, that catastrophic, would be impossible to accomplish;
the root of his very being prevents it.

“No, I’m not. And if I did, I’d not be a person worthy of his friendship in the first place. He’s a very good person.”

She smiles again, and Oliver realizes how much of a reward that is, her rare gestures of approval, the moments when her serious mask, the one that has settled in on her face by force, the one that held her up through torture and slog, loosens and lets out the light of the effervescent child beneath. It is evident that she doesn’t offer them up easily or for frivolous reasons; the softening of her features must be well-earned, and Oliver is willing to bet that not many people are able to crack her deep and heavy armor. He feels oddly honored to have merited two in so short a time. *Perhaps there’s hope for me yet.*

“I thought so. It would be stupid to bring him if you were.”

“That’s true.” He leans down and whispers, “You’re really quite remarkable, you know that, Vimini?”

“Thanks.” For a moment, she looks slightly abashed. “So are you, Oliver.”

“Thanks.”

“Is that what he thinks, too?”

Oliver is brought up short. “I…I think so. I hope so.”

“Is he stupid?”

“No.”

“Then, that’s what he thinks.”

Oliver’s feet are starting to hurt in the old boots. It’s a good thing Indiana Jones walked around on sand most of the time, he thinks ruefully. Elio had slipped away a short time ago to find a restroom, so Oliver slumps down onto a bench to wait for him to return so that they can leave. He doesn’t want to be too exhausted to unwrap the layers of leather and black silk, the promise of which has kept his brain going once the various speeches and endless thank-yous began at the microphone.

Somewhere in the sea of bodies, he hears a tinkling of notes, as if a cat has run the length of a piano’s keyboard. There had been a grand piano in a roped-off portion of the room, and something makes Oliver rise and drift around to see who had decided to give it a whirl. On his knees on the bench is a young boy, perhaps six years of age. The boy stares down at the keys with concentration, his tongue wedged into the corner of his mouth. He strikes a few chords, which sound surprisingly tuneful, then looks up quickly to someone next to the piano that Oliver cannot see.

When the person slides onto the bench next to the boy, Oliver sucks in a breath. It’s Elio.

Elio places his hands on the keyboard also and says something to the boy, who nods vigorously. Then, Elio taps out a beat and begins to play a light tune, and when he gives a big dip of his head, the boy joins him, hitting the same few chords, which he then repeats every few measures.
Their duet has drawn a minor crowd of listeners, some of whom clap along. Oliver watches Elio’s curls bounce as he cues his tiny partner, his tall frame curved down so that the boy’s elfin face is parallel with his own. Oliver feels like he’s about to explode. How is this possible? How is it possible to love someone so intensely it makes even your teeth ache? Oliver wants to rush forward and pick him up off the bench and carry him home. He is swamped with a need to kiss him and murmur in his ear and feel every inch of his skin, warm and impossibly soft, awakening every nerve in his own.

“You’ve done well, Oliver.”

The voice makes him jump. He whips around to see Dr. Lazenby behind him. “Sir?”

Lazenby looks over his shoulder to Elio at the piano. The music has ended, and Elio has moved aside so that his small partner can bow for the smattering of applause coming from the crescent of onlookers. “Be smart about it, though, son. That one’s a keeper.”

Oliver is too stunned to think, and the truth falls into the gap. “Yes, sir, I know. He really is. I’ll do my best.”

The older man nods a goodbye and walks slowly toward the door. Along the way, a short man with slicked back dark hair and a pinstriped suit joins him, perhaps intending to portray Gomez Addams. Just before they reach the door, the man slides an arm around Lazenby’s narrow waist at the same time the doctor’s arm falls onto his shoulders. His normally severe profile visibly relaxes, and his head turns back in time for his eyes connect with Oliver’s. He throws him a subtle wink and is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Mr. Hammer and Mr. Chalamet could pull off a convincing Indiana Jones and Zorro, respectively, right? :)

I loved Vimini’s character in the book, so I am very excited that I could have a version of her here and her special connection with Oliver. Now there’s a girl who needs a better path to her story, just like our heroes!

I imagine most people know it, but in just in case, the girl with the ruby slippers is Dorothy from the 1939 classic film “The Wizard of Oz.” If you grew up in America, you’d have watched this on television every year around Easter, but I was taking the chance that this was not a tradition in all countries, so poor Elio might have missed out on the wonders of the yellow brick road!

The next chapter is the one you, me, and Oliver have been waiting for, so stay tuned! :)
Elio and Oliver plan to spend Thanksgiving break together, and both learn in earnest the real meaning of the holiday.

Oliver cannot pinpoint the exact moment when it all changed.

Even if he had the strength to let his mind climb back through the labyrinth of the last few weeks, he would not be able to pick exactly when it was that Elio started to pull away from him. It seemed to fold itself in increments, in small and subtle gestures, like bends in a ribbon, returning its unruly and unspooled length to a tight square, tucked back into a drawer, out of sight.

Without warning, his tongue grew quiet when it would have spoken, the bubble moving it forward to reach Oliver abruptly popped, cut off by teeth and a glance shifted, away from his face and over his shoulder. Moving on, to something else, some other topic, some other face, an awkward tremor all that was left behind to mark its place. And if you didn’t know the spectrum of tones in Elio’s voice, didn’t have memorized the path a thought would take from his brain to his eyes to his mouth, to your ears, to your mouth, it would be invisible.

But Oliver knows the turns of Elio’s face better than his own, knows the way his tongue skirts his teeth before he says something daring, how it pokes through his lips at the tip when he’s about to laugh. Oliver could write books on the fluctuations in Elio’s eyes when he wants to kiss, when he wants to be kissed, when he wants to surrender or to overwhelm. The pressure of his fingertips, the temperature of his skin, the rhythm of his breathing that telegraphs his wants, directly into Oliver’s core.

It is like he had closed his eyes to see a fuzzy negative, an image reversed and perverted from the one at which he’d marveled for so long. Oliver was left with an impression only. A hand that curled inward when it used to reach out. The dark head turned, swirling out of his orbit. Murmured words he had come to cherish, to crave, to need like drips of water on a desperate tongue, withdrawn, swallowed. Rescinded.

A chill was left behind. The blanket that Oliver had wrapped himself in receding like a slow tide, leaving him chaffed and exposed, his organs and his dreams scattered on the dry beach like litter, trinkets that had passed as jewels before an unseen moon pulled the ocean away.

No, he can’t remember when it started. But he does know when it ended.

It happens on a Thursday.
“I just don’t understand the purpose of it.”

“Purpose? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You mean it is a holiday about…food?

“You make that sound bad. No presents to buy, no decorations to put up. It’s great! Just eat and watch television all day—two activities that have made America what it is today.”

“What, diabetic and lethargic?”

“Exactly! It’s part of the Pledge of Allegiance: ‘One nation, indivisible, with diabetes and lethargy for all.’”

A snort. “I feel more patriotic already.”

“Oh, come on! Besides, aren’t there entire festivals in Italy devoted to olives?”

“Okay, okay. Point taken. Seriously, though, where would world cuisine be without olive oil? But this holiday of yours is based around bland food?”

A sigh. “Your dad is American. You mean he never celebrated this with you and your mom?”

“Hmm…” Some beats of silence. “I think…I think he may have suggested something to Mafalda once when I was a kid, but she said that she would be placed in the ground of the churchyard the day she would serve a bird that tastes like a mushy tablecloth.”

A scoff, then a giggle and a small sotto voce. “I have to meet this woman.” His throat clears. “Look, just because turkey is the traditional food, it doesn’t mean we are obligated to eat it. We can have whatever we want.”

“Well…do you like it?

“Like what?”

“Turkey. Do you like turkey?” The voice is pained, as if even the question has hurt to ask.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On whether or not it is dipped in mashed potatoes and smothered in green bean casserole.”

“A casserole? Of green beans?”

“Yeah.”

A gulp of dread. “And…and what else?”

“Condensed soup. Cream of Mushroom.”

An agonized gurgle, a shuffle of fabric. “All right, that’s enough. Don’t tell me any more. God…”
He bites his lip to keep his voice steady, a fight for innocence in its tone. “But you haven’t even heard about the cranberry jelly sauce, Elio. You’ll love this! See, what you do is—”

“No! No, stop! Oh, my God! Just stop before I vomit on my shoes.” A deep shudder that cranks the phone audibly in his grip. Oliver can practically see the elegant hand pressed to the forehead, shoving the fringe of curls backward until it stands straight.

His laughter finally spits out and drops him back on his chair, clutching the receiver tighter since he cannot reach out for his arm. “All right, all right.” His chuckles settle to a warm smile, beaming up at the face that’s not there but fills the room nonetheless. “Thanksgiving is a holiday that has become about food, but that’s not really the purpose of it.”

“Something from your Colonial past, from what I understand.”

“Right, and as the name implies, it’s a time to show appreciation.”

“Sure, for a successful harvest. What happens if you’re not a farmer?”

“Then, you try to appreciate whatever goodness you have harvested from your own life, and you hope to God you can hold onto it.” He huffs, finally seeing himself the light of dawn. “It’s about going home.”

“Is that why the city empties out? Because the airports are full?”

“No…well, yes, sort of. I mean, it’s about finding your way back to that safe space, the place you think of going when you need to feel welcome and protected, unconditionally.”

The quiet swish of breath is all he can hear, then softly, “What if you can’t go there?”

“Well, then, you…you find a way to get it to come to you, I suppose.”

“So, it’s not going home…”

His head bobs before the words know to come out. “It’s about coming home.”

That had been at the beginning of November, when all had felt normal, the comfortable groove he’d carved for this new reality, smooth and fresh and exhilarating. And at times, it still felt that way. Stopping by Insomniac to claim his warm blue cup, eating croissants and laughing with Marzia as Elio tells them about the time he ate dirt on the playground as a kid in Milan because a classmate convinced him that melting it on his tongue is how coffee was made. Looking up from his work to see Elio watching him from across the room, savoring the unguarded expression that rested there, a mash-up of affection and longing.

But those times grew scarce. Elio was never rude, never cruel. The two of them didn’t argue or accuse or ignore, nothing so overt. Everything was the same as it had always been.

And it wasn’t.

By the time the holiday break was upon them, an indefinable frost had settled onto Oliver’s skin, one he could feel but not see, and Oliver had feared Elio might change his mind about the whole thing—the entire four-day weekend together and the dinner and the bad television. And him. He doesn’t
ask what’s wrong. No, thank you. No way. He doesn’t push Elio up to the wall and hold him there with desperate eyes and beg to know what’s happened, why he’s not there anymore, why it feels like he’s moved out, moved on, and hasn’t told Oliver where or why.

And worst of all is that, down deep, it feels like it did before, sinking into the same cuts that had never healed completely. All those years ago when Oliver had watched from the shadows, lost and confused, while people looked past him, through him, like he didn’t matter enough to grace with even a trace of recognition. The invisible kid.

Oliver never asks the question because he can’t bear to hear the answer. He wouldn’t be able to survive if he heard it from Elio’s mouth, too. Not from him.

_Not bad. Not great. Not anything._

When the phone jingles on Thanksgiving morning, Oliver freezes in the process of assaulting his molars with his toothbrush, and a sudsy grin bubbles up automatically. He spits into the sink and grabs the hand towel, wiping off his mouth on his way back into the bedroom.

“Pronto.”

There’s a breath of laughter. “Cute. How did you know it would be me?”

“Lucky guess.”

“Look, can you bring bread?”

“Bread?”

“I—I forgot. I’m sorry. I don’t know how I—look, can you? Do you mind?”

His voice is pinched, agitated.

Weeks ago, when they’d planned their holiday, they decided to meld cultures and celebrate an American holiday with hearty Italian food. A sturdy pan of lasagne al forno was decided upon, partially because Oliver begged for it, and partially because of how he’d begged—kissing a wet, unhurried path down Elio’s spine until Elio was so sweaty and quivering, he would have agreed to eat SpaghettiOs straight out of the can if only it would get Oliver’s mouth to continue its path, to let his tongue push inside of him as his careful hands continued to work over him in deliberate strokes, just slow enough to take him to the edge, until the balance shifted and it was Elio who begged, in loud and guttural groans, like he never had before.

“Of course I don’t mind. Any particular kind?”

“No, I—no. Anything’s fine. Anything you want.”

_What I want has nothing to do with bread._ “All right. See you soon.”

He replaces the phone in its cradle and heads back to the bathroom, only to have it ring a few minutes later when Oliver’s face is covered in shaving cream. _What’s he up to?_ He growls and grabs the towel again, volleying between wry and sizzling for the tenor of his remarks as he stalks
back to the bedroom.

He sweeps the receiver up to his face. “Yes, I will get bubble bath, too. Why didn’t you just say so before?”

“Oliver?”

His blood congeals in his veins. “How did you get this number?”

“Come on, baby boy. That any kinda way to talk to your mama?”

“What do you want?”

“Just to talk to you.” There’s a thick, wet cough. “I’ve missed you. How you doing?”

Oliver falls on the bed because he can’t feel his legs anymore. “Are you joking?” His voice tremors, and he grits his teeth viciously. No weakness. None.

“Oh, honey, it’s Thanksgiving. I know how you love Thanksgiving. ‘Member when we’d go to Troyer’s and get one of them Amish berry pies? You always loved those. Get purple all over your little face…” The voice trails off to a chuckle before the hacking cough takes over again for several moments.

“Yeah, holidays were great,” he grinds out. “Especially the year Dad stole my birthday money to get another bottle of his shit, and you didn’t bother to make dinner because you were passed out in the basement. That was a really special time.”

“Well, seems you’re doing okay for yourself now.”

“Yes, I am. For myself, by myself.” His jaw is so tight, he almost can’t force the words out. “You taught me well.”

“Such a good boy,” the voice coos, irony wasted. The throat clears. “Maybe you’ll help your mama out a little, then. It’s been hard lately, and I…I’ve been a little short. Maybe you can spot me some cash? Just a little, you know, for stuff that I…that I need.”

The breath he started to take sticks in his trachea. “What?”

“It’s been tough here, son. Hey, when you comin’ to see me, Oliver? When you gonna come back home to me?”

Oliver cannot bear to picture that, though his covered eyes can’t stop the tide of images of it, of that parallel existence, that living death. If that were it, if that had been the limit of his scope, he’d be sitting in a parking lot drinking gas station coffee, waiting for the meeting to end so that his mother could swear loudly all the way back to the house that she hates vodka and she’ll never touch another Quaalude again, all while she clutches a purse which holds a full bottle, the entire cataclysm reinforced by some bumper sticker mentality about how family is supposed to stick together, a vision that would see a man like him voluntarily dig his own grave for those who would cheerfully toss him away like garbage, and all simply due to an accident of blood, as if that were the only quantity that ever mattered.

“I don’t believe this. No, fuck that, I do believe it. Some things never change, do they, Mom?”

“What’s that, baby?”
“You and your poison. Always together.”

“Watch it, boy.” The old metal still there, the promise of pain the only one she ever kept.

Oliver laughs through clenched teeth. “Actually, I am in the middle of something, and you have interrupted me, so are we done here?”

“You shitty little brat,” the voice hisses. The carrot drops; now, it’s all stick. “You think you’re so fucking clever, don’t ya? All your worthless bullshit, always about you. That’s all you ever cared about. What’d it ever get you, huh? Nothing. You’re still nothing?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

In the quiet that follows, he falls into himself, his old habit from his teenage years of checking himself for damage, like a survivor stumbling up from the basement after the hurricane to see if the house is still standing. It is. Lots of wind to ruffle the siding, lots of thunder echoing in his ears, but the lightning hasn’t struck its target, not in a very long time. Poor Alice, and you used to have such good aim.

He suddenly wants Elio, just wants to hide his face in the crook of Elio’s neck and the dark forest of his hair. Safe shelter.

I think.

When he finally gets to his feet, Oliver prays with all he has that he is not just in the eye of the storm.

The heavenly aroma greets him on the street. Bless you, Mafalda, wherever you are, Oliver thinks as he jogs up the stairs, gripping his duffle tighter. He gives a couple of knocks of warning and lets himself in. “It’s me!” he calls toward the other room. He puts his bag by the desk and slides out the bread and a bottle of Elio’s favorite chianti that he’d purchased for the day. By the time Elio joins him in the kitchen, he’s already pouring it out for them.

Elio takes his glass and gives him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thanks,” he says, tipping the glass and nearly emptying it in several long gulps. He’s wearing a red cashmere v-neck sweater, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. A layer of sweat glistens on his upper lip. He puts the glass down on the counter, then grabs it again and bends down to look into the window of the stove. “Should be about 45 more minutes.” He flashes a quick smile and polishes off his glass, thrusting it back to the counter so quickly it spins toward the edge, and Elio has to lunge with both hands to steady it before it pitches onto the floor.

I can’t do this anymore.

Oliver reaches out slowly and puts his untouched glass next to Elio’s. He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Elio.”

“Huh?” He’s turned away, fiddling with a dish towel, refolding its already crisp edges.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

He pulls his hands back like he’s been burned, spinning on his heel and scrubbing a hand through
the hair at the back of his head. “What do you mean? Nothing's wrong.”

Oliver just watches him.

“Don’t you want some of your wine? It’s really good. Thanks for getting it. It’ll go perfectly with the pasta.”

The silence hangs.

“Oliver, really, I…I, ah, I have a..a, well, it’s…”

When Elio finally lets his eyes meet Oliver’s, his mouth snaps shut. Elio’s gaze darts around Oliver’s face before his shoulders sag, and he mutters, “I can’t do this anymore.” His eyes close for just a moment before he shakes his head quickly, like he’s trying to whip snow off his hair, and he grabs Oliver’s hand in a clammy grip. “Come on.”

Oliver obeys mutely, following Elio out of the front door and down to the next level where he rips a key out of his pocket and lets them into the back office of the music store. They wind around several hallways in the dark until they emerge into the showroom. Elio leads him over to an enormous grand piano on a red-carpeted dais. The instrument is a work of art, and it gleams even in the low light. Elio slides onto the bench and turns his head toward Oliver. “I want to…no, I have to play something. For you. Okay?”

Oliver nods and moves forward to nestle into one of the curves of the piano’s massive body. Elio swipes his nose with his index finger, head bent over the keyboard, but even in the shadows, Oliver can tell kaleidoscopic green eyes are looking inward. Elio slides his hands up and down the legs of his pants before poising them atop the keys. Oliver immediately stands straighter when he hears the first few bars. He recognizes it. It is a song from his CD called “Midnight.” The melody is the same, but the song has been transformed, as if it has gone from blueprint to living structure since last he’d heard it. Its vibrancy, the arc of its narrative from hesitant to flirtatious to passionate, alive and immersive, is a landscape of tonal steps crafted from what had been a simple rolling hill. Elio’s body follows its terrain, his eyes intent and determined while his spine undulates with ease. By the time he finishes, his dark hair is matted to his forehead, beads of sweat hanging heavy on his forehead and cheeks. Or are those tears?

Oliver has never heard, never seen, anything more beautiful in his life.

As the resonance of the last notes dissipates, Oliver’s throat strains against itself. “You…you changed it.”

“No, Oliver, you did.”

“I did?”

“You were meant to hear it, Oliver. It had to pass through you before it could come back to me finished, changed by that one thing I was missing, the one little bit of…of something, of magic, that I could dream of but never create convincingly on my own. It needed that last piece of the puzzle before I could hear it with my ears the way my heart always had.” He shakes his head slowly, with awe. “I have been waiting for you for a very long time.”

“Elio,” he breathes, “that’s…that’s just so…” His fingertips run along the curved edge of the piano. “I don’t understand, though. What was it, the thing that you were missing?”

Elio shrugs, eyes downcast to the run of keys that his fingers fitfully hover over, a growing swath of
red climbing the long column of his neck. “Love.”

“What did you say?” His voice is so faint, it’s as if he’d mouthed the words.

“Oliver, do you remember the story I told you about, the fairytale about the knight?”

The swerve leaves Oliver reeling. “The knight?” His mind scrambles. “Oh, the one who must decide to speak or to die?”

“Yeah.” Elio’s voice is so low, but it is coated with an urgency that makes Oliver immediately leery, awakens that practiced voice in his head that urges him to take cover, to dive into a corner before the bomb explodes and the mushroom cloud envelops him. “I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately, and I realized that I didn’t quite understand it. I had thought it was just about his need, about satisfying his desire to have his truth spoken and what it would do to him if it wasn’t. But that’s not it. He doesn’t care about himself, not really. All he cares about is that she doesn’t have to go another day without hearing what he has to say because she deserves that. She deserves to know. Then, whatever happens, whatever she decides to do, she could never say that she didn’t know.”

Finally, Elio’s hands still, and he looks up, pinning his eyes instantly. “I love you, Oliver.”

Oliver stares at him, a man turned to wax. His brain is a sluggish white noise, a disbelief so potent it feels like fear. He can’t speak. His lungs do not inflate. Large palms press flat to the piano, as if it is the only thing keeping him from collapsing beneath it and dissolving into the carpet fibers.

Elio’s delicate features begin to fold in on themselves, and his gaze falls to his hands once more as the nails pick and grind at one another. The longer Oliver stares at him, the more he rambles to try to fill the silence. “I love you, Oliver…I tried not to say it in case you didn’t feel the same or weren’t sure about me, but I…I can’t help it, I…God, I’ve been in love with you for so long, and I don’t know if that makes you happy or not—I mean, I hope it does—or if maybe it just makes you want to…to run or…or…I…I’m sorry if all this scares you. Maybe it’s too soon, or maybe—No, it is…it is too soon…I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should just—”

“Me, too.” A barest whisper.

Elio squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, then takes a deep breath and dares to glance up at him. “You—“

“I love you.”

Elio stares blankly, as if he has to replay Oliver’s words on a loop to makes sure he’s not made them up, and the softness of his features makes Oliver want to erase the board of his life and start from this moment, to go back and untie all of the knots that have held his heart up in his chest so that it can float on its own now that it’s filled up with something lighter than air.

“I am in love with you, Elio.” He sinks to the bench. Now that he’s said it, he can’t stop. “I love you. I love you, Elio. I love you.”

Elio turns, one leg thrown over each side of the wood, and pulls them together, gathering him up and pressing his lips to Oliver’s skin with a hiss. Then, Oliver realizes that he is repeating the words, the sentiment traded like their names, from one to the other. Oliver tilts his head enough to capture Elio’s mouth, letting their tongues work around each other, sharing the words before they’ve even formed.

Elio tips his head back, and their foreheads connect as they pant for breath, for balance, but neither can bear to waste more than a few moments on air. Their lips brush, a kiss to the hollow of a cheek,
the cleft of a chin, again and again, and all the while, the words keep coming. “I love you I love you I love you I love you.”

Oliver circles his cheek against Elio’s and whispers in his ear. “Where have you been? Where have you been these last weeks? Where did you go?”

Elio’s hands cup Oliver’s neck, thumbs caressing the underside of his jaw. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I just… I couldn’t handle it after a while. I wanted to tell you so bad, but I had all this planned. I wanted to do it right, you know? So that you could hear it in the music and know that it was for sure, that I was for real and that it was not just words. But every time we were together, it got so hard not to say it. It was killing me, trying to hold it back. I could hardly touch you or see you or… smell you without almost losing it. I was going out of my mind!”

“Why now? Why today?”

“Because of what you said.”

Oliver’s eyebrows flick together, and his head ticks to the right.

Elio’s hands twist like vines into his hair and grip tighter, fingertips kneading his skull to bring Oliver’s mouth back to his own. “Today, I’ve come home.”

“I’ve never eaten so much in my entire life.”

“You’re a proper American now. Your citizenship isn’t official until you stumble away from at least one table and have to undo your pants to be able to breathe.”

Elio’s chuckle vibrates through his own chest where they recline next to one another on the sofa, heads resting against the back, feet outstretched to the coffee table. “You’re sure you didn’t miss having poultry?”

“Are you crazy? I’d have licked the pan clean if it wouldn’t have burned my tongue.”

“Maybe we should go running in the morning.”

“You worried I’m going to get fat, Perlman?”

“What? Of course not. Besides, I wouldn’t mind that at all.”

“Well, forget the running. You’ll be far too exhausted.”

“From what?”

“Let my food digest a while, and I’ll show you.” He slithers a hand onto Elio’ thigh and squeezes, winning him a contented giggle.

Oliver’s eyes close, and he floats easily in the darkness. Elio strokes his hand, running his fingers under it to do the same to his palm and the inside of his wrist, pressing two fingers to its edge to feel his pulse thrum.

_Pulse. Beat. Together._
Oh!

“I got a gift at my office yesterday.”

“What was it?”

“You have to see it for yourself.”

Oliver bends and drags over the bag that he had placed on the floor by the desk. He folds back a layer of his clothes and pulls out a small picture in a simple black frame, laying it carefully across his thighs. It is a pencil drawing, and Elio slides closer to him to look down on it to see clearly what it is. When he does, he gasps. “Oliver? Oliver, is that—”

“Yeah,” he says quietly. “It’s us.”

The picture is a pencil sketch of Oliver, head turned to the right, chin angled up slightly, as if he were looking to the horizon or contemplating the stars. He is wearing a button shirt, several of them undone, and what initially looks to be either folds of fabric or skin or tufts of body hair is actually a subtle etching of a curly head and profile looking up towards Oliver, in the same direction as he, hovering over the left side of his chest.

“Who did this?” Elio’s voice is barely a whisper.

“Vimini.”

“Who?”

“A little girl I met at the Halloween event. We talked for a short while.” Oliver tells him briefly of the conversation they’d shared. “I can’t believe…”

When he doesn’t continue, Elio looks up at him. “What?”

Oliver finally raises his face from the drawing. His eyes are dark and watery. “She remembered.”

“She must have liked you a lot.”

“No, I mean…she remembered how I looked at you. She could see it.” He huffs a laugh. “She sees everything.” He runs his fingers over the edges of the frame. “She knew right away.”

His eyebrows flick. “Knew what?”

Oliver’s finger ghosts above the curves of the drawing before he raises his face to meet Elio’s eyes, steady and sure. “That you are my heart.”

Elio blinks once, twice, several more times, each quiet camera-flash of his eye wiping a veil of grateful tears over his lenses.

Chapter End Notes

Troyer’s is a real thing; Amish communities are relatively plentiful in Ohio and Pennsylvania. I’m not a pie fan (pastry crust tastes like cardboard to me), but these are supposed to be some of the best.
If you've never experienced them, green bean casserole and cranberry sauce are also real things. They may sound gross, but they're very tasty!

I based Elio's realization about the knight and the princess around something that Mr. Chalamet said in an interview when asked if it is imperative to speak out in life; he claimed it should be dependent upon motivation, and in the process, illustrated yet another reason he is good at his job: his extremity as a thoughtful and introspective person.

God, if I had even a smidgen of artistic talent, I would love to draw Vimini's sketch of Oliver and Elio! I can see it with my heart, but I desperately want to see it on a page. Alas, even stick figures are beyond me! :)

I hope all of the emotion and fluffiness here was not too much. Consider this, though: they've cleared a major hurdle and opened the lane for so much more...
Chapter Summary

Oliver and Elio discover how best to complement their sense of vision, and in the process, redefine their dreams.

Chapter Notes

“Close your eyes
I want to see you tonight in my sweet dreams...”

“Sweet Dreams,” Air Supply

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver’s neck shifts, and he blinks awake, yanking a clumsy wrist across his mouth to smear the drool dampening its corner. For a few long moments, he doesn’t know where he is. His senses are turned in on themselves, abandoning him to a standby mode, a subfloor between awareness and oblivion. The darkness is thick and cold, the colors hiding in it muted, and the insistent slosh of traffic that usually would press through his thin apartment walls has gone silent.

In the haze he wonders if he’s still caught in the abyss and merely dreamed that he’d awakened, closed inside a box painted with a dust of reality so that the lid seems lifted when it’s truly locked tight, an endless purgatory he had erected for himself when his mind had been unguarded, the defenses that should have prevented his fall bypassed by a promise of adventures his waking self could neither master nor survive.

When Oliver was a child, he had a recurring dream that haunted him for years, stuck to a subliminal lobe like gum to a shoe. While most of his dreams faded with the dawn, these images remained crisp, the emotions freshly tipped in poison to inject his mind and fling him back to it when he’d least expect. In the nightmare, he had trekked across the towering slopes of a desert, rippled like water against the force of a wind he did not feel. There was no sound, no life at all, only the shock of the brilliant blue sky atop the endless, shifting sands.

Suddenly, there had appeared a low arc of color carved into the landscape ahead of him. It was an opening. A cave, perhaps? When he had gotten near enough, he had realized it was a room, an inlet to a structure burrowed beneath the emptiness he had navigated. He was drawn into it, spurred by fascination, stepping directly onto a narrow wrought iron walkway that ran the length of an elaborate room laid out below, decorated ornately in rich fabrics and vibrant colors, laden in paintings and sculptures, lush greens and herringbone mahogany floors, a palace under a golden dome and a sliver of perfect sky.

Each time, he ambled to the center of the catwalk and peered over its railing, struggling with an impulse to scale down into its depths. He would tuck his waist to the handrail and lean over, straining to see further into the hidden matrix, into the rooms that branched off behind this grand hall, the potential treasures that his spot on the finite catwalk would never allow him to reach. He would
grow frustrated, and his aggravation kept him suspended. The only way to see further into the other rooms would be to return to the entrance and decrease the angle of his vision. How could that be? Why would he have to get closer to his goal by putting distance between himself and what he desired? It wasn’t fair. There had to be another way.

But before he could consider his options, the scene would change, unhinging, scraping across his brain. He’d freeze, overwhelmed by dread. There was a presence there. Something lived there, something insidious. He could feel it, a cold prickling that pierced his skin, and if Oliver were to stand there much longer, the faceless monster would enter the room. It would see him there. Oliver would be trapped, held a prisoner, confined indefinitely. There would be no escape, and in this perpetual maze of buried terrors, nowhere to escape to. No one would ever know what had become of him. Would they look for me? He would disappear for good, in silence. Would they notice? It would be as if he’d never existed at all.

Wait.

Movement, somewhere in another room. A shadow of it.

There?

Yes.

It’s coming.

It will see you. Go. Go now!

So he would run, clanking back up the catwalk and into the sand, which had fallen into a cool dusk, the sun disappearing along a horizon outside of his vision. He would plod mechanically up the slope, stiff-limbed and numb once paradise had grown fangs and purged him. When the hopelessness had pierced him fully, all would fade to black.

From that point on, Oliver could not confide in his dreams, could not stop them from inevitably crossing the terminator into a wicked dark, his subconscious tuned to an emptiness, a perpetual denial, which his heart had chafed against in its own quiet way, but it had managed to overwhelm him when his conscious mind dared to relax its fists.

Now, he lies on his stomach, face stuffed into the thick folds of a pillow. He presses his palms into the mattress and raises his upper body a few inches, rubbing his chin against worn silver sheets and nearly grazing his scalp on the inlaid wood of the Art Deco headboard. Elio’s bed. Exactly the place his dreams would insinuate him, the one place that could lull him into interminable sleep. The one place that he would never fight to escape, never scramble to his feet and skid for the door. Until it was too late.

He turns his head heavily to the right, straining over the mound of puffed duvet, and he is relieved to see a crown of dark curls smashed against the matching pillow. Should he trust it? It could be another mirage, another temptation, another assurance of paradise that turns to horror and leaves him hollowed and homeless, wandering the dunes.

His hands spread on the quilted surface beneath him, gathering in more of its warmth. Eyes can deceive. The other senses must take up the slack, take up the fight, in a collaborative effort to take back his dreams once more. He lets his thickened lids settle closed and reaches out a hand. It wavers, clawing at the air until it connects with a softened bump of shoulder, cool where it is exposed to the air but warming his fingers when they wrap around and burrow into the fold of arm.
There’s a swoosh, a sudden intake of breath, and the mattress undulates as the body flops around and spreads flat in a gangly rush of limbs. A grunt and a rusty crackle of a voice. “Oliver?”

He gathers himself up to rest his weight on a hip. “Oliver,” he whispers back and flutters his hand beneath the layers covering them to map the bent angle of a leg, sleek at its widest point, around the blunted jags of knee, into the thin wool atop the bony ridge of the shin. Down one side, back up the other, carefully, deliberately, finger pads sensitive to every bump, every turn. “Close your eyes. I want to see you better. All of you.” Again, slower, swirling around the flesh. A light touch, a press in. One direction, then the other.

“Elio.” The word is no more than a sigh that fluctuates under the teeth and over that tongue, a signal for the rest of the muscles to relax and make the whole body pliant. “Tell me. Tell me what you see. I want to hear it.”

He exhales through his open mouth, humid air that adds to the heat around him. He throws off the covers and lets the cold air displace it, twisting to follow his fingers down, the touch of his eyes tickling into the silken gully behind the knee, the swollen bag of relaxed calf, the rod of the Achilles’ tendon pushing into the bone of the heel and into the crusted flat of it at the bottom.

He gathers himself at that end of the bed where the sheets are cool and untouched. He lifts the foot up and balances it on his own knee. His palms wrap around it, warming it, caressing it.

“Your sole is perfect.” He trails his fingers up the length of the bottom. “The heel is basalt. It is the spot where the lava finally cooled because everything that comes from your body is molten until it hits the ground.” His voice is gruff and low. “But it needs to be like that to keep this arch protected.” His thumb examines the lines of it, bending around from side to side. “Look at its veins, so close to the surface. How is this like new skin? Why is it so delicate?” He raises the foot to his face and inhales through his nose. “A funkiness to it.” There’s a huff from the other end of the bed. “Maybe it’s from neglect.” He takes a cautious lick, and then pushes the arch fully into his mouth, gathering tastes that take him around to the toes. He deals with each individually, swirling his tongue around its pad and sucking delicately like they are blunt drinking straws. “Thirsty,” he remarks, feeling the slight tug of the foot while the rest of its body slowly writhes. “Yes, that’s it. It just needed some attention.”

He lowers the foot back to the mattress and bids it farewell by pushing the pucker of his lips around the interior ankle bone. “A perfect fit. Like it was made for me,” he murmurs and rises up on his knees. He runs his hands up the bumpy lines of the shin bones to scoot forward. He hears a swish as the shins spread apart to make room for him and fold back in at the bottom, trapping Oliver in the center of a diamond.

He lets his arms fall to his sides where his fingers graze the soft ridge of the knee joints. “This is my favorite place in the world,” he groans to the ceiling, head flipped backward in acquiescence to the rush of blood from his head to the rest of his body, hands moving in slow circles up the baby soft flesh of those inner thighs encasing him. “This part? This glows. This is sloped and mysterious and warm...so warm...I could die here, my Oliver. I’d be happy to die right here.” The legs shift subtly, continuously, as he talks, a light gasp and heavier breaths puffing down from their source in front of him.

His hands work higher, kneading their way toward their apex. As they move, the tendons stand out more, drawn tight from their buried core. He leans forward, down toward his circling thumbs. “Remember that day in the park?”

There’s a broken moan of assent.
“Looking into the sun—that’s what this is. It’s blinding…the heat…white hot…too much for my eyes to see.” A deep breath. “The smell is intoxicating, though…oh my God…” He sucks in the drool that had collected around his teeth.

There’s an echo above him of those last three words, punctuated by pants of air.

Abruptly he stretches forward like a cat, wrapping his hands around the bottom of the narrow ribcage, eliciting a startled gasp from the unseen mouth. The ribs expand as a deep breath is drawn. “But this…” and his fingers press into the flesh and slip down around the taut waist and grip tight, “this…but this is so incredibly sensual. It mocks me, Elio. It dares me to desire it, no matter where I am, no matter what I’m doing…”

He bends and tastes the flesh, licks along the ridge of the bones, thumbs trading places around the belly button. He sinks his teeth into the taut belly and is gifted a shameless yelp and spluttering, “Please, yes, please,” from the needy voice.

Instead, he leans farther forward, using his tongue to trace the gully of the breastbone, his palms working their way up curves and ridges of the sides of the lithe body where normally Elio would be ticklish, but he is too far gone to bother with that kind of surface sensation. The skin here is damp with sweat, and Oliver laps it up, chasing drops to the side until he scrapes across a nipple and feels the legs sandwich together against him, as if he’d tripped the spring of a bear trap. He chuckles, vibrating his lips against the sensitive flesh as it rises and pushes against his mouth, begging for more. “Do you see this perfect mound of flesh? It’s like a close encounter, a mesa rising out of the desert. Nothing on Earth like it…” He swirls his tongue around it several more times before swinging to the other side and finding its match unerringly in the darkness.

He braces his weight on the heels of his hands, wrists snugged into the pits of Elio’s arms, to hover over him. The rasp of breathing is louder now, and Oliver can see in his mind’s eye the concentration on Elio’s face, can feel the knitted eyebrows, the clenched jaw. He wants desperately to kiss his mouth, to collapse on top of him and lick into its soft interior, but he knows that will be the end of all. He would be easily overwhelmed by his desire, the keen edge of which he’s barely kept contained throughout this exploration. He is burning on the inside and is so hard it’s actually painful. But he wants this more than anything, the reality of Elio Perlman taken apart and reassembled into his dreams.

He leans down until he can feel a wisp of hair tickle the tip of his nose and whispers, “What keeps me going on the longest days, and what keeps me awake at the end of them, is this throat. I can see its tendons working now—I know they are—clenching and rippling every time you swallow, like the wires of your piano. And that perfect point, that perfect heart-shaped point of your larynx? It talks to me even when you don’t say a word. It sings. It is music, Elio. I can hear it all the time, like a radio that’s been left playing in an upstairs room. It makes me dance around it and makes me strain to listen and makes my mouth move with words I don’t even know…” He tilts back and kisses the spot gently, but he cannot stop himself from following its path down to the bend where neck meets shoulder, and with a heavy exhale, bites down hard.

“Fuck…Elio, Elio, Elio…” The words are puffs of air that flutter Oliver’s hair around his temple.

Straining forward for a moment, just long enough to drag his nose through the wild dark hair and take a deep inhale of that smell, he lifts one hand and finds the ridge of a cheekbone and follows the line of it inward to his mouth. He circles its moist skin with his middle finger. “This looks full and pink. A rose on the cusp of opening. Full of promise.” The finger grazes the barest outline of the lips. “Full of sin.” He cannot suppress a soft groan. “It’s…it owns me, Oliver. Did you know that?”
He hears an answering groan, feels the wet pressure of a seeking tongue, trying to pull his hand closer, pull his finger into its depths.

“Mmmm…like our first kiss,” he mumbles, smiling. “What I would have given to have my hands see you like this, then…even then…”

“Yes,” is the breathed word from below him.

Oliver pulls away and sits back on his heels. His hands fall in front of him, naturally finding their place in the crease of Elio’s hips. “Here is where your skin is softest,” he murmurs, petting over the skin in light strokes. He fondles individual strands of the thick hair of his groin. “Like a cashmere fluff.” He folds down and rubs his face in it, damp with sweat and the steadily leaking fluid smeared over Elio’s abdomen and pooling here. Oliver has smelled the pungent elixir since his sensory trek began, and at this point, the wetness is coming from both of them.

He laps some of it up, cleaning the ridges of heavy, silken flesh to a stream of curses. He dips his hands underneath, still kneading and stretching the soft expanse, fingers pulling around the mound of his buttocks, thumbs working into the crease, greasing and smoothing the puckered skin. “Do you know what I see here, Elio?”

A whimper.

“I see heaven.”

In one motion, he pushes his thumb inside and swallows Elio down to the root.

Oliver doesn’t need eyes to feel the sharp pull as Elio’s long fingers twist into his hair, the trembling restraint in his forearms as he tries to keep from yanking Oliver’s whole head forward. Eyes are irrelevant to savor the beautiful babbling nonsense that falls from his lips, the panting and the prayers and the fractured syllables of his own name mixed up and ripped individually from that long, perfect throat.

“Oliver, Oliver, I need…need to see you…please…”

He circles his tongue around him as he pulls off and lets Elio drag him up his body, hands still clamped in Oliver’s hair. He drags him directly to his face and licks into his mouth, bites at it, kissing him hard. He kisses him like he has missed him, like he has not seen him in weeks, like he’s never seen him before. They taste it on their tongues, the flavor of both of them, seeing everything with eyes that cannot lie.

Elio wraps a hand around the back of his neck and slides one down between them. He wraps his hand around them both, slick and desperate.

Oliver hisses and lets his head drop back. “I love you, Elio,” he pants. “All of you, I love you.”

He loses it then, loses his thread of reality, gives his mouth over to shouts that make his throat raspy, to the feel of Elio’s neck tightening as he jerks and shakes. Oliver sinks back into the dream world, back into an ethereal plane where his senses swirl, tumbling through the dark, clinging to a warm and comforting body that clings to his.
Later, he lays sprawled next to Elio, fingers of one hand hooked casually together, still warm despite their nudity, so the covers are bunched at the foot of the bed, and Oliver brushes the heap with his toes as he mindlessly works his ankle back and forth.

“Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to be a gymnast?”

They’re both flopped on their backs, heads heavy in the down pillows, which bunch up like blinders on either side. It’s as if Oliver’s listening to a late-night talk show on the radio.

“Nope.”

“When I was almost seven, I watched the summer Olympics on television. It was so amazing, you know…seeing these guys just fly through the air like arrows, all compact strength and precision…” Elio’s voice is hypnotic. It is soft and rounded, lazy as they feel here in the middle of the night, spoken like he’s emptying the last of the oxygen from his lungs and doesn’t want to spare the energy to inhale once more and break his line of thought. “And I was skinnier than hell, just a bunch of elbows and feet.”

“Was?”

Elio huffs and gives his fingers a squeeze. “Shut up, you know what I mean.” A sniff. “Anyway, I loved the parallel bars, and…of course, I didn’t have a set to try out, so I used to sneak over to the neighbor’s place…he was an older guy who had hand railings on both sides of the steps to his back door…he used to have to sort of hoist himself up with his arms because his legs were bad…arthritis or something…”

“But aren’t stairs angled?”

“Umm, did you miss the part when I said I was six at the time?”

A giggle. “All right, all right…did you try to do tricks?”

“Yeah, I’d sort of walk myself with my hands…but I wasn’t very strong, obviously, and my arms were barely long enough to reach, so it was more me just tripping up and down the stairs with my shoulder’s stiff…which sounds really stupid, now that I’ve said it out loud.”

“Nah, that’s actually kind of clever for a little kid. Enterprising.”

“Well, after about a day of that, I thought I was good enough to do a flip.”

“Uh-oh.”

“You got it. Hairline fracture in my wrist. Had to wear my arm in a sling for weeks until the bone healed up…I was so sad after that, like my life was completely over. I moped around for days and days. Well, my parents got worried, and they…they tried to make me go out to play or go to a friend’s house, stuff like that…I never wanted to…I hated everything and didn’t want to talk to anyone.” A quiet cough. “Finally, my mom just came into my room and sat on my bed…she never said a word, just sat there and stared at me.”

“Did you crack?”

“Like a raw egg. Told her everything about my ridiculous dream…and cried a lot…and I told her I thought my dreams were over for good.” A few beats of silence. “She just shook her head and said, ‘Tesoro, if it is over already, perhaps it wasn’t what you truly desire. Perhaps there is something else to dream.’”
“And?”

“And as soon as the sling was gone, I signed up for piano lessons.”

“And a legend was born.”

He chuckles softly. “Not quite…but even if I’d never played a note of music in my life, I know that my mother had been right. I had no idea what my true dream was.”

Oliver blinks several times. “But how could you know that if you’d never become a musician?”

“How could I…” A sigh. “Oliver, I had no idea what dreams were until you came along. But now…now, I…” He feels a tug on his hand as Elio grips it tighter to roll onto his side and look down into Oliver’s face, his free hand coming around to brush at the strands of blonde hair stuck to Oliver’s forehead. “If I could have you like this in my dreams every night of my life, I would stake my entire life on dreams and be done with the rest.”

Oliver pulls him down, kisses his lips, lets his sudden tears sink into the pillow covering, settles the curly head beneath his chin so Elio can hear the steady beats of his own name echo inside of Oliver’s chest.

The dream reconfigures, a tandem quantity. The physics is altered now, redrawn and rebuilt, the soundlessness replaces with mumbled whispers and piano music and the breaths of a sigh, the emptiness fills with palaces of his own design on top of the sand.

Chapter End Notes

My eternal thanks to the fabulous Willowbrooke and her eagle eyes for proofing my heap of words. You are the best!

The mountain featured in the 1977 film Close Encounters of the Third Kind (called the Devil’s Tower) is in Wyoming.

The last scene with Elio speaking in hushed, near breathless tones was inspired by the Variety podcast “Playback,” in which Mr. Chalamet is interviewed about his most recent movie. I was very struck by the quality of his voice and thought it ideal for some pillow talk with Oliver.

The line near the end of the chapter which Elio uses for Oliver is, of course, taken from Aciman’s original novel; I figured that it would be automatically recognized, but I just wanted to make sure I officially acknowledged the borrowing of it!
Chapter Summary

Vimini comes to Insomniac, calls Elio not very smart, and charms in her usual style. What she doesn’t realize is that as she drops some of her well-earned wisdom, she also helps the boys navigate the ever-changing waters of being an us.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Are you still out there??

How I have missed all of you AND this story! It was always on my mind, even while dipping my toes in the RPF pond. I hope you're still willing to come back for these boys!

A humble and desperate thank you to Willowbrooke for her sage advice and for helping me work out the tangles of my writing quagmire. You are a goddess!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver flips his tie and tucks it under, pulling at the knot to try to straighten it. He’d gotten so used to doing this in the dark while still half asleep or while stumbling to the door with half his breakfast wedged in the corner of his mouth that the brightly lit assistance of the bathroom mirror is almost confusing the process.

“This is like watching someone box up your birthday present to return it to the store.”

Oliver’s eyes refocus in the mirror to the figure slumped behind him on the toilet seat. “Is it? Hmmm…does that mean you want to keep playing with it?” A single eyebrow slides up. “Because I think that can be arranged.” The eyebrow wriggles and drags the corner of his mouth up in its wake.

Elio balances on the closed lid with his long legs folded in front of him, bare feet clamped to the edge of the bowl. His upper arms are propped on the arrows of his knees, causing his forearms and hands to flop aimless in the air ahead of them. It is miserably early, the world behind the window still a blackened glitter of lights, and though he’s no obligations until late afternoon, he’d heaved himself up when Oliver’s alarm rang, pushing at his eyes with the backs of his wrists and grumbling about the darkness and the cold.

“Hey, now.” Oliver had kissed his forehead and tried to guide him back beneath his covers. “It’s all right. I promise I’ll be quiet. Go ahead and sleep more, or you’ll hate me when your rehearsal time comes.” He’d walked him backward until Elio’s legs connected with the side of the mattress and tried to angle him down to the pillow.

But Elio had merely lurched forward again and enfolded him in a sleepy, sloppy hug, mumbling, “No point…stupid bed…you…you not there,” and stumbled toward the kitchen to make coffee.
Oliver had watched him go, hypnotized by the crescent of white skin between Elio’s flannel pajama pants and the rucked up grey t-shirt, wondering if there would ever come a time when this would lessen, if there would be a day when his heart wouldn’t throb under the glow of that baby skin, or if a simple sentiment offered up by a grumpy, tired voice wouldn’t make his stomach swim with warm quicksilver.

Oliver grabs a comb from the drawer and slides it closed with a nudge of his hip.

“Let me.”

Elio unfolds from his perch, and Oliver watches in the mirror as he slides up behind him, arms tangling and coming around Oliver’s body like a Hindu god, easing the comb from his fingers and hitching it slowly through his hair from front to back, a long stroke that scratches his skull deliciously and makes his eyes involuntarily flutter closed.

“Turn around,” a low whisper commands, and Oliver complies wordlessly, twisting in the circle of Elio’s embrace to face him. He feels the sensual drag of the comb’s teeth around to the nape of his neck, then the puff of a warm exhale against his face, wafting a hint of rich espresso into Oliver’s nose.

“I hate this, Oliver.”

He finally opens his eyes, sees Elio’s eyebrows gathered together in concentration, face tinged in a sadness that pulls Oliver’s brows atop one another in mirror imitation, like the sympathetic reflex that makes him reach out automatically to enfold his narrow waist, fingers working subtly into the soft fabric of his shirt, thumbs brushing light arcs over the bottom of his rib cage. “What, Elio? What’s going on?”

“Why are you leaving so early?” His voice is small, a pout implied in its rounded edges, in the downward turn of his lips. His gaze remains on Oliver’s hair as one hand works the comb and the other shapes the feathered edges over his left ear, the delicate fingers of an artist finessing the details.

Oliver frowns. “You know why. I—I’ve got to go home first before I go to work. Take care of a few things and…and grab those department notes that a-are on my…”

Elio drops his arms and finally meets Oliver’s eyes. “Home?”

Oliver blinks as his mind stumbles on uncertain ground. The motion of his hands ceases. “Just…well, my apartment. You know what I mean.”

They had spent the entire Thanksgiving break together at Elio’s, a luxurious span of four days with nothing to do but what they wanted. A Chevy Chase movie marathon sprawled on the couch with Elio’s head in his lap, running his fingers through the cool silk of those curls until his giggles faded and his breaths lengthened, waking to static on the screen and Elio tugging his hand to take him to bed. Sitting in companionable silence while Elio edited a score and Oliver read through the penultimate chapter of his book, making annotations with sticky notes and watching the snow fall thick and fat outside the window and collect on the ledge. Sharing a long shower in the middle of the day because they had run for miles around the wet pavement of the city and been sprayed repeatedly by speeding traffic, Oliver insisting that it was his duty to be thorough and cleanse Elio properly by working his sudsy fingers with deliberate strokes into every conceivable crevice of Elio’s body until the thin frame turned boneless and the only thing holding it from the polluted water at their feet were Oliver’s strong arms around his waist. Cooking scrambled eggs in the middle of the night when they were both wide awake for no reason, Elio tossing in chopped veggies and pouring out a pair of perfect apricot bellinis.
It had been wonderful and natural, like they had lived that way all their lives, like there could be no other way for their days to unspool than exactly this way.

And there was that one moment in the late afternoon when Oliver had glanced up from the journal he was reading. Elio was stretched at one end of the couch with a copy of the sports pages from some Italian newspaper draped across his knees, his icy toes shoved under Oliver’s thigh, scratching absently at a spot on his left elbow. The scene was utterly unremarkable, which made it all the more glorious, and Oliver had an unsettling blur skitter across his brain. For that one moment, he could not remember what it had felt like to be him before this. What it had felt like to be him before us.

Oliver would never have allowed for this as even a remote possibility. Domestic bliss is not a phrase that had any kind of meaning to him; it was an oxymoron, a fiction reserved for Hallmark movies and Norman Rockwell paintings. The layers of surreal disbelief had piled up in his chest. Had this been going on around him all along? Is this really the kind of existence that normal people had? If there were one absolute that Oliver’s life had reinforced repeatedly, painfully, it was that there was nothing normal about him. Mere glimpses at how the other half lived, the charmed half that marinated in the joys of the everyday and ignored their good fortune, were all he’d ever thought he would be permitted.

All of it fluttered in his brain like the euphoria of weightlessness at the top of a hill on a rollercoaster, that flash when you think you can fly, but you're really about to accelerate to the ground and have the flip side of g-force remind you of just how mortal you really are.

It had been very jarring, going their separate ways and returning to the cold grey of his apartment when Monday had finally ended. Oliver had trudged up the steps of his building, had closed his door with a soft click and sagged against it in the dark, and had thought of swimming. He remembered keenly those afternoons in the reservoir when he was a kid, the illusion of strength he’d have when he’d be out too long, bobbing and paddling around in the waves like a god, until he would try to walk on solid land again, only to find that he was weak and slow, that his limbs had acclimated to an alien environment that his body could never sustain once he was shoved back into the real world.

He had pressed his back into the wood and fought the urge to rip it open and sprint to Insomniac, to camp out at a table until Elio’s shift ended and follow him home like a stray cat, the kind you’re never supposed to feed your scraps else they become pests, forever lurking around your door and begging for more. Pathetic. The last thing he wanted was for Elio to feel suffocated by his presence, for him to be annoyed that his space had been constantly invaded and his time flagrantly usurped. Ben Franklin’s aphorism about fish and guests starting to smell in three days had whirled through his mind. If that were the standard, what kind of stench had Oliver stirred up in four?

Before he’d met Elio, Oliver’s rare visits to others’ apartments were abbreviated and functional. Needs were satisfied, plain and simple, and Oliver would be long gone shortly after. It was all so easy and clear and blissfully disaffecting. But now, he has absolutely no idea how to navigate the current terrain. The last time Elio had looked at him like this, eyes rimmed in a raw edge of pain, of betrayal, was the second day they met, the time that he’d assumed Oliver had been merely toying with him while truly being interested in Marzia, a time that Oliver wished he could put behind him and forget. He couldn’t deny that Elio’s harsh scorn had cut a gouge into his heart that had filled slowly with the scar tissue of a lesson learned.

Right now, the spot thrums, burning inside his chest.

“Hey.” He raises a hand to Elio’s cheek and brushes the delicate cheekbone with his thumb. “What
time are you finished tonight?”

Elio sucks in a breath and looks at the ceiling to parse his day in his head. “Probably…8:00.”

“All right. I’ll meet you here. With Mr. Wong. Well, with his beef and broccoli.” Elio drops his eyes to Oliver’s and relents, pressing his lips together and cinching his mouth to the side, nodding slightly.

Not good enough.

Oliver hooks his arm tighter around Elio’s waist and pulls him closer and closer as he speaks. “I mean, I can bring him along, too, if you really want me to. He seems nice enough. He could probably do with a night off. He can drink a beer and yell at me in Mandarin when he realizes I eat his food with a fork. Think he’ll give me a break if I tell him I almost poked my eye out with a chopstick when I was a kid? Maybe he’ll feel bad and throw in a couple of extra spring rolls…” He rambles until Elio’s face relaxes, until the glitter returns to his eyes, until a chuckle bubbles up from his chest.

Then, Oliver kisses him soundly, hands massaging reverently the satin stretch of skin low on Elio’s back which he had coveted earlier.

No, he decides of it. No, it will always be like this.

An unexpected shadow passes through.

It has to be.

“You’ll never guess who I talked to today.”

Elio rips cartons from the bags, a man on a mission. “Johnny Carson.”

“Ah, no, that was last week.”

The tail of a droll snicker is gobbled up by an enormous wonton and a slurp of broth. His jaw works in circles as he fights to swallow down the random enormous bites he’s shoveled into his mouth in quick succession. Oliver watches wide-eyed as he next grabs for his glass and chews down half a pint of ginger ale in one go and stuffs in another heap of food. “Holy crap, Elio. Don’t you eat lunch?”

“No time today,” emerges amongst the symphony of smacks and gulps. He gestures vaguely for Oliver to keep talking.

“Vimini.”

Elio’s mouth stops moving.

“Yeah, I wanted to thank her for the picture, so I made some calls, found out who her teacher is and when she has her art class.”

Elio swallows and turns to look at the picture, which they had propped high on a bookshelf where the small track floods, angled just right, illuminate it like portrait lights. “I wish I could meet her,” he
comments wistfully.

“Well, you’re in luck, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“I invited her to Insomniac. I told her nothing says thank you quite like gourmet hot chocolate, and you make the best around.” He shrugs. “So her teacher is going to bring her there after their next class.”

“When’s that?”

“Day after tomorrow. 6:00.”

Elio grins, chunks of cabbage and dumpling riddling his teeth. “Excellent!” And when Oliver winces and holds up his glass of water for him, he scoffs, “What, something wrong?” He smacks his lips and somehow spreads more food over his gums in the process. “I want you to kiss me. Kiss me right now.”

He reaches over the table to grab Oliver’s arm, but Oliver ducks and tumbles off the opposite side of his chair and crouches behind it. “That is foul, Perlman. You look like a garbage disposal.”

Elio rips off the end of spring roll and smacks at it with an open mouth. “Oh, Oliver. You should know—caring is sharing.” He sticks out his tongue and waggles it around until a hunk of wanton crust falls onto the table.

Oliver bites his lip to contain his laughter. “Thanks, I’m full.”

Elio rises slowly and grabs the edge of the table. “Come on, Oliver,” he coos, eyes glimmering. He inches toward him. “You know you want to try it.”

“Never!” Oliver fakes left and sprints out of the kitchen, but he waits a second too long trying to decide where to hide out, and Elio leaps on his back and knocks him onto the sofa. They bounce on the cushions, and Oliver is laughing too hard to fight back. He lets Elio pin him down on his back, knees locked on either side of Oliver’s chest.

“Ha! I’ve got you,” he bubbles with a movie-villain laugh. “Now you are mine, all mine.” He pulls back the hands that Oliver had plastered over his face and holds them by the wrist next to Oliver’s head, leering down toward his face, teeth bared. The glops have been wiped away, leaving only his flawless incisors to threaten.

“Oh, God, have you become a vampire now?”

“Perhaps.” A long tongue flicks out to run along the edge of them, like his fingers on the keys of his piano. He dips down for just a moment and runs his nose across Oliver’s neck. “Perhaps I wish to suck your blood.”

Oliver stares at the tongue, still lolling in the corner of the pink lips. “Perhaps I’ll let you.”

Elio’s eyes darken as they drift from Oliver’s face to the white palms bound tight by his very own hands. “Even if it means you’ll be trapped here, a slave of the night?”

Oliver stares him down and tips his chin up. “Try me.”

There is another flash of incisors before he lowers his head and licks a fat stripe up the side of
Oliver’s neck, crooning, “*Questo è mio,*” in otherworldly tones to his ear.

It blooms gooseflesh over the entirety of Oliver’s body, and he shivers from the lilt of accent that infuses the words, wondering in part of his mind if Elio knows that he could dominate Oliver without a single touch, simply by deploying that lingual flair.

Elio hums against his skin. “*Il sapore è buono.*” His lips drag as his tongue trails down, and there’s a graze of teeth. “*Molto dolce.*”

“Oh, *shit,*” Oliver mutters, helpless to the sounds, to the weight of Elio on his body, the dance of his mouth on the defenseless surface of his skin.

“A gentle kiss to the hinge of his jaw. “*Cos’hai detto?*” A circle around to his temple before he leans up just far enough to stare serenely into both of his eyes.

*Oh, he knows.*

“*Elio,*” he sighs, letting the syllables roll around on his tongue like jewels. *God, even his fucking name is gorgeous.* His eyes slip closed.

“Yes?”

“I’ve missed you.”

The hands holding Oliver’s wrists slide up and their fingers lace together.

“Yes?”

“Yeah.”

Oliver feels his arms lift, feels the warm press of lips to their joined fingers, feels the soft caress of Elio’s shirt as he snugs them to his chest. “I have an idea, then.”

His eyes pop open and fill with the puffs of pinked cheeks pushed up by a hidden grin, midnight emeralds glittering behind twists of his hair. “Dare I ask?”

“You don’t have to—I’ll *show* you.” Elio jumps up and hauls Oliver with him over to the desk. He clicks on the small lamp, opens the desk drawer, and pulls out a brass key. He holds it up, and it glints in the light. “I have had this since I moved in here,” he says quietly, “and I could never figure out what I would ever do with it. I mean, I didn’t really need a spare since there was no one who’d bring it to me if I’d forgotten mine, anyway, and the guys at the store could let me in if I were in a jam. But then I…” He swallows audibly. “I finally realized that it isn’t a *spare* key at all.” He looks up finally and locks his gaze on Oliver’s in the shaft of light emerging from the round shade of the desk lamp. “It’s *your* key. And all this time it’s been waiting for you to…to want it, I… I mean to…to *claim* it…and come home. For good.”

Oliver stares at him.

Seconds tick by.

*Take it, you fool.*

He almost reaches out. He wants to, so much his mouth is dry with the need. He realizes his hands are trembling, so he stuffs them into his pockets before they can betray him. *What the fuck is the matter with you?* His gaze falls to the lamp and fixates on the blinding light of the bulb. Suddenly
he feels like Icarus, flying next to the sun, and after all his studies of the Ancients, he really should have known better.

His wings are about to melt.

He glances back up at Elio, but now his vision is compromised, and he cannot make out the expression on Elio’s face. But he hears the crackly inhale, hears a sniff before the creak of the desk drawer being opened, the splat of the metal as it is dropped inside and closed away.

Then, the lamp winks out, and the room is overtaken by shadows that obscure the slow, fading swish of footsteps in retreat.

“Elio, please…”

Elio freezes but doesn’t turn around.

“I’m…I…I just—”

“It’s been a long day, Oliver. I need to get some sleep.” Elio’s voice is low and quiet.

Oliver wants Elio to scream and throw a book at his head. He wants Elio to grab him by his collar and tell him what a fucking moron he is, to kick him down the steep steps and double over with laughter when he smashes his worthless body into the red door at the bottom.

Elio doesn’t do any of that. What he does is far worse.

“If you’re staying, don’t forget to set your alarm,” Elio whispers before disappearing into the bedroom, leaving the door ajar.

Oliver has no idea what to do now. Elio can’t possibly want him to stay, not after that. Not after what he’d just offered, only to have…

Not after…not what…but Oliver had…

…and—

Oliver crumples onto the sofa. He is shaking, his whole body wracked with tremors, to the point that his teeth chatter together in uneven clicks. He has no idea what’s going on. He’s not cold, he’s not ill. Not really. He drops his head into his hands as a wave of vertigo slaps into him and rocks back and forth to ride out the nausea that floods in its wake.

_Just go._

But he can’t. He looks toward the front door, but he can’t bring himself to move toward it and walk out, as if it’s an airlock and all that lies beyond it is a cold void that would explode his organs, one by one. Instead, he turns the other way, toes a tightrope to the bedroom and slithers inside. _You are so weak. Leave now._ He pulls off his shirt and pants, eases down onto the edge of the mattress. _You do not deserve this, and you know it._ He lifts his legs and lays flat, stares at the ceiling, ears ringing in the silence.

That’s when the covers shift, and Oliver braces himself, prepares for the litany of insults, the reaming that he has earned. Elio rolls over and bumps up under his arm, throws his own around Oliver’s chest.
His breath hitches. After a few minutes pass, he dares to tighten his arm against the curve of Elio’s spine. Just a little, just enough to make sure it’s real.

*Is this what people do? Is this what people do when it’s real?*

He closes his eyes.

*It has to be.*

“What time is it?” Oliver circles around the settee and pounds one of the pillows back into shape, placing it artfully on end in the curve joining the furniture’s arm and back.

“What about three minutes later than it was the last time you asked.”

Oliverug and looks over to the counter where Elio is restocking tea varieties in a small hutch next to the cash register. It’s a slow night; now that the universities are nearing their semester break, the shop’s usual clientele has scattered.

They haven’t seen each other since that night. When Oliver’s alarm had rung in the morning, Elio was already gone. His stomach had churned, not knowing what that meant, not knowing what Elio was thinking, not knowing what he should do next. It had been almost a relief that both their schedules had been unrelenting. Work, as it had so many times before, had carried him through.

Their eyes connect for what feels like the first time since Oliver had gotten there. “Sorry. I’m…I just…”

Elio’s features soften. "I know.” His lips curl up in a small smile. “She’ll be here soon.”

The jingling bell startles them both.

Vimini cranes her head, looking around at the decor with curiosity. A tall blonde woman stands behind her, wiping the wind-swept hair from her face.

The little girl grins when she sees him. Once her teacher slides off the little yellow raincoat from around her shoulders, she rushes over and throws her arms around his legs. “Oliver!”

“Hi, Vimini! I’m so glad that you could come.” Oliver looks over to the teacher, who is hanging her own coat up on the rack. “Thank you so much for taking the time to bring her. I’m sure it makes for a very long day for you.”

The woman nods to acknowledge his words, and Marzia comes over to escort her to a table, chattering constantly, fussing over her comfort and the specifications of her order. She winks at Oliver on her way back to the machines.

Elio had prepared a plate of every conceivable pastry the shop had on the menu, and Oliver pushes this toward Vimini when she crawls up on the stool at the table they’d set for her near the counter. She grabs at a chocolate chip cookie and takes a cautious nibble. That leads to a giant chomp, so Elio fills another plate with these before he comes over with a carafe and pours out a cup of steaming cocoa.
Elio lowers himself into a chair and eyes Vimini uncertainly. He’s nervous. Oliver clears his throat. “Vimini, this is Elio; Elio, meet the artist herself.”

Elio holds out his hand. “It’s really an honor to meet you.”

Vimini looks him up and down before taking it. “Thank you. You, too, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Well, if Oliver likes you, you must be all right.”

Elio blushes. “Thanks.” His tone warbles between wry and flummoxed, and Oliver grins internally. The bluntness of Vimini’s delivery might require an adjustment period for him, but he thinks Elio will manage just fine.

Oliver takes a croissant from the plate and chews off a corner. “We are so happy that you could come here so that we could try to thank you properly for your drawing.” He leans down to look directly in her eyes, face serious. “It is amazing.”

She can see his sincerity and gives a toothy grin. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Of course I like it,” he retorts, “I have eyes.”

Elio’s eyebrows are furrowed. “Why did you—well, why did you decide to…to draw that?”

“When I was sick, everyone kept telling me fairytales because they thought it would cheer me up, but I didn’t get it. Why would pretending make me feel happy? So once I got better, I decided I only wanted to draw what was real.” Vimini wipes her nose and nibbles on the edge of a piece of banana bread before grimacing and dropping it back on the plate.

“And so you picked Oliver?” Elio gazes at her in wonderment until Oliver purses his lips and flicks him with his fingers, causing a deeper blush to bloom in the center of his cheeks. Elio gulps, “No, I—I mean—”

Oliver shakes his head and rolls his eyes, smiling. Their distance had felt so foreign. It is surprisingly easy to fall back into themselves, and it warms Oliver somewhere deep inside.

Vimini seems oblivious to their antics. “Yeah.” She shrugs, slurping her cocoa. “I don’t see a lot of adults who know what they want.”

His eyebrows raise, and Elio’s face flicks over to Oliver, whose gaze has not left his face. Oliver wants to smirk, a show of ineffable smugness to make Elio cowed and proud in the same swipe. But his expression never manages more than a pressed-lip resignation, the swell of a soft-eyed confession. Yes, Elio, I really am that obvious.

Elio’s eyes fall to his fingernails. “Most don’t really know. They tell themselves they do, but Oliver…you think that he does.” His voice has an edge of doubt that makes Oliver’s stomach churn unpleasantly.

Vimini stops chewing and looks at Oliver. “I thought you said he wasn’t stupid.”

“He’s not.” Oliver ignores the audible choke from Elio and keeps his eyes steady on the little girl. “I am.”

Vimini tilts her head and considers this. “I think you worry,” she announces. “That’s different.”
“You’re right. I do worry. All the time. Probably more than I should.”

“Why?”

He stares at the wave of hair concealing Elio’s perfect face as he answers. “Habit.”

Elio’s head jerks up, mouth open as if he were about to speak. Oliver can see the swirls behind his eyes, warring, reassessing. Remembering.

“My parents worry about everything.”

“I can understand that. I think most parents do. The good ones, anyway.”

“Were your parents good ones?”

“No.”

“So you had to be the one to do the worrying.”

“I guess so.”

Vimini watches him, as if reading the images in his head, her mouth in a thin line. “Not everyone should be parents,” she says darkly.

“I agree.”

“But they should feel bad about it, not their kids.”

He sits forward a bit. “I keep trying to remember that. Isn’t always so easy to do.”

She reaches out a thin hand and lays it lightly on his for just a few seconds, a tiny gesture of solidarity, from one survivor to another. Somehow, it makes him feel pounds lighter.

“They think I am made of glass.”

Oliver gives her a wry smile. “They just love you very much, and they can’t stand the thought of ever losing you. Don’t be so hard on them.” He pushes another cookie towards her.

“I don’t worry.”

Elio blinks and sits back in his chair. “You don’t?” He tips the pot to warm up her cocoa, eyes strained. Oliver watches his levels of concentration, the passive surface mediating as his own thoughts conflict within him.

Vimini’s face is a mask. “Don’t suffer future pain.”

“Why…I mean, how…how do you do that?” Elio’s face reddens again.

“Because what if it doesn’t happen?” She takes a sip of her drink.

“The pain?”

“No, the future.” Vimini’s dark eyes are unwavering. “The present is certain because I’m in it. There’s no point in making what I have bad because I’m afraid of what I might not get.”

Oliver and Elio look at each other for several long moments. Oliver knows that what he sees—the
last week unfurling across the watery canvas of his eyes, the cinching of his mouth to one side to hide the depth of his feelings—play out in a different code on his own face.

Finally, Oliver leans down to Vimini and whispers. “You really are quite remarkable, Vimini.”

She grins.

“Don’t you ever let anyone even attempt to convince you otherwise.”

“Thanks, Oliver.” She swallows down her last hunk of cookie. “You, either.”

When Vimini had gone, Oliver helps Elio clean up. Both are quiet, and once the job is done, they end up on the cold pavement together, suspended, held captive by all the words that hang between them unspoken.

Oliver can’t take the silence. He looks at his feet and takes a deep inhale. “Elio, I’m—“

“No.”

He whips his head up. “What?”

“No, Oliver.” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “As in no, don’t you dare apologize.” He sighs, and his warm breath fogs the air around them. “Because I need to apologize to you.”

“You—“

“I never should’ve done that to you—just thrown out ‘Live with me!’ like an idiot without bothering to talk about it first. That’s something that we need to decide together, not just jump into on a whim, and I shouldn’t have put you in that position.”

Oliver’s cheeks have a hard time forming words. “It’s…it just…it took me by surprise, that’s all.”

Elio takes a step toward him. “But I really…I want that to happen. Sometime. For my apartment to be our apartment. Or, shit, we can find a new place if you want, but…God, I just want to know I’m going to start the day with you and end the day with you. To come home to your shoes by the door and your billowy blue shirt on the back of the desk chair.” Another step closer. “I want to make dinner with you and read over your shoulder and buy that weird kind of yogurt you like.” Another, and he tilts his head up to hold Oliver’s gaze. “Everything, Oliver. I want everything, whenever you think you’re ready to give it.”

Oliver is lightheaded. He reaches out his hands and clutches at the front of Elio’s jacket to steady himself. He swallows several times before his rusty voice can emerge. “Yes. That. Yes, I…I want…I just…fuck, I was so scared, Elio. I was terrified that I had ended us.”

“Me, too.”

They stare at each other in the pool of yellow from the street lamp. As the moments pass, Oliver starts to feel a curious pressure in his sternum, pumping to the rest of him like the sting of a jellyfish, its tentacles threading through him, through every vein, every capillary.
It feels a lot like hope.

He pulls on Elio’s jacket to bring his body flush against his own. “You know, my lease is up in January. Can we…can we talk about this over the holiday break?”

Elio bites his lip. “That would be…that’s perfect.”

Oliver tilts his head. “Elio, is this what people do? Is this what people do when they’re in love?”

“It has to be.”

Chapter End Notes

Elio’s Italian phrases (I hope) are This is mine...The taste is good...Very sweet and Excuse me? What did you say?

Johnny Carson was the legendary host of The Tonight Show from 1962 until his retirement in 1992.

Oliver's pointed comment of worrying being a habit is a call back to chapter 15 and Oliver's confession to Elio about his dim opinion of himself.

There is more to come for these two. Anyone up for some extra Perlmans to come to town for the holidays?? :)
Meet the Parents

Chapter Summary

The Perlmans come to town and make Oliver an offer he can’t refuse.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for coming back again for these two lovelies! We’re getting near the end of their journey, and I am overjoyed that you’ve been kind and patient enough to join us for the ride. I love all of you!

A huge thanks once again to Willowbrooke, editor extraordinaire and angel on earth! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver is burrowed deep, his grandmother’s afghan swaddling him, folding over his head as a mist of rain hisses against the window pane level with his bed. Sleep tugs at his brain like bites of warm caramel, tethers gathering him in deeper when he hears the fluttering whir of a bird in the distance, clear and insistent in the plaque of the fog.

Again. It’s closer.

“Hello?”

Elio.

Oliver smiles and snuggles down, the soft voice like an extra layer of warmth that works its way into his subtle dreamscape, keeping him safe from the unforgiving elements beyond.

“Papa! How are you? No, no it’s not too late. No, it’s fine, really…” The stream of warm words winds itself around in Oliver’s head, a braid of brushed cotton that drags him carefully, inch by inch, back to reality. His bunk bed is replaced by the leather sofa groaning as he shifts his body, the yellow and white zigzags of the home-made afghan morphing into the scraggly clumps of Elio’s ancient wool throw, the one he’d had since he was a child himself.

Oliver shifts his feet, kneading them into the soft warmth of Elio’s thigh, and while he grips the phone with one hand and murmurs, “Uh huh…yeah…oh, don’t tell me Anchise’s complaining about that again. He thought those trees should’ve come down years ago,” Elio absently massages Oliver’s ankle and calf muscles, the rhythmic touch nudging his eyes closed once more, nearly making him free-fall back into the fuzzy abyss of sleep.

Until he hears Elio gasp, “You did? Oh, my God! When are you coming?”

Oliver’s hands clench tighter on the blanket’s fringes, and his heart starts to pound.

“Ok…ok…no, that sounds great…of course…yes…yes, I’m positive…What? Yeah, go ahead…Salut, M’man…tu me manques aussi…Oui, c’est bon…ouais, bien sûr, nous l’aimerons bien…oui…
très bien, je t’aime aussi…on se verra en quelques jours…d’accord, à bientôt.”

Oliver slowly retracts his legs and sits up, keeping the old blanket wrapped tight around his shoulders like a wizard’s cloak. “That was your folks?”

Elio grins. “Yeah, and guess what!”

“They’re coming for a visit?”

“Yes! They’re flying in the day after tomorrow.”


“Right, can you believe it? And I didn’t think they’d be able to come.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a smart day to travel since most people are already at their destinations by then.” Oliver’s stomach tightens. “I’ll bet you’re looking forward to some family time.”

Elio’s mouth compresses and cinches up to the side, the apples of his cheeks a soft pink. He shrugs. “It’s…you know, it’s been a while.”

Oliver wipes at his nose with the edge of his index finger. He wants to crawl into a hole. “I know.” He pulls the blanket around and starts to fold it up in his lap. “Well, that’ll be great, then. And I guess I really need to put in some time at my desk, anyway. I’m still working on the last chapter and you know how that’s been going.” Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Elio’s eyebrows flick together, but he can’t bring himself to turn his head and look at him fully. “So I’ll just…umm…grab my stuff and…and you can call me next week sometime or whatever…all right? Ok.”

He lays the blanket on the sofa arm next to him and tugs at its folded edges, making them sharp and defined, but when he moves to stand, he feels a warm hand on his forearm. He stills and stares at the floor in front of him. Distantly he realizes he’s holding his breath. He doesn’t know why.

“Oliver, what are you doing?” Elio’s voice is soft.

“I…”

That’s it. That’s all that comes out.

Elio slides closer and moves his hand to behind Oliver’s right hip to prop himself up as he leans the length of his chest against Oliver’s arm. “Where are you going?”

Though Elio’s voice is just a murmur, Oliver flinches. “Space. I am giving you the space you need so you can be with your family.”

“Space.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Oliver exhales hard and jumps up, pacing around in the small area in front of the desk. His chest is tight, his skin prickly. Elio is so calm, almost amused, and instead of soothing him, it only makes Oliver more agitated. “Why are you asking me that? You…you should be able to…when your parents are here, you don’t want a…a…”

He watches Oliver stalk around in a circle for a few moments. “Tell me.”
Oliver’s hand tightens into a fist that he presses against his forehead. “Don’t play games, Elio. You know what I mean.”

Elio’s forearms rest lightly on his knees, and his hands lace together patiently. “No, I don’t. Go ahead—tell me what I don’t want.”

Oliver throws his arms up. “You don’t want some stranger in the way with your parents here! That’s just…that’s only for family!”

“I see. And that doesn’t include you?”

Of course it fucking doesn’t! He is swamped with anger, white hot, a shot that surges up from somewhere deep within him. He wants to scream and smash his fist through the wall. He wants to rush over to the sofa and grab Elio around the shoulders and shake him. What in the hell is the matter with you? How can you not get it? How can you not see? But when Oliver flings his body around to face Elio, the flame has already burned itself out. All that’s left is the smoke, which works into his eyes and fills his throat. “No.” He swallows hard. “That word…it has never included me.”

Elio stands, and he adjusts his feet awkwardly, like he had been about to step towards Oliver, like he had wanted to close the distance and reach out for him, but had thought better of it. How does he know? Instead, he crosses his arms in front of his chest and stares at him steadily. “Do you have any idea how angry my mother will be with me if she doesn’t get to meet you?”

Oliver doesn’t know how to answer. He glances around the room as if the words he needs were written somewhere on the walls.

“Since I told her how much you liked the lasagna, she’s been insisting that she needs to cook her own specialty for you.”

“Since…wait, what?”

“And my father has been dying to get into some drawn out discussion with you about the resurgence of American Transcendentalism since I told him that you enjoyed Thoreau, so prepare yourself for that because it could go on for days.” He smirks and shakes his head ruefully.

Oliver’s throat works harder than before. “You told them. About me.”

“Yes.”

“What did you…how much did you say?”

Elio’s smile is almost shy. “Well, when I described my plan for how to tell you that I love you, my dad said he was proud of me, and my mom cried and begged me to take pictures.” He rolls his eyes.

“I…I don’t…oh my God.”

“Yeah, she means well, but sometimes she can be a little ridiculous.”

“No, I…I mean—”

A whisper. “I know what you mean.”

“Elio…”

“Forget it, Oliver. You’re already a part of our family. There’s no getting away from us, even if you want to.”
“I don’t,” escapes on a gust of air before his lips have a chance to move.

“Good.” He bites his lip and looks Oliver up and down for a moment. “All right, then. It’s time we do this. Stay right there. Don’t move a muscle.” Elio rounds the desk and slips open the drawer. With unexpected caution, he pulls the brass key out, holding it in front of him with a finger and thumb, like it is a delicate artifact, like it is a lynchpin that can save the world or blow it to pieces as soon as it touches a charged surface. He returns to his spot and places it on the edge of the desk in between himself and Oliver.

Oliver takes a deep breath. *Here we go.*

Elio’s eyes study his face. “What do you feel when you see that? What’s the first thing that hits you?”

“Fear.”

“Of what?”

“Loss.”


Oliver tries to scoff at this, but his chest has already constricted on him, and it emerges as a wheeze. He raises his face to the ceiling. “Let’s say I move in here and in a month, you decide you can’t stand me and want me out. Then what? I’d be screwed. Homeless…and…dead inside…and screwed.”

Elio’s jaw clenches. “No. I already told you what I want.” He crosses his arms. “You have three advanced degrees, Oliver. What part of *everything* was confusing to you?”

Oliver shoves the heels of his hands into his temples. “Everything.”

Elio huffs. “Yeah, well, what if you suddenly decide you can’t stand me? Have you got a plan for that?”

Oliver barks a laugh. “Please.” He runs his hands over his face and sighs. “Come on, Elio. Get serious here.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Of course I’m *serious!*”

“No! No, you’re not, Elio!” Oliver’s voice cracks as the words explode up to the ceiling. His upper arms drive into his ribcage so that his hand can claw ineffectually at the air, like he’s trying to mold his thoughts into a shape that can possibly make sense. “You’re not being *serious* when you just…I mean, do you have *any* idea how fucking in *love* with you I am? Do you know that I would sit in that damn coffee shop *every fucking night* if I could, just to watch you, just to be *near* you? Do you realize that on more than one occasion, I actually have had to unplug the phone in my office to keep from calling you, just because I want to hear your voice, or that I have to force myself not to *run* up those stairs out there to get to your door?” His crooked fingers plunge into his hair. “It’s *unbelievable*… Jesus, it is *ludicrous!* And you…you actually think that I…that I could…” Oliver stutters a humorless chuckle and drops his arms heavily to his sides, utterly defenseless now, feeling like he’s just ripped back a curtain, rolled back his skin and invited Elio to feast on his organs if that were what he desired. His ragged voice completes his surrender. “I warned you, Elio. I *told* you. I told you I would never recover.”

Elio’s eyes soften before they fall closed, and he sucks in a gulp of air, like he wants to hold all of
that for a moment more, to hoard the words inside himself before they can be lost to the air. He
drops his chin to his chest and exhales slowly through tight lips, hands anchored on his hips. He
finally raises his head and gathers up Oliver’s gaze as he does, tucking it like lengths of rope deep
into his own as he leans closer and lays his fingers in a fan against Oliver’s sternum. “Whatever you
feel in here, whatever it is that’s filling you up? You should trust it, even when it scares you
—especially when it scares you. Because it should tell you the truth, that what I feel for you is just
as strong. So please stop thinking of yourself as being alone in everything. I swear to you, you’re
not. Not anymore!”

Oliver’s eyes swell with tears that he bites back and blinks aside. His voice is gruff, but he presses
on. “You have to promise to talk to me, Elio. Even when you’re disappointed in me, even when
you’re pissed at me, even when you think I’ll be pissed at you. You have to tell me everything. And
don’t expect me to know what you’re thinking—I’m not a mind reader, and…and you have to spell
everything out for me like I’m a goddamn four-year-old and force me to listen. Promise me.
Please.”

Elio grabs his hands and squeezes them tightly, like they’re all that keep him from floating into
space. “I will. I promise. But you have to do the same. You are not allowed to draw your own
conclusions about what I’m thinking and run away from me.” Elio’s eyes are impossibly large, and
they bore into Oliver’s, with a near frantic intensity. “You have to ask. You have to talk. Promise
me you’ll do that, Oliver.”

God, he knows me so fucking well.

And he wants me anyway.

Oliver nods furiously. “Yes,” he manages, but even with his teeth firm in his bottom lip, he can’t
stop the sob that escapes. Elio drops his hands so that he can throw his arms around Oliver’s
shoulders, and Oliver wraps up his torso and crushes Elio to him, wants to crawl into him, keep his
head forever in the crux of his neck, feel his warmth bleed through his shirt and the bones of his
pelvis carve into his abdomen. “I love you,” he breathes.

“I love you.” Elio kisses Oliver’s neck, his cheek, then wipes his eyes on his own bicep as he leans
back.

Oliver clears his throat. “All right, all right. So now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, let’s deal
with the really important stuff.”

A burst of surprised laughter percolates from Elio’s chest. “Oh, okay. Such as?”

Oliver crosses his arms sternly. “You should know that I stay up late. A lot. And…and I might
forget to turn off the lights when I come to bed.”

A glimmer dances in Elio’s eyes. “I see. Well, in that case, you should know that I hum a lot and
when I get a song or a phrase stuck in my head, I’ll repeat it for hours on end.”

“I hate doing dishes.”

“I hate doing laundry.”

“I write reminder notes for myself and forget to look at them.”

“I leave books open and laying around when I’m in the middle of reading them.”

“I refuse to eat expired food, even if it ‘smells all right.’”
“I refuse to ever make popcorn in here—it’s disgusting. What is it with Americans and corn?”

“I yell at the television when I watch basketball.”

“I don’t know anything about basketball, so I am going to ask you questions through the entire game.”

“You’re sure we can do this?”

“Did you really unplug your office phone?”

“Shut up.”

“I’m sure.”

“No, I mean…you’re sure?”

“Oliver?”

“What?”

“Welcome home.”

———

He knows it’s coming, but the knock at the door makes him jump anyway.

Elio appears from the kitchen and looks over at him. “You ready?”

“No.” Oliver straightens his collar for the third time and flattens his hair. “Yes. No. Do I look…all right? Is this—“

“Hey. How many times do I have to tell you, Mt. Olympus?”

Oliver’s cheeks pink.

A saucy grin overtakes his face. “You’re perfect.”

Elio swoops open the door to a flurry of arms in the air trying to grab him and shouts of Elio’s name and various endearments, phrases in Italian that Oliver couldn’t interpret. The delighted voice of his father cuts through, saying his son’s name with a colorful lilt that Oliver likes immediately, before he grabs Elio’s face with both hands and plants a kiss squarely on his mouth. Elio’s arms flap as he tries to hug them both at once, all while trying to usher them across the threshold so he can shut the door.

His father has a shoulder bag that he places on the floor, beaming as Elio’s mom squeezes her son’s face with one hand, puckering his lips as she pushes in on his cheeks. He glances over at Oliver with near desperation, and for some reason, it fills Oliver’s heart with warmth. Seeing the three of them together just fits, as if it makes the whole picture of Elio’s life come more into focus.

Elio breaks her grasp by hooking his arm around her waist and spinning the both of them while he gives her a kiss on the cheek.

“You must be Oliver!” Samuel rushes over to shake his hand, his warm smile never wavering.
Oliver feels himself bow slightly. “Yes! Professor Perlman, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He looks over the man’s shoulder to Mrs. Perlman. “Both of you.”

“Please, call me Samuel.” He gazes up at Oliver. “My, you’re much bigger than the picture I had in my head!”

Oliver smiles, running his hand up and down in the air next to him. “Yes, well, I guess it would be hard to fit all of this in your head. It’s hard to fit it in most doorways.”

Samuel giggles, a noise so much like Elio’s own laugh that it flutters the little hairs on the back of Oliver’s neck. He motions for Elio’s mother to join them. “My wife, Annella.”

She takes Oliver’s hand and covers their joined grip with her other one. “Oliver, it is so good to finally meet you. Elio has spoken of you so often, we rather feel as if we know you already.”

Oliver glances up to see Elio gazing at them with a complicated expression pinning his face somewhere between happiness and revelation, as if he were reframing the image of his own parents as they stand there with him, a tableau he’d perhaps envisioned but could never see clearly until reality intervened, finally shifting the colors of it into exactly the right light.

He looks back down at Annella, her kind face and keen eyes, and nods, “Likewise, Mrs. Perlman. Just knowing Elio makes me feel as if I’ve known you, too. The kind of man that he is, that doesn’t happen by accident.”

Annella’s smile deepens, and she gives his hand a firm squeeze before Elio interrupts, bustling them to the sofa to relax, asking them if they’d settled in all right at The Bowery and what they might want to drink. They had flown in the night before, and after a long day of travel, had merely given Elio a quick phone call to let him know they’d arrived. Today, however, they are rested and eager to pepper their son with thousands of questions about his classes, his new compositions, and anything else he could possibly have done or seen in the months since he’d been in Italy. Oliver leaves them to it, heading into the kitchen to make some iced tea. By the time he returns and serves everyone, the conversation had moved to more immediate concerns.

“Elio, your mother has been itching to get into your kitchen and give you a taste of home.”

“Mom, no. You don’t have to work like that. We can just go out to eat. This is New York City; you can practically spit out the window and hit a great restaurant with anything you’d ever want to eat.”

She takes a long draught of her tea. “Which one has my braciole?”

Elio sighs and looks at his feet. Samuel chuckles.

“Besides, I won’t be preparing this alone.” She looks over to where Oliver leans against the edge of the desk and smiles. “Oliver will help me.”

He snaps upright, sloshing his drink. “Sure. Yes. I’m happy to, Mrs. Perlman.”

“Wonderful.”
Oliver takes Annella to a small grocery store in the neighborhood for the supplies she requires that were not already nestled in the fridge in anticipation of their arrival. Oliver carries a basket while she leads the way deliberately, up one aisle, down the next. As she lovingly inspects a selection of tomatoes, Oliver can’t help but follow her eyes, trying to guess what it is that she is seeing that he does not, the subtle details that denote the fruit’s degree of perfection before it either returns to the display or wins a spot in the basket.

At some point, he realizes she is looking over the ruddy mound at his face, which immediately turns a similar shade. “You seem to look with the eye of an artist, not a chef, Mrs. Perlman.”

She gives a soft smile. “They are not dissimilar professions, I suppose. Each feeds a necessary part of us.”

Oliver nods. “Tangible expressions of a human soul.”

She passes to him another tomato and a head of garlic, then moves them toward the artisan cheeses. “Elio tells us you are a professor of philosophy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Why?”

“Why philosophy or why a professor?”

Her mouth pulls up on one side. “Both.”

Oliver leans forward so that she can add a massive hunk of Parmigiano-Reggiano, its dotted rind clunking to the basket’s bottom. “Well, philosophy focuses on the big picture of who we are and what we do. It keeps us honest to our world and keeps us from dwelling too long on ourselves. That kind of compartmentalizing makes us myopic, and in the end, more isolated and alone.”

“Something tells me you know a bit about that.”

Normally, such a statement would grate on him, but her voice is not laden with pity, merely empathy. “More than I’d care to.”

“Is that why you decided to teach?”

“Yes, I suppose so. Ideas can only go so far inside one’s own mind. At some point, we need to share a love of them, or there’s little point in any of it.”

She is quiet for a while, but as they wait for the butcher, Annella turns toward Oliver and fixes him with her decisive gaze. “You know, Elio is my only son. My only child. I want his happiness more than I want my own.”

Oliver blinks, but a thick swallow does little to shed the sand in his throat, “So do I.”

Annella smiles warmly and puts a hand on his cheek, and Oliver is struck then by how much her son resembles her. “I know you do, Oliver.” She pats his cheek twice, just as she had done to Elio before they’d left the apartment. “He has chosen you well.”
“Mom?”

“Yes, mio piccino?”

“I’ve really missed you.”

The table is decimated. Annella had watched in varying stages of amazement as the meal she swore would last them several days disappeared in the space of an hour. Elio is slumped in his chair, as if each mouthful he’s taken has weighed him down to the point that he can barely keep his head above the rim of the table.

“What do you boys normally have to eat?”

“It depends.”

Oliver shakes his head with mock severity. “I don’t think he ever eats lunch, Annella.”

Her mouth drops open. “Elio!”

Elio is about to protest, but instead he opts for balling up his napkin and arcing it across the table at Oliver’s head. Oliver catches it with one hand and smiles sweetly as he uses it to dab the corners of his mouth, then flattens it out with exaggerated strokes next to his plate. Elio rolls his eyes and finishes the last of his wine.

Samuel chuckles and leans forward. “So what should we do with ourselves tomorrow? Do either of you have obligations you must attend to?”

Oliver looks to Elio, who shrugs and shakes his head. “No, I guess not. The only obligation I have is to my publisher, who is expecting the next set of pages in January, but that’s not immediate.”

“No?”

Oliver smirks. “No, it’s more of an ongoing tragedy, to be honest.”

Samuel gives him an encouraging smile. “Well, first drafts are always an exercise in survival. The genius truly comes in the aftermath.”

Elio flops over the arm of his chair and lays his head on his father’s shoulder. “Dad ought to know. He’s written a series of six volumes.”

Oliver had guessed as much. “Your field is archaeology and ancient art, correct?”

“Yes.” Samuel’s face looks dreamy. “There is no way to understand the present if you do not understand the past.” His expression turns doleful. “My last text was…oh, let’s see here…four—no, five years ago, focusing on Greek sculpture. I can tell you, that was a bear to get done! The research alone took—”

Oliver sits higher in his seat. “Wait—Art of the Ancients? That was you? You’re that Samuel Perlman?”

“Why, yes, I am.” The professor blinks in surprise. “Do you…have you read it?”

“Read it? That book saved me in my Greek Culture class. The chapter on the influence of Praxiteles was enthralling!” Oliver is smiling so wide his cheeks hurt. He remembers distinctly the comparisons drawn by the text, the elegant nature of the descriptions of each piece’s impossible yet nonchalant curves, ones that all but dared the audience to desire them. “It was the first time that I’ve
read a book like that, one that’s instructional and informational in nature, that actually reflected the beauty of the works being described. It was so *alive.*

Samuel beams, stroking his salt and pepper beard. “I thank you, Oliver. Thank you very much.”

Next to Oliver, Annella chuckles and pats his arm. “Now you’ve done it, darling. My husband loves a like mind. He’ll be unwilling to let yours go.”

Samuel laughs at his own expense and winks at her. “I’ll be good, my dear. I promise.” He looks back to Oliver. “When is your final deadline? How much time do you have to draft and revise?”

“End of September. By then, it needs to be ready for the printer.”

“Is that so?” Samuel looks contemplative. “So most of your final work will be done over the summer?”

“I suppose so. It’s hard to have time for it during the regular semesters.”

Samuel glances over at Elio, then to Annella, who both miraculously seem to follow wherever the professor’s thoughts were leading. Each gives a conspiratorial smile and nods in response, mirrors of one another. Oliver looks between them and back to the professor, eyebrows gathering along the bridge of his nose. “Why? What’s going on?”

Mr. Perlman folds his hands together on the table. “I have an idea that you may or may not enjoy, so please understand I’ll not be offended if you decline.”

Oliver shifts awkwardly in his seat. “Okay…”

“Each summer, Annella and I sponsor a student at our villa, just our way to help young academics revise a manuscript for publication. In return, all I request is about an hour a day to assist me with my correspondence and paperwork.”

“*Not* an easy task, by any means,” Annella throws in, reaching over to squeeze her husband’s hand playfully.

“This summer, however, we could forego applications for the position if it is already filled.”

“Filled? By whom?”

Samuel’s eyebrows raise. “You, Oliver. You could come with Elio, and you and I could work together on your final edits so that you can meet your last deadline well ahead of schedule.” He smiles. “I would love the opportunity to learn from you, too, and to help you in any way I can.”

Oliver can’t speak. His lips feel numb. He fears he’s fallen into an episode of *Candid Camera,* and any moment now, Allen Funt was going to pop out of the bedroom and shove a microphone in his face. He looks beseechingly at Elio, his touchstone, his barometer for everything in Oliver’s life since the moment he himself first had entered it. Oliver’s not even sure what he’s looking for, but whatever he needs, Elio, whose eyes circle his face, reads it all, reads him like a fortune hidden in the folds of a cookie solely for him to find.

Elio holds his gaze steadily, and as his toothy grin emerges, nods again slowly. Just to him, just for him.

*Just for us.*
Oliver runs a hand over his tingling scalp and turns back to Samuel. “Wow, thank you. That would be amazing! Thank you, Professor. I would… I would love that, really.” He winces slightly. “You’re sure? I mean, you’re sure I won’t be imposing?”

“Nonsense, Oliver. You’re absolutely welcome in our home anytime.” He reaches over and wraps his arm around his son’s shoulders. “After all, you’re family now.”

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That night, Oliver pulls Elio into his arms as soon as they crawl onto their bed, pulls him tight with a hand pressed to his chest and the other to his abdomen. He feels Elio sigh and go slack, molding himself to the curve of Oliver’s frame. “I missed you,” Oliver murmurs into his hair. “We’ve been together all day, but I still missed you.”

Elio runs his hands along Oliver’s forearm, circling his fingers in nonsensical patterns. “I know.” He turns his head enough to kiss Oliver’s mouth, running his tongue along the seam of his lips and opening them, pushing up into them, making Oliver tighten his grip on the lithe body to feel as much of it as he can until he shudders with exhilaration from every centimeter of his skin.

“I hope my parents weren’t too much.”

“Too much for what?”

“Just too much.” He huffs. “I told you they were eager to meet you.”

“They’re perfect, which makes absolute sense because so are you.”

“Me?”

“You.”

“You.” He circles his ass deeper into the cage of Oliver’s pelvis, flicking a grin at Oliver’s soft groan.

Oliver licks his lips. “You know, I realized today that I need to readjust my use of pronouns.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, this used to be your bedroom. Second-person. One step removed. But now,” his teeth graze the side of Elio’s neck, “it’s our bedroom. First-person. Plural.”

“Ah,” Elio breathes, “that’s… yes, right there… um, that’s true.”

“Our pillow. Our shower.”

“Our apartment.”

A tongue dips into the ear, a slow thrust. “Our home.”

The jaw loosens, tongue rounding the lush circle of lips. “Our family.” An insistent hand drags Oliver’s fingers to a raised nipple. The moan from both is instant, making it seem as if it has come from a single throat.
“Our future.” The other hand slips from abdomen to hip bone, anchoring them, using every part of their bodies to bring them closer, then apart, then closer still with movements so languid that the surface tension from the shared slick of sweat can scarcely unstick itself before it reforms, tighter than before.

“My Elio?”

“Yes. God, yes, my Oliver.” Heat, hard and determined.

“More…I want more.”

All they have now are thready tufts of air, hands that reach and grab, one head thrown back, the other curved down to it, tasting the noises that come, devouring them whole before they can emerge. Oliver cannot feel the borders of his own body. All he knows has melted into sensation, a tunnel to the edge of a cliff paved in wet curls and soft cheeks and a pulsing heartbeat that vibrates under his lips and echoes inside of him.

“More…this is more.”

“This…you…you are more.”

“You are more…more myself than I am.”

The ground he’d walked disappears, and Oliver is flung out into the atmosphere, but only to fly, higher than he ever thought he could because shared wings catch every convection, every gust. He comes apart, and as the pieces of him scatter and fall to earth, he lets them lie, lets them rest unafraid and wait for the gentle hands to find them all and make him breathe again.

Chapter End Notes

The small conversation Elio has in French with Annella on the phone should be something like this: “Hi, Mom…I miss you, too…That’s right…yeah, we’d love that…all right…all right, love you, too…see you in a few days…ok, bye.”

_Candid Camera_ was an early reality show of sorts popular in the 1960s and 1970s, in which pranks were played on unsuspecting victims; the charade was revealed by the show’s famous catch phrase: “Smile, you’re on Candid Camera!”

Just as an aside, I really love the idea of Annella and Oliver connecting because even though his father is wonderful, the film really seemed to show our precious Elio to be mama’s boy! :)

Elio and Oliver finish travel preparations and head to Italy together.

Willowbrooke, for your kindness and sagacity and patience, you deserve both the rainbow and the pot of gold at its end. Alas, all I can do is thank you, humbly and profusely, for all that you do.

“Got a surprise especially for you,
Something that both of us have always wanted to do
We've waited so long…”
Eddie Money, “Two Tickets to Paradise”

“I can’t believe you’re leaving!”
Elio scowls around his wad of cinnamon bun. “What do you mean? It’s only six weeks. It will take you longer to unload all of that hibiscus tea.” He hooks his thumb at the new display by the counter.

Chiara’s hands are on her hips. “But that’s more than a month!”

“And slightly less than two,” Oliver adds soberly.

Elio covers his mouth and snickers.

Chiara pouts and drapes her arms around Oliver’s shoulders, pressing her ample chest into his back and aligning her cheek with his. “Well, do you have to take him with you?” she purrs.

Oliver feels himself cringe and start to shrink down, but she tightens her grip. He doesn’t wish to hurt her feelings. The two of them have slipped into an easy friendship over the last few months. She has invariably been lively and welcoming every time he had come in to see Elio, and Oliver quickly learned that it wasn’t an act or an angle—it was just her way. And once she learned the truth about his relationship with Elio, she simply extended her handsy vivacity to include Oliver as well. Now, he just smiles and lets her kiss him on the cheek, leaving a large cherry imprint from her lipstick. He consoles himself by blinking innocently at Elio from behind his blue mug and relishing the way those artful features fold further as the scowl deepens.

“Yes, I do, so you can let go of him now,” Elio growls at her.

“But I can take care of him while you’re gone.” She runs her hands over Oliver’s chest. “I promise I’ll be good to him.”
“That’s such a nice offer,” Oliver throws in lightly, nearly biting clean through his lip to keep from laughing out loud at the adorably appalled huff Elio breathes over his cappuccino.

“Don’t you have customers or something you need to take care of, Chiara? Like, now?” Elio grumbles and rips off another hunk of pastry.

“Okay, fine. Be that way, Elio.” She kisses Oliver’s other cheek. “You know where to find me if you change your mind.” She winks at Oliver, then sticks out her tongue at Elio and roughs up his hair as she sashays back behind the counter to take the order of a couple who had come in from the street several minutes ago and were patiently waiting for her to notice them. The wife smiles gratefully at them, squeezing her husband’s hand as he peruses the menu with curious eyes.

“Aww, come on, Elio. I’m pretty sure that it was you who once told me that sharing is caring, right?” Oliver clucks his tongue, convinced he could well pop a blood vessel with the fight to keep his expression bland.

Elio pinches his mouth closed, and he exhales forcefully through his nose. He dips his napkin in his cup of water and wipes it across Oliver’s cheek, then pins his gaze with a smoldering viridescence that makes Oliver’s pulse thrum. “Never.” He scoots his chair closer until their knees brush and push together, holding Oliver’s eyes steadily while he reaches around and gives a few long strokes to the other cheek as well. His voice drops, and it seems to pull his stare down momentarily to Oliver’s mouth so that Oliver finds himself holding his breath when Elio meets his eyes once more. “You are all mine, and don’t you forget it.”

“Yes, sir,” he murmurs, choked with the urge to pull Elio onto his lap and lick the sugar crystals from the corners of his full pink lips.

But there are times when Oliver does forget.

There are times when he wakes up early in the morning with that familiar anxiety gnawing in the periphery, when the light is grey and barely formed, when he teeters between the real world and its careful mirror, an invention that he’s constructed for himself to make the thoughtless hours pass without resistance, a thin syrup of reckless dreams coating the folds of his mind. But then he rolls over on his pillow and his face disappears into strands of silken midnight, his arms falling naturally around the body the color of moonlight that sighs beneath his touch though still deep asleep. There are times when he sits back heavily in his desk chair and rubs his neck, glances out of his office door into the forlorn darkness of the hallway, and feels that tickle of loneliness prick his mind. But then he turns his wrist and looks at the time and realizes that Elio will be home in an hour, and he gathers his things in a flurry so he can get there first to greet him with a kiss and a glass of wine, to massage his shoulders while he talks about intonation problems and the ligature options for a clarinet. There are times when various colleagues gripe about their spouses who are veritable strangers to them, about how they’d fought over intrusive in-laws or a lack of shared interests or Phil Donahue’s comments about the tent-poles of healthy relationships, and he will blank out momentarily, his well-worn method of withdrawal from conversations whose subjects would never matter to a solitary man. But then he smiles and nods empathetically and perhaps asks a few questions before subtle suggestions dribble out of him with a shrug and a mumble of maybe that just works for us, though. And he goes straight home to Elio squinting at the Cavs game and throwing up his arms in disbelief, “Oliver! Do you believe Hubbard has two fouls in the first quarter? What is wrong with him tonight?” and pulls him down onto the soft leather of the sofa and kisses him until he is raw and winded.

It’s been a learning process, that much is for sure, but it is one he’s relished. He imagines that at some point it will stop, the feeling of discovery, the jolt of electricity deep in his gut when he
remembers everything, when he learns something new about Elio that he hadn’t known before—the way he sings in the shower when he thinks Oliver’s already left for the day, or the way his face lights up when he pets a dog in the park, or the way he strokes Oliver’s hair to soothe him when he has bronchitis and is miserable. The petals of Elio exist fully even as they unfold, and Oliver feels the headiness of it, the condition at once of being and becoming, the evanescence in every moment.

And there have been things he’d rather not have learned. There was the aggravation when a rehearsal ran long and Elio missed a dinner date they’d had planned for two weeks. There was the disappointment that devastated Elio’s precious features when Oliver was late for a performance, scuttling into the hall as the second movement finished, nearly missing entirely the debut of Elio’s featured composition, the silence that followed nearly unbearable. *I can’t stand the silence, Elio.*

But that was nothing compared to the explosion of anger and hurt when Oliver, exhausted and under significant pressure at work, snapped and accused Elio of condescending to him, of looking down on who he is.

“That’s what you think, isn’t it, Elio? I’m just some stupid poor white trash? What the hell do you know about anything? Your whole life is based in privilege. You know nothing of the battles I’ve had to fight to get where I am!”

“Fuck, Oliver, now you *are* being stupid! Try not running your mouth when it’s detached from your brain! You think I don’t know what it means to fight for something? Who *are* you right now?”

“If this whole relationship is just some charity function for you, then why the fuck are we even bothering?”

It had taken days to fill in the blast holes that the argument had carved into their bodies, for them to work their way back to each other on a flood of apologies and tears, reverent touches and soft lips, tending lavishly to the scars left behind so that their skin wouldn’t pinch and tug anytime either of them would move, waiting until they had finally healed each one for good and made the shared underlying muscles even stronger than they had been before.

Every bit of happiness and joy, fear and uncertainty, has been worth it. Oliver would not trade a moment of the worst times he’s had with Elio for the very best of times he’d had without him. He realizes that there is no longer a part of him that does not contain Elio. Elio had said something similar to him on their first night together, and Oliver had been warmed by the idea, but he had not appreciated what it really meant. Looking back at the last nine months, he sees it clearly. Everything about him that matters, every critical thread of his life, has quietly woven around the two of them, fashioning a web that shifts and expands and holds them up through war and weather and time.

They take a cab to the airport to avoid the hassle of luggage on the train. When they had packed their things last night, Elio’s mantra became, “Nah, you won’t need it.” Dress shoes, long pants, any and all socks—only a few of the demoted necessities that Oliver found back on the coffee table after he’d packed them away. “All you’ll need is swimming trunks and a couple of shirts. And those funky espadrilles you threw in the back of the closet.”

“What am I supposed to wear the rest of the time?”

Elio had shot in from the other room and swarmed into his personal space until he was mere inches away, wickedness painting every line of his face. He had slid his arms around Oliver’s waist and pushed his hands into Oliver’s back pockets. “Absolutely nothing.”

Oliver had laughed softly and tilted forward, angling his neck around so he could murmur into Elio’s ear. “But Elio, how am I supposed to stay warm on those long Italian nights?”
Elio’s hands had started to stroke and knead him through the fabric of his pants until his pelvis ground against Elio’s just enough. “Friction.”

They had not gotten much sleep after that, but Elio’s eyes are still bright this morning, the prospect of more than sixteen hours stuck in an airport or on a plane no deterrent to his excitement to be heading home. Oliver clutches his passport, running his fingers over its cover. He’d never had one before. Why would he? When he was a kid, he’d thought about being an explorer, one of those intrepid men who would speed to the edge of the map so that they could be the first to face the monsters that might lie beyond it. But most of his life had been spent exploring ideas, safely ensconced in his corner of the library, letting his mind traverse terrain his body would never know.

Elio changed that. Knowing Elio had made him understand truly, for the first time in his life, what it means to live in a participatory universe. Thought and word and deed are so closely enmeshed now, and Oliver has never possessed this degree of appetite for experience, a desperate hunger to discover things with his bare hands, to drag into the light the philosophy he had once only contemplated in darkened corners and test all of it amid his patient construction of a quintessential existence. He thinks of Thoreau, toiling at the edge of Walden Pond and plumbing its depths as he did his own; would the author be gratified to see Oliver put aside even his seminal text to devote himself to sucking the marrow from Oliver’s own life? Of course he would—it was the very point of it, to seek one’s contemplation in the physical world, to fight with every limb for the struggles which matter, those that have little to do with a material world and more to do with tapping into a wellspring of that which lives within us yet will outlive us all in the end.

It is the very definition of love.

As they wait for their flight at the airport, Oliver watches through the giant panes of the concourse as the planes taxi in circles to come and go, a slow ballet of enormous machines that cross oceans and span continents, and he is overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. Thousands upon thousands of travelers passing around him that he’ll never meet, never know at all, jetting to far-flung destinations to walk amongst thousands more. He rests his shoulder against the glass and tries to imagine what it would’ve been like to have been one of them, to have bought the ticket he’d sworn he wanted after high school and traveled to Italy, meeting Elio as a teenager before he came to America to study. How gut-wrenching it would have been to have fallen for him back then, to see with crystal clarity what magic his life could have had, only to watch it pass by him in the window of a train car. How could he have faced the prospect of leaving and putting a whole ocean between them? It would have butchered his soul and left his hopeless body to slip into a coma, decades of purgatory until he would finally die an ignorant man.

He shivers and folds his arms around his torso, turning to seek out Elio’s face where he reclines in the rigid line of chairs, legs stretched out before him, ankles crossed and head tipped back, his eyes closed and his earphones on, fingers twitching out notes to the silent melody. He must feel Oliver’s eyes on him because he opens his and his lips twist into a small smile. He slips down his headphones and pats the seat next to him.

Just as Oliver gets comfortable, the boarding call comes.

The plane is fully booked, yet the chaos of people finding seats and stowing their carry-ons does not deter a young flight attendant named Tiffany from orbiting around Elio, fetching him an extra pillow and blanket and gabbing with him about Rome, a city she is apparently desperate to visit, and based upon the amount of hair flipping she does, one she’s desperate to have Elio show her.

Oliver lets her blather on for a solid minute before he clears his throat and tacks on his best kindly-fuck-off smile. “Thanks, Tiffany. I think we’ve got it from here.”
The girl scurries away, and Elio’s jaw drops. “What was that? She’s just being nice.”

“I should’ve taken the aisle seat.”

“Don’t be that way.” He shrugs. “Could be useful.”

“Right. Sure. If you can charm your way to free drinks and an extra bag of pretzels, then I’ll consider letting you deploy those eyelashes.”

“What does that mean?”

Oliver snorts. “Oh, save it, Perlman. Like you don’t know your eyelashes are so long they practically need their own zip code.”

“Mine? Yours brush your cheek every time you blink.”

“So?”

“So it’s so fucking sexy that I want to rip your clothes off every time I watch you read for any length of time.”

“Good to know.” Oliver leans forward and snatches a magazine from the seat pocket. “Time to catch up on my SkyMall.”

The emerald eyes narrow before two fingers dart out to pinch Oliver’s knee, a spot he well knows is the only place on his entire body where he’s ticklish. He yelps and tosses the magazine in the air, making Tiffany’s eyebrows raise as she passes down the aisle. Elio snickers and settles back, and Oliver hides his blush by turning to the window to watch the luggage carts outside motor under the wing in their circuit around the plane.

It isn’t long until he feels Elio’s hand snake onto his lap and grab his tightly.

Suddenly, Oliver thinks about Georges Seurat; really, of his descendant, the one with whom Oliver had empathized. Modern George reads the artist’s words at the end of the play, the list of design elements the master had used to create his paintings, the ones meant to conquer the challenge of bringing order to the whole. It is not until the end of the list that George stumbles. Harmony. That is the one term which he cannot interpret, to the point that he needs help even to read the word on the page.

It is the one concept that he cannot quite conceive.

But what is truly improbable about it, though, what Oliver never could’ve predicted all those months ago, is what he now finds undeniable: harmony is the only word on that list which Oliver has retained. It is the one word that Oliver knows by heart.

Oliver turns away from the plane’s window and looks down at his hand, the fingers entwined with Elio’s, threaded securely with one another, just like they had been at the theatre. No words.

As the plane starts to taxi, Elio leans over. “Penny for your thoughts.”

Oliver smiles quietly and reaches into his pocket, relishing every part of Elio’s surprise, the pink lips ajar, the green eyes moistening as he reaches out a finger to touch its surface and gives Oliver a look that he will remember for the rest of his life. He clears his throat, but his voice remains husky. “I’ve got one already. I got it in a coffee shop one night, and it’s worth more to me than anything else I’ve ever had.”
“Why?”

“It is a good luck charm.”

Elio pulls at their joined hands and snuggles them to his chest. “Do you believe in luck, Oliver?”

*Random luck of the universe,* he’d called it last year. Random luck that they would find each other and genuinely appreciate each other as human beings. Random luck that they would complement each other, that they would be better together than apart. But what are the chances either would fall in love? What are the chances they *both* would?

What are the chances that it would last?

Outside, the jet turbines fire, and the craft accelerates.

“Would you call me lucky, Elio?”

He smirks. “I guess I *could*, but I’d rather call you Oliver.”

“Yeah?” The world shifts as the plane tips up, a steady ascent into the clouds. Oliver relaxes into it, laying back in his seat and letting his eyes close. “I’d rather you call me by your name.”

**End of Part One**

Chapter End Notes

*Walden; or, Life in the Woods* is Henry David Thoreau’s best-known text. Beginning in 1845, he devoted a little over two years to putting Transcendental philosophy into practice in the woods surrounding Concord, Massachusetts.

Phil Donahue was to daytime talk shows of the 1970s and 1980s what Oprah Winfrey became in the 1990s and 2000s.

Phil Hubbard played forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team from 1982-1989.

LindeHobbit, if you’re still around, I’m picturing the couple who comes into Insomniac in this chapter as you and your husband!

So.

This part of their adventure has ended, and words fail me when I try to find a way to express my gratitude to all of you for your feedback and encouragement along the way. If you’ve ever wondered whether your comments matter to a writer, let me assure you without reservation that there can be no greater gift!

Now, serious question: would you like more?

At one point, I thought 8 chapters would suffice for this story...then 11...and then I gave up trying to predict where the characters were taking their story; then, true to its form, as I worked on this chapter, ideas for at least four more sprang into my head, a sampling of their adventures somewhere in Northern Italy. I do not wish to overstay my welcome,
however, so if you really think it’s best to say adieu to the boys here, I get it and it’s absolutely fine to say so. But if you think you might want read on, please let me know, and I will happily bring back the chapter count question mark once again! :-)

Chapter Summary

Unable to sleep on their flight to Italy, Oliver's philosophical mind wanders and contemplates the tenuous nature of life as he knows it.

Chapter Notes

There is no way for me to thank all of you properly for your overwhelming kindness and support. All I can do is to beg you to believe that it means everything to me, and I’d not have had the courage nor the stamina to continue this story without you. Thank you for loving these boys as much as I do and for agreeing to read on in my little universe!

My gratitude, as always, to Willowbrooke for bringing order to the whole with a clarity that would impress Georges Seurat himself!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oliver startles, the abrupt pong of the illuminated seatbelt sign the culprit, so he drops the bookmark into the pages of his novel and cricks his neck back and forth to stretch it. He has no concept of how long they’ve been in the air. He slides open the window shade to reveal his own reflection, nothing but blackness to greet him on the other side.

It is an odd phenomenon to cruise at 500 miles per hour while 35,000 feet in the air. Without a fixed point of reference, it’s like you’re not moving at all. Reclining seat in the apartment, reading by the window, television at a low drone, his feet in my lap. Just another evening.

But is it ever that?

Pull back far enough and we are always speeding through space, a small blue orb ripping through the cosmos at 66,000 miles per hour, subject to random meteoroids and axial precession and solar flares.

Stability is an illusion.

His gaze travels the rounded edges of the window, and he lays his hand at its cool center, smothering himself in the collection of panes. He never realized that there are three, three sheets of glass to protect all of them from catastrophe in the incredible imbalance of pressure exerted at this height, skirting the troposphere with nothing but the bleed hole to make amends between the opposing forces, those lighter than air and those trying desperately to hold onto it.

Without reason, he thinks of their last night at home, Elio rising above him, face a mixture of heaven and hell, the wicked purity with which he had smiled down upon Oliver’s face, bitten into his neck, thick beads of sweat gathering at the tips of his curls and falling like rain into Oliver’s mouth. Oliver drank them up as he nudged Elio higher, sucked him in deeper, with each fervent surge of his hips. It is the same, Oliver realizes. Elio is what he pushes toward, always, the place he goes when the pressure that has built up within him is released and he needs that equilibrium restored. Elio is where
he goes when he wants to come back to himself and feel whole again. The thin panes that keep them apart, whether they be work or time or circumstance, could not function without that bleed hole, that singular outlet that allows him to find his way back to Elio, allows Oliver to pull him close and immerse himself entirely inside the weightlessness of his soft fingers as they dig into his skin and the lean thighs as they pin him helplessly beneath and his open mouth as it pulls a string of barely formed words from Oliver’s throat with only a vibrating groan in reply.

Oliver lays his forehead against the cool, smooth surface, a flicker of a smile teasing the corners of his mouth. One thing he has had to learn since being with Elio is that ability to give himself over to an experience, to retract his claws from the idea of control and permit a moment to take him, to guide him blindly and to have faith that something better waited in the darkness. For so long, he’d kept the lid on tight, vacuum sealed, certain that if what was inside of him were to meet the stagnant air in which he had lived, all of him would sour and rot, all the plans he had patiently crafted for himself when no one else was looking simply wasted and ignored. Elio made him realize that there could be wondrous things waiting for him, and all he had to do was to spread his arms wide and look to the sky and step over the edge into whatever might be out there only for him.

Elio gave him permission to live, allowed him a sense of freedom he’d never experienced, letting him move effortlessly as if his world had no walls.

But as Oliver sits back and stares into the darkness once more, he gradually sees his own face change as a fresh recognition washes over him: he has never been afraid of heights, not really. There is nothing inherently frightening about standing at a vantage point, surveying with clarity all that lies before you. To do so fills you with information, every detail catalogued and anticipated, primed and prepared for well in advance. In truth, it is the depths that paralyze him, the murky unknown. Danger could be millimeters away—catastrophe, sharp and ugly, spearing directly for your soft underbelly, but you’re completely helpless against it. There’s no way to tighten your muscles to resist a blow you can’t see coming; every punch from the darkness is a direct hit, every bite rips your flesh to senseless shreds.

What lies in the depths can steal your soul before you even know you’re dead.

He feels an unpleasant frisson twist through his gut, and he breathes deep to try to shrug it off, sliding the window shade closed.

The cabin is dim, a simulated dusk the balm by which each passenger has lived through a day that none have experienced. Flying east is a conundrum, the very idea that time has accelerated, that they are missing hours, ones spent in each other’s company that do leave their clear mark on the clock, a twin paradox that fits the dimensions of a pocket watch. Does one forget on a plane? Are those hours erased for good once the destination is reached, or will they come flooding back, overwhelming the steady ticks of the hours to come, mixing up what is and what was, what happens to us preyed upon by what we can’t bear to remember? The influx would be every bit as unsettling as the lack, repression kicking into overdrive to keep the tissue paper of the psyche from ripping apart, its filaments joined but just barely, the severed connections of a brain led into chaos by the deceptively steady hum of turbines at maximal lift.

The lump of Elio’s body is flopped toward the seat backs, knees crooked to his chest, which still leaves his shins and feet lolling across Oliver’s legs. A bare crescent of his cheek is visible above the hem of the thin cobalt airline blanket. They’d pushed up the armrests so he could stretch out as much as possible, seeking whatever passes for relaxation in their cramped surroundings. Oliver knew that he would never be comfortable enough to doze, but Elio seemed to have it down to a science after all of his trips across the Atlantic, and neither the sparse legroom nor the fussing toddler behind them could keep him from creating his nest of blankets and yawning uncontrollably as soon as they’d
reached altitude. By the time beverage service had ended and the lights had trickled down, his neck pillow had been the only thing keeping his head from lolling into the aisle.

Tiffany trundles down the walkway then, smiling and nodding to all, trash bag in hand. She has a bubbly exchange with the older couple across from them and points up at the light, stopping dead when she turns and sees Oliver watching her. She pulls the bag closer to her chest, as if shielding herself, so Oliver does his best to effuse helplessness, a plea for her assistance, trusting the attendant’s native kindness to break the ice faster than his own stilted apologies would for his brusque attitude when they first boarded.

The girl clears her throat. “Do you…need something, sir?” She’s speaking in hushed tones, as if afraid to speak too forcefully and elicit his ire once more.

“Yes, Tiffany, thank you. The seatbelt sign is lit. Is there a reason?”

“Merely a precaution, sir, against reports of turbulence ahead.”

“Turbulence? Is that so? That surprises me since the weather had seemed perfectly clear.”

She blushes. “I’m sorry, yes, but clear air turbulence can occur.”

He looks down at Elio lying between them, still as the grave. Oliver’s not sure why, but he has a sudden and overwhelming urge to grab him, to hoist him up and clutch him to his chest, to tuck his legs around Oliver’s waist so that Oliver could protect Elio with his own body. *Why are you being such an idiot?* He flattens his palms on the tops of his thighs and nods dutifully. “Yes, of course. Thank you for the information.”

She raises the trash bag in invitation, and he drops in the plastic cup and napkin he’d had stuffed in the seat pocket. As she starts to turn away, he catches her glancing down at the top of Elio’s head, and for a moment, he thinks she’s about to reach out and finger one of the soft curls.

Oliver swallows down the involuntary growl of *Back off!* and instead asks gently, “Should I wake him, too? Is that necessary for this?” He tilts his head toward the warning light.

She blushes. “Umm, I think that…well, maybe…but, I mean…no, I guess that’s probably not necessary, sir.”

“Ok, I appreciate that.” It’s just a reflex to roll his eyes and add, “He can be like an angry bear if he’s really tired and I dare to wake him up before he’s ready to get out of bed.” He huffs a soft laugh.

By the time it registers to him what he’s just revealed and clicks his face up to hers, she is already sinking her top teeth into her bottom lip, eyes widening. Just as quickly, though, he’s amazed to see her face relax into a closed-lip but genuine smile before she nods and continues down the aisle.

Oliver’s hand falls around Elio’s ankle, and he strokes up and down his Achilles’ tendon, caressing it, the soft indentation that even the tangle of hair on Elio’s leg has abandoned to the elements.

*So delicate.*

Cut it, and a man will fall without a sound.

Yet it is right there at the surface, just below a thin sheen of skin that does not even conceal its shape.

*It’s curious, isn’t it?*
No matter how one insulates himself, he is always open to attack. There is always a part of him that is exposed and vulnerable. Instrumentation on a modern aircraft is sophisticated in the extreme, capable of navigating the craft through the darkness, across the expanse of an entire planet, avoiding the storms and measurable obstacles that lie ahead. Should clouds bubble up in the atmosphere and block the path of the pilot, though miles away, he is ready; he can read those instruments and adjust his course and warn the passengers to hold on tight. A situation like that is easy to survive. If you know what you’re getting, almost anything can be endured, patiently timed out until the clouds finally dissipate and life returns to normal.

But it is the innocuous times that can destroy, the ones to which your eyes are wide open, yet they still cannot be seen. For all the technological wonder insulating him and the other passengers inside this large metal tube, the most terrifying turbulence occurs when the winds are calm and there is nothing but clear blue sky ahead.

Go on, it dares. Take every measure imaginable, whether wary or wild. Dip your baby in the River Styx, but the well-placed arrow will find him.

And there’s nothing you can do to stop it.

“Are we about to crash?”

The sleepy murmur makes Oliver tighten down reflexively on the limbs he holds. He sucks in a breath. “What? Why would you ask that?”

“Because I can feel your mind working from over here.”

“Just thinking, that’s all. Not much else to do.”

“Uh huh.” The blanket warps as Elio rubs at the slit of his eye with a clumsy finger. “Boredom doesn’t usually make your neck bend like that.”

Oliver smiles in spite of himself. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

A muffled snort. “You think I don’t know you by now?”

“I think you’re hallucinating thanks to that questionable slop you got at the airport. Didn’t anyone tell you not to buy tuna fish from a vending machine?”

“Seriously, you nervous about something? Or nauseated? Grab that bag if you need it.”

Oliver flaps a hand. “Oh, hush. According to the monitor, we still have about three more hours up here, so go back to sleep.”

Elio’s feet move placidly, returning with care the caresses they had received.

Oliver’s voice drops, grows warmer as his mind clears. “It’s all right, Elio. Really. I’m fine. Just rest while you can, okay?”

“Okay.” He is silent for a minute before a quiet voice emerges, “Oliver?”

He reaches over and tugs on the edge of the blanket, smoothing it down to cover Elio’s lower back completely, tucking under the hem of the fabric to hold it in place. “Yeah. Me, too.”

Elio is motionless after that.

Oliver flattens out his book against the prop of Elio’s shins and tries to lose himself in the pages once
more, but something keeps him from succumbing to their charms. He glances up at the caution sign, noiselessly pleading in its muted orange. On an impulse he reaches over and scoops up the levered half of Elio’s seatbelt that hangs down below the wedge of his pillow, then fishes under his calves for its mate, clicking them together and letting it rest around the swell of his hip. “Better buckle up. Might be rough skies ahead,” he whispers.

Oliver pushes the button to recline his seat and shuts his eyes, hoping that he might be able to nap for even a little bit before the cabin is flooded with light again in the forced cheer of an artificial dawn and gratingly cheerful chaos of coffee service.

*God, could I use a macchiato right about now.*

Warm blue mug.

Hypnotic green eyes.

Pink lips curled in a shy smile…*my* smile…

*What more could a man ever need?*

Just before he drifts away, Oliver’s fingers fumble at his sides, and he snaps the mechanism of his own seatbelt.

For whatever reason, he can’t shake the feeling that somehow he’s going to need it.

Chapter End Notes

I never thought I’d Google the phrase “history of sandwiches in vending machines,” but needs must when the Devil drives…

Sometimes I look back at what I’ve written and realize that I’ve chosen every word with a dual purpose in mind. At this point, I’m feeling a bit unsettled about what is to come for these boys, so all I can say is that we should follow Oliver’s wisdom and buckle up! :)


Chapter Summary

Arriving at Elio’s home gives Oliver more insight into his past and their combined future.

Chapter Notes

Hello again! I know it’s been a while, but I pray you’re still out there. If real life’s been getting you down these days (and, boy, I’m right there with you), then this chapter is just what you need; I hope you take a few minutes to indulge in some happiness with Oliver—we’ve all earned it!

My desperate thanks once again to Willowbrooke for her time and for her sharp eye which sees all the things to which I am blind.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s a sigh as the brakes release, and the metal wheels grind against the track. The hushed vacuum of acceleration swirls dust around Oliver’s shins as the carriages bump and wheeze around a turn and obediently trail one another, returning to their base in the south.

He looks up and down the platform as the travelers scatter, the hum of insects soon the only sound left to him on the quiet bricks. Across the tracks lies a meadow, dotted in purple and yellow flowers disappearing into a line of trees in the distance, one of those perfectly ordinary natural wonders that Oliver hasn’t seen since his days in the Cuyahoga Valley more than a decade ago. The station is sparse, but Oliver supposes it doesn’t need to be fancy to act as a conduit, merely functional. No one lingers here, after all.

Or do they?

He turns enough to notice a solitary bench propped against the small building, and as he stares at it, empty and waiting, he swallows down a wave of apprehension, of ache and loneliness, as the understanding pierces him that the bench is for good-byes, the only spot left to those who are left behind.

He hoists his bag higher on his shoulder and glances around for Elio, finally catching the top of his head inside of a telephone booth. As he nears the glass, he catches the end of his conversation. “Oui, nous sommes vicino Milan, à la gare. No, c’est bien…no, nous allons prendre le bus….je t’aime, maman.”

Elio steps out of the booth, gripping a small schedule in his hand.

“Everything all right with your folks?”

“Yeah, just letting them know we’ve arrived. You sure you’ve got everything you need?”
When they’d gotten on the train, Elio had been overflowing with energy, skimming up and down the thin aisle to stow their bags, charming one of the workers to get their seats changed to the shady side of the car, chattering incessantly about the clean air and cottongrass flowers and the Alpi Orobie and its pristine but frigid waters. But as soon as they were underway, he was gradually lulled by the slow rocking of the carriage, and he sunk into the corner formed by their seat and the curtained window. Now, his curls are plastered awkwardly to the sides of his skull, the stubborn ones on his crown standing upright and swaying in the breeze. He crinkles his nose as he squints in the sunlight, bunching the freckles on its bridge and puckering his top lip into a plush dollop of rosy velvet.

Oliver smiles slowly. “Yeah.” He takes in the faded chicken pox scar on Elio’s cheek and the crust in the corner of his eyes. His smile broadens. “I’m sure.”

Elio quirks his neck. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Elio searches his face for more.

Oliver snorts and shakes his head. He steps forward into Elio’s space, and Elio’s arms fall to the side to make room for him. “You’re perfect, Elio. Do you know that?”

Elio groans. His eyes roll and one hand flops on the top of his head, scratching at the knots across his scalp, wiry forearm trying to block his face from view. “Ha ha, very funny.”

Oliver waits. When the hand stills and the arm drops, his gaze remains steadfast until the freckles disappear amid a surge of pink. “See what I mean?” he chides. “Perfect.”

“You are ridiculous.”

“Maybe. Doesn’t make it any less true.”

“You know what I really am?”

“What’s that?” He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. “Please say horny.”

A huff. “Hungry. I’m hungry, and we have a bus to catch.” He grabs his bag off the ground and pushes Oliver backward with it, leading the way out of the station to the waiting transport, a rickety blue monstrosity that didn’t look like it could chug down the street, much less navigate the rugged and mountainous terrain that likely was ahead of them.

Oliver stops dead. “Are you kidding me?” He points at the rusted frame and retread tires. “Is this for real?”

Elio chuckles and keeps walking. “It’s a bus. Surely you’ve seen pictures.”

“No, it was a bus twenty years ago until the elementary school that owned it decided to take it to the junkyard.”

“Whatever. Andiamo, Americano!”

Elio slides on his sunglasses and disappears into the vehicle. By the time Oliver bends himself inside the door and hunches up the steps, Elio is perched in a seat near the back with a satisfied smirk. Oliver wants to be annoyed, but when he looks across the rows, all he can see is a cocky teenage version of Elio, boarding this bus at the other end and taking himself on a journey to his future, clowning to his family out the back window until their faces disappeared and all that remains is a
ticket to New York, a slew of impressive talents, and a dream. Oliver has always been impressed by Elio, but seeing him here, seeing for himself the idyllic world from which Elio emerged, so adept and unafraid, adds a whole new layer of awe. Elio against the backdrop of his home is a revelation, like finally seeing an orca in the ocean and not at Sea World; it is every bit as majestic in the concrete pond, but surrounded by its true sea and stone, it is a breathtaking marvel, letting its withered dorsal fin unfurl to stand at new heights.

For a moment, he thinks of the delicate creatures made of transparent jelly that exist miles beneath the sea, flourishing at depths that would crush humans and most everything they could build. The existence of these organisms seems improbable, utterly alien on a planet that has learned to live only at the surface. But what happens if you displace them, if you drag these gorgeous anomalies into our own atmosphere to examine them in earnest, on your own terms? Would they suffer? Would they explode?

Oliver trudges back to Elio and swings jauntily into the seat so that he momentarily crushes the narrow frame to the side window of the vehicle, and though he wants to shoot him a derisive glare, all he can muster is a stupidly adoring smile.

Elio yanks off his glasses with a retort at the ready, but when he gets a real look at Oliver’s face, his eyebrows angle inward and lifts his chin. “What now?”

“All right.” He tries to nudge him playfully, to keep up the banter from earlier, but his body betrays him as much as his face had. He ends up just gripping tighter to the seatback in front of him and pressing the line of his body firmly against Elio’s, keeping his eyes forward because he doesn’t trust himself not to dip his head and kiss him right there in front of everyone.

I’d kiss you if I could.

Elio’s eyes unfocus, looking inward for a moment, and he seems to understand. His whole body sags a little and his head rolls back against the restraint. “Me, too, Oliver,” he murmurs. “Me, too.”

By the time the bus coasts into town, Oliver has given up hope of having a functioning spinal column ever again. A solid hour of jostling around the turns and potholes of a forest road, made worse by a recent soaking rain, wreaks havoc on a man with an extra long torso. He’s certain that each of his vertebrae has been displaced like abused pieces of a Jenga puzzle on the verge of collapse. He limps off the bus and stretches, taking stock of the stone square and its parti-colored collection of buildings which could’ve been in this same location since medieval times yet still manage to be inviting and functional. A small cafe, a post office, a tavern—everything a suitable paradise really needs. He makes a mental note to return to the bookstore in the corner of the square to purchase a newspaper, solely for the sinful purpose of cajoling Elio into reading him the entirety of the day’s news in Italian, turning simple articles about tax rates and international politics into salacious porn.

“Ellie-belly!”

“Hi, Papa!”

Elio drops his bag and runs to the small green car to hug his father, nearly picked clear off the pavement by the latter once his father’s arms wrap around that narrow waist. Annella takes a few
steps forward and holds out her arms for Oliver, and he flushes, approaching her slowly. She seems to sense his reticence, her warm smile splitting open as she calls to him. “Oliver, my sweetheart, how we have missed you!”

He folds into her arms, and his eyes sink closed. She holds him tightly, running her arms up and down his back, and he is mortified to feel tears rise in his throat. He had told himself for so many years that he needed no one, least of all a mother. No one had to clean his wounds, no one had to pat his head, no one had to tuck him in at night. He’d lived without those luxuries for as long as he could remember, and he’d wiped from his brain any innate desire to be sheltered by that kind of care. He had learned that mothers were people who manipulated you, who used you when it suited them and discarded you when you expected anything in return. Oliver could never have imagined a mother who would send him recipes in the mail and spend a half an hour talking him through how to execute it with flair. He never could have imagined himself calling a mother to ask her advice on birthday gifts or cold remedies or sure-fire tactics to remove an ink stain from a fine Italian linen suit jacket.

“Hi, Annella,” he mumbles into the fabric of her shirt.

“Let me look at you!” She grabs him by his shoulders and holds him at an arm’s length, her kind eyes swarming over his face, not missing a single detail. Exhaustion, appreciation, surprise, distress—she reads them all in an instant and lays her palms on his cheeks. “I am so pleased to finally see you here, caro. You must promise me that I will be able to spoil you a little bit while I have the chance.”

He ducks his head. “Yes, ma’am. That’s very…I look forward to it.”

“Good!” she beams and kisses him on both cheeks, just as Elio grabs her from behind and does the same for her, making her bubble with laughter. “Ehi, puccino! Mi rendi un panino!

Samuel has stowed their bags in the car before Oliver can get to him to assist. He raises his arm to shake his hand, and the professor takes it only to pull him in for a burly hug, though given the difference in their sizes, no amount of enthusiasm would allow Samuel to budge him from the ground. “Welcome, Oliver! You’ve had quite a pilgrimage, eh? You must be completely exhausted by now.”

He runs a hand through his disheveled hair and tugs at his rumpled clothes. “Oh, ah, what gave me away?”

“Well, this sort of travel is not for the faint of heart, my boy,” the professor replies, clapping him on the back.

Oliver smiles sheepishly. “I hadn’t realized because I’d never…well, I…I’ve never come this far before.”

“I gathered as much.” Samuel has a peculiar gleam in his eye. “Well, we’re honored that you’ve been willing to risk the journey to be here with us.”

Oliver blinks, suddenly aware that Samuel is no longer talking about airports and train schedules. He glances over at Elio, who is flapping his hands in the air to keep his mother from straightening the collar on his polo shirt while she clucks at him in French. He doubts that Elio would have told them much about his past, for no other reason than Elio wouldn’t view it as his story to tell, but Oliver would be a fool to think that the Perlman had not long ago deduced every bit of it, seen clearly as the scars revealed themselves in the set of his shoulders and the vagueness of his eyes when topics would drift like fog across the swamp of old wounds.
He meets the professor’s gaze steadily. “It was worth every mile, sir.”

Samuel nods firmly, then strokes his beard. “Ah, so it must be true, then: destiny carries one only so far, but the rest of the journey must be consciously traveled.”

Oliver cocks his head. “Is that Gandhi?”

“No.” Samuel winks. “Perlman.”

The ride to the Perlmans’ villa is relatively quiet. The windows are cranked down, and the warm wind rushes around them, leaving little room for conversation. The air pushes hard against Oliver’s face when he leans his neck at just the right angle to catch the gust. Oliver had insisted upon folding himself into the back seat next to Elio, despite Annella trying to cajole him into the front of the car “where the long legs should go” and leave her to the back. His knees poke up above the rounds of the front seat, but it is worth it to let his thigh loll against Elio’s while the latter lets his fingers roam absently across his skin, tapping out a melody that circles in his head as he stares blankly out the front window.

Oliver watches the countryside whip past the gentle turns in the road, sure that if he were to squint just right, he could see Elio pass them as a young boy, cranking his skinny legs on the pedals of an oversized bike frame that everyone had assured him he’d grow into, determined tongue clamped in the corner of his mouth, venturing further from home with each successive ride.

They follow the river for a stretch, and Oliver is certain that Elio has gathered there on its shores, surrounded by a group of his friends, splashes and shrieks shattering the pervading calm, rippling into the air above and displacing a knot of ducks resting in an eddy near the bank. Or he has found a quiet pool nearby that he’d hoarded for himself, a spot all his own to transcend time and place, to conquer mountains and win wars of love and history in the pages of a book.

When they finally turn down the long drive to the villa, Oliver feels nearly like a man out of time, wandering in the visions of a childhood that wasn’t his. The idyllic house and its vast but unpretentious grounds only add to the effect, and when he steps from the car, he wanders away to stare at the vacant square of one of the first-floor windows and into the invisible face of a wistful Elio, chin resting on folded arms atop a stack of texts, lost in his own private thoughts that volley around pretty girls and Haydn transcriptions and the pack of cigarettes hidden in his desk drawer upstairs.

Distantly, he hears car doors slamming and Elio’s voice, muttering to his parents, “Go ahead. We’ll be in, in a few minutes.”

Oliver drifts into the yard and around the corner of the house. He looks over at the spot under the tree, the small bench with a subtle Ionian curl in its base, the modest throne of a Greek god for his times of contemplation. He sees Elio there, a teenager feeling his way in the world as his fingers pluck tentative chords from an old guitar. Giving voice to his music. Giving music to his voice. As the breeze blows the one errant curl from his forehead, it raises the flesh on his bare chest, and he inhales the quiet speculation of a dream he fears to pursue, one that would take him across an ocean to a city he doesn’t know, and the uncertainty curls his spine down, around the familiar smooth wood of the instrument until he can exhale, sending the fear back out to nestle in the clouds while he keeps every bit of the dream inside.
“Everything all right?”

“Yeah.” Oliver’s voice is quiet. “Just looking around. Trying to take it all in.”

Elio moves a few steps closer and tries to follow the track of Oliver’s eyes around the yard. “What do you see?”

Oliver turns slowly toward him and waits until he holds Elio’s gaze entirely within his own. “You.”

Elio’s neck grows splotchy and pink, and the corner of his mouth lifts slightly. “What do you mean?”

Oliver is certain Elio wants to look away, to hide under a shake of his curls or to press the top of his head playfully into Oliver’s shoulder, but Oliver holds him there, keeps his eyes in the light so they can see everything that his offer. “Everywhere I look, I see you, Elio.”

The pink inches up to his cheeks, fills in his dimples, and he shrugs a bit. “Yeah, well. I guess that makes sense. My family does live here.”

Oliver reaches out a hand and lets his fingertips graze Elio’s throat. “It’s not just now, Elio. It’s not just here.”

The throat undulates as Elio swallows. “It’s not?”

“In town, on the road, on the bus…” He strokes up and around the perimeter of Elio’s face with a light touch until Elio shivers and sways forward enough to rest himself in Oliver’s palm. “Hell, I saw you all over New York, long before I ever met you.”

“Oliver…” The word is breathless, dreamy.

He leans closer, bending to follow the exposed side of Elio’s jaw, just barely brushing the invisible thicket of peach fuzz with his lips until they tickle, and he feels hands grip his waist and squeeze, then steady, then tug ever so slightly. Until a soft moan wrenches itself out from deep under his mouth, and from somewhere in the network of cords far below, the echo of his own name stripped of any letters that could not be formed from the arching of Elio’s tongue in his unhinged jaw.

The grip on his waist slowly releases, save the finger that Elio hooks into one of the belt loops on Oliver’s shorts, which he uses to pull Oliver with him toward the door. “Come on,” he murmurs, swiping his bottom lip with his tongue, “let me show you my room.”

They dump their bags by the stairs and first go in search of the Perlmans, who have adjourned to the kitchen to put together some drinks, maybe a few snacks. But Oliver is certain from the dedication with which they extract the glasses from the cupboards and arrange the small plates on the counter that they have merely been allowing Elio and him a bit of privacy. It moves him well past any twitter of embarrassment and straight into a wash of gratitude, stemming not just from the immutable fact that mutual respect is clearly a tenant of the Perlman family that extends to all of its members, regardless of age or blood relation. But right now, he’s keenly aware that the long day is coming close to defeating him. Right now, after all of what’s opened for him, Oliver wants nothing more than to close a door and close his eyes, cover himself with Elio’s body and sleep for a thousand years.

Elio raises an eyebrow. “Mafalda?”

“At her sister’s in Clusone,” his mother supplies. “She’ll be back next week.”
They gulp down glasses of lemon water, devour bread and cheese and fruit like they’ve only just remembered how to chew, while Samuel and Annella lean against the sink, nursing glasses of juice, and chat between themselves about which trees need to be harvested and the long-range weather forecasts that threaten a stormy summer ahead.

Oliver watches Elio finish his water, tilting his head to the ceiling so that every drop can run down into his mouth. He wants to catch his eye, to plead with him silently, but he never gets the chance. When Elio clunks the empty glass to the marble and wipes his mouth, he throws his arms behind him in an exaggerated stretch and yawns noisily.

“I think we’re gonna head upstairs, all right?” he tosses to his parents, taking a step toward the door.

“Yes, of course! Go relax, boys. Do you want—“

“No,” Elio says quickly. “Thanks, but we’ll just see you at breakfast.”

Annella merely waves her hand at them as Elio yanks Oliver’s arm to pull him out of the room.

All the way up the stairs, he keeps his eyes on Elio’s ass, swaying two steps ahead of him, exactly at eye level. As weary as he is, he realizes he is salivating. *I'm tired, not dead.* He doesn’t even notice what door they enter when Elio tosses his bag to his right and sidesteps to reveal a pair of twin beds. He moves to the far side and uses his legs to nudge the two together.

“There. Much better.” He flops down on the joined mattresses and smiles up at Oliver.

Oliver takes a cursory look around. Large mahogany wardrobe, overloaded bookshelf, quirky posters of various bands, and several dozen cassette tapes next to a neglected boom box. It is exactly as he’d imagined it would be. There is something that brushes against his heart, something both apt and anomalous, about how Elio had lived in this room, the interior one immersed in shadows, while the small connected room, the one where his desk and staff paper are, is where he would create, bathed in light from the expansive windows.

“Are you glad you came here?”

Oliver smiles and falls face-first next to Elio. His answer is deliberately devoured by a mouthful of fitted sheet.

“What was that?”

Another incoherent garble.

Elio giggles and shoves at him, straining to flip over the dead weight of him. When he finally succeeds, he drags himself onto Oliver’s body and presses him flat into the mattress, pulling himself up bit by bit until their faces are inches apart. “Well? *Are you?*” Elio stares at him with the glint of a devil, but Oliver’s laughter jiggles him around so much that his glare gains no traction.

“Let’s try this again.” He hovers his ear over Oliver’s mouth. “Are you glad you came here, Oliver?”

Oliver lets the remnants of his laughter splutter out before he cranes his neck so that his lips brush the shell of Elio’s ear. “I am now.”

When his tongue pushes inside the ear canal, he feels Elio’s entire body clamp tighter around him, feels the gasp of hot air against his cheek, and his mouth is still open when Elio rears up and turns to meet it with his own. The kiss is like falling into a snowdrift, his body melting into the soft fluff,
sinking down into its familiar magic the more that he moves, letting it mold to him as his every movement fluidly adjusts its shape. With the proper combination of heat and chemistry, both morph into a perfect fit.

Before the sand runs out of the hourglass, neither of them thinks to part; neither tries to move aside. They remain locked together, Elio’s hands snuggled under his neck, Elio’s feet tucked under his knees, and Elio’s tongue soft against the inside of his cheek. Oliver gives himself easily to oblivion, sure that he could die in the night, so close was he already to heaven.

Chapter End Notes

I rewatched the film’s bus and train station scenes many times while writing this chapter. I cannot believe that, as many times as I’d seen it before, I never really noticed how a giddy Oliver sits down in the seat next to Elio! Also, I relied upon Armie Hammer’s commentary for GQ about the condition of the bus that they used, but I must say that I think his expressions as he watched the various scenes were far more revealing than any of the words that he spoke… :)

Elio’s French phone conversation with his mom is (I hope) something like, “Yes, we are near Milan, at the station. No, it’s fine…no, we’ll take the bus…I love you, Mom.” Then, when he hugs her from behind, her surprised exclamation is (again, I hope), “Hey, little one! You make me a sandwich!”

Have you ever noticed that killer whales in captivity have curled dorsal fins, but those in the wild do not? Perhaps I just watch too much Discovery Channel...

There will be some more good times ahead for Oliver, and there will be some terrible times ahead, too, so I implore you to stay tuned!
The Storm

Chapter Summary

Oliver has a breakthrough just before his whole world has a breakdown.

Chapter Notes

I have nothing but gratitude for all of you who continue to read and for Willowbrooke whose wisdom and inspiration are unparalleled!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The villa in the morning is a temple.

It’s the serenity born of a complex system in precise equilibrium, swallowed whole by the trees which seem to bend around it and hold it in their embrace, in the chirping and fluttering of unseen wings and the soft wisp of Elio’s breath against Oliver’s ribs, awash in yellow light held high to the arches by the new sun skirting the horizon, original in the truest sense of the word.

Several times in the last weeks, Oliver has relented to its call, kissed the knob of Elio’s bare shoulder and risen, pulled by the compulsion to wander barefooted on the mosaic tile, touching the tapestries in the hallway and letting his fingertips caress the smooth keys of Elio’s piano, hovering before the cave of the stone fireplace, fondling the haphazard stacks of books that rest in the sills and the piles of sheet music beneath. He would pace the cavernous vestibule to gaze at the maps and marvel at the turns of the wrought iron chandelier as it swings over the main entrance.

Stepping into the study feels like stepping onto a stage. Time to perform, to prove his worth, earn his keep. Is this how an actor feels? The electric turn of nerves and ambition, spikes that roll fresh against his insides with each turn of his head? This small space is magical; it tells a story of its own, like a curtained alcove of enlightenment into which he has burned to immerse himself, and it gives way to an open expanse, a sea of faces hiding in the dark, waiting for results, for revelation, waiting for the years of study and research and promise to come together into something new, something passionate and creative. Something worthwhile.

Contemplation is a lost art.

Oliver runs his index finger along the spines in the endless rows of manuscripts on Samuel’s shelves, feels the tick of years in the dry rasp, all of those who had come before, trusting themselves because the professor trusted them, letting their pages unfold like the husk of a corncob, one after the other around a solid spine, silk and fiber, sweetness and grain.

The room holds treasures—the unassuming typewriter, the peels of the wallpaper, the opaque glass of the desk lamp and its thin layer of dust. It is a living museum, a refuge for someone who has staked his life on his work, let it be the beacon that pulled him through a chaos of human emotions that he could not process without the eternal healing of rational thought. It feels like the epicenter for all he’s striven to do, as an academic and as a man. He cannot be what he needs to be without it. He
could not be fit for one like Elio as an incomplete person, as one who lacks the depth and the foresight to make peace in his own mind with the learning he has amassed, doggedly, relentlessly. In books he’ve read, marked, returned to their dog-eared corners with grinding teeth. In the interminable nights facing the blank wall of a library cubicle teasing out the threads, knitting a patient mesh of his thoughts unfettered by distraction. In the corner of a bedroom, rereading sentences obsessively as the thin walls shook from the force of the dishes and vitriol thrown against them on the opposite side, tucked in the shadows behind a door with a secret deadbolt on the inside and an open window that he could use for escape.

He grips the back of the wooden chair in front of the desk and looks up at the antique mirror. Its trio of panes frames him in the room, places him center stage, surrounded by its well-worn elegance. He stares at his face, trying to decide if it fits here, if it could ever measure up to what surely has transpired here over the course of years, a compounded wisdom, an eminence born of the professor’s careful and patient hand.

When he’d stopped into his office and casually informed Dr. Lazenby of his plans for the summer, the older man had been suitably impressed.

Lazenby had sat back in his chair and held its arms with raised eyebrows. “Samuel Perlman?” He had hummed thoughtfully. “That’s quite a coup, young man. His books are required reading for several departments’ courses. And from what I understand, he gets hundreds of applicants a year for his research apprenticeship.”

“Yes, sir,” Oliver had answered quietly, a swell of pride hidden beneath his sober nod. “I’m very grateful to have been invited.”

Lazenby had whipped out a pad of paper. “I’m making a note for Cecilia. This should get a write-up in the department report to the Dean. International acclaim—great for visibility.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I look forward to seeing the results of this.” His eyes had raked over Oliver, discerning that which Oliver could not follow. “Perhaps this was all it took.”

“Sir?”

Lazenby’s eyes had glittered. “It’s no secret that you were galvanized in the second semester, Oliver. Back on track with your research—like a new man, it seemed.” His pen tapped against the blotter. For a moment, Oliver had actually thought he was going to ask about Elio. “Perhaps all you’ve needed to go that last part of the journey was someone to help you bring it all together, a mentor.”

His stomach had fluttered strangely, and he could not place why. Excitement? Nerves? Both were true, he’d supposed, but neither was really accurate to the depth of the sensation, the ingenuity of it inside him, and standing here in this room allows Oliver finally to understand.

Oliver never had anyone to disappoint before.

When you’re the invisible kid, it’s not like anyone is ever going to demand a look at your report card or tell you to do your homework. He’d never been instructed that he should take Physics or asked how his essay on Macbeth was received or expected to prove he’d learned that Appomattox Court House wasn’t a building at all.

Oliver could do all of that on his own. He never needed anyone to show him how to push himself to
excel. He’d been doing that on pure instinct for his entire life.

There were plenty of people over the years who had imposed their expectations on him, teachers and advisors and the like, some of whom he’d respected and wished to impress, like Dr. Lazenby. Still, their approval or displeasure had been a mere marker of his status, not of his worth. It was never something that he’d felt inside, quickening through his blood and filling up his chest, not something that he’d define himself by. They were just a simple tape measure, like ticking off marks on the wall to show how tall he’d grown, year upon year.

But there was never that hand on his shoulder guiding him, that face there to encourage and comfort and advise, one that Oliver would seek as confirmation that what he had done actually mattered. The idea was so foreign to him, the orphaned intellect, looking for a parental one to make the living connections that his stoic books could not begin to comprehend.

Suddenly, a face joins his in the mirror, grinning with delight. “Ah! Oliver! Getting an early start today?” The professor chuckles when Oliver jumps and accidentally jerks up from the floor the chair he still grips with whitened knuckles.

“Good morning, Samuel!” He runs his hand through his hair and squares his shoulders. “Yes, I hope you don’t mind that I wandered in here. This room is so…” he shrugs, “centering.”

That makes his laughter broaden, arm sweeping over the wall of built-in shelves, every corner tucked with volumes with intricate spines and golden pages that Oliver envies and itches to explore. “Well, it’s certainly overflowing with scholarship, much to Annella’s chagrin.”

“I could very easily lose myself in here.”

“We have that in common, then. I am ever amazed that the world has so much to teach us and that so much of it can be found in our past. Rather like new knowledge that is centuries old, do you think? That paradox drives me, has driven me, for most of my career, and it really makes me wonder…”

Oliver’s eyes are distant and unfocused as he follows the thread, sees it in growing lengths of rope pulled out of a hole that had been concealed under the floorboards, waiting for his mind to rip back its barrier and unspool, mile upon mile, to knot again in sturdier contortions. “Wonder…if what are we assembling right now will not be discovered for generations to come, learning that’s incomplete now because it is meant for a different age?”

“Yes!” The professor’s hand shoots over his head. “It’s as if hiddenness is an essential facet, to this process, rather than an obstruction.” His fingers fall to brush his mustache. “Do you think the ancients realized this as well?”

Oliver’s mind is caught in the somersault, and his body sinks blindly into the chair. “Yes. Yes, I do…in fact, if the early Greeks viewed hiddenness as a core component to all entities, as Heidegger contends, then it follows that such a trait would be endemic not only to lifeforms, but to the life that they had formed, to the entire process of civilizations building upon themselves.” His clammy fingers grip the edge of the professor’s desk, and he swallows across a dry tongue. “Because that whole process is a lifecycle, and what is hidden from one society must be in order to fuel the discovery of more in the next, just as it would in the establishment of personal relationships, from one entity to another.” His desperate eyes seek out the professor’s face, which has settled into a quiet and enigmatic smile. “It’s…it’s like the loon!”

“The what?”
Oliver leaps up and starts to pace in the small space. “In Thoreau, the loon that laughs at him in his boat on the pond...he...he can’t follow it. The bird bests him each time because it dives, and he’s just sitting there, on the surface of the water.” His words splutter out while Samuel follows his track in careful silence, leaning back against the shelves, arms crossed serenely across his stomach. “And no one has ever learned a thing sitting on the surface. He’d have to dive, right? He’d have to seek, to find the bird’s location beneath the water if he’s ever going to have a hope of predicting where it will pop up next. It is the way of all things—all things in all times!”

“That is excellent, Oliver!”

Oliver freezes mid-step. Even his breathing chokes off in the rush of the visions that consume him, unmoored from where they’d waited in the recesses of his brain. “The dots.”

“Dots, you say?”

“Yes, yes the dots—Seurat’s hat in the painting—it’s the same idea! The red and the blue, separate on the palette, placed separately on the canvas so that the eye of those who looked upon it could discern the purple. It shimmers—it’s far more vibrant than if he’d attempted to create the new pigment himself. That’s the genius of it—it’s a conscious stepping stone, and without the audience to take it to the next level, the art could never have achieved the greatness that it has...its vibrance, its true vibrance, could never have been realized, literally or figuratively!”

Samuel scratches meditatively at his beard. “Indeed...and I think it must be so, for a work is not just great because of what it can do for the medium alone.”

“Right! It is great because of what it can do for the audience that must see it and absorb it. It reaches people, even those who have never actually seen it for themselves. It connects us, like synapses in the brain. And without that, there’s no purpose in carving out that piece of your heart and offering it up—because that’s what all art really is, right?”

“So the art truly lives in the perspective, in the distance required by the transfer from page or canvas to flesh?”

In Oliver’s mind flashes a memory of Elio, bent over the keys of the music store’s piano, pouring out his art, a song reimagined in the tangled vines of one soul that had found another. Of course he’d known. Of course Elio would have understood instinctively, would have moved forward on a faith cultivated in the belief that beauty lies in the revolution of what was to what can be.

Oliver nods raggedly. “Remade. In our own image. It’s...it’s almost—”

“Divine.”

Oliver gulps, his breath returning to him in frantic pants, and he gapes at the beaming Samuel, who leans across the desk to squeeze the back of his neck and murmur, “Well done, Oliver, very well done!” He’s not even sure what is making tears collect in the corners of his eyes or the terrified beginnings of a smile flip at the corners of his mouth. Is it relief? Gratitude? “I...I think I have some rewrites to do.” His voice is shaky. “Especially chapter 4 and...and chapter 5...and...” All he really wants to do is jump up and down and clap his hands like a fool or run around the house and whoop to the sky until his larynx shatters. He drags the back of his hand across his forehead and finds it rimmed in sweat. Have you gone mad? Get a grip!

At that moment there is a gurgling noise from the hallway, and Oliver pivots to see Elio poised there, yawning and stretched into a stiff arc, arms flung backward over his head, fingers wriggling in the empty air. He must be on his way to the river because he is wearing only his swimming trunks, and
his naked skin glows in the daylight that pours in from the main entrance.

There’s a quiet voice next to him. “You know, there’s more than mere art that endures after death.”

Oliver forces a shallow cough just to cover his gaping mouth, but he’s unable to drag his eyes away from the door. “What’s that?”

“Love.”

That puts Oliver’s head on a swivel, and he blinks uncertainly at the professor. Samuel waves his hand. “Go. Relax and enjoy the sunshine. Your work will still be here in the afternoon.”

Oliver stares at him. He should tell the professor how phenomenal he is, as both teacher and mentor, a parent and a friend. He should tell him how he never knew that people like the Perlmans existed, that he is proud and flummoxed just to be here, breathing their air, and that he still isn’t sure that he’s not simply dreamed the whole trip. He should explain that he hasn’t felt this exhilarated by academia since he’d gotten the scholarship to Harvard that had pulled him out of purgatory and given him a place in the world. He should fall at his feet and blubber that he can’t bear the mere thought of letting any of them down.

Instead, he smiles imploringly, chokes out, “Thank you,” and stumbles from the room.

He catches up to Elio by the gate.

“Want some company?”

Elio whips his head around and smiles softly. He has a towel slung around his neck. His eyes, caught in the sun’s rays, gleam amber. His fuzz of curls ripples in the light breeze. “Depends.”

“On?”

In one movement, he moves the towel from his own neck to Oliver’s and tugs until Oliver is close enough to feel the warmth from his skin rise into the chill air. Elio licks his lips and whispers, “On how willing you are to get wet.”

Oliver huffs and lets his eyes fall closed for a moment. He leans closer so that his words have to filter down through his curls to get to Elio’s ear. “You realize that doesn’t require a swim, don’t you, Elio Perlman?”

Elio just bends his fingers into the cup of Oliver’s hand, hooking their pinkies together to lead him to the path, a different way from how they’d gone before, down to a new length of water more secluded, around a bend from where the locals would usually gather.

It’s still early enough that the water is deserted, save the insects that skim its surface and disappear into the haze that mutes the fresh sunlight. A mild current flows through, curdling the lazy turns of it along the sandy bank. There’s less of a grassy area here, and the branches that have fallen from the canopy of trees close them in like arthritic arms of barbed wire.

Elio drapes his towel across a length of a tree trunk that lays by the water, stripped of its bark and smooth to the touch. When he tucks his thumbs into the waist of his trunks and starts to inch them
down, Oliver sucks in a breath. “Elio...are you sure you should...”

Elio flicks an eyebrow. “I’m sure you should.” He smirks. “Don’t worry. No one’s around, and no one ever comes to this part anyway. Too far from the road.”

Elio steps out of his trunks and tosses them on top of the towel, then lopes down to the water’s edge, and Jesus, he’s beautiful, so Oliver just sighs and grumbles, “I can’t believe the things I let you talk me into...” and follows suit. Elio wades into the shallows and waits for him to catch up. The water is freezing, so Oliver sinks his numbed toes into the sand to cover them and reaches out for Elio, whose face is serious and sleepy, studying him with dark eyes. Oliver coaxes him closer until Elio’s arms slip around his hips and they are flush against one another as the water grudges and bubbles around their calves. Oliver’s wrists rest on the protruding bridge of Elio’s clavicles and his hands wrap around Elio’s neck, thumbs massaging the underside of his jaw. “What are you thinking about?” he murmurs.

“This place feels so different to me.”

“What do you mean?” His fingertips knead the silken strands at the base of Elio’s skull.

“The river, the town...even the house.” He gnaws at the corner of his bottom lip. “None of it feels the way it used to.”

Oliver shrugs lightly. “Yeah, I can understand that. You’ve been away for a while. Things change, people change. Nothing’s ever quite like we think it was when we were young.”

The curls shake over downcast eyes. “No, that’s not it. That’s not what I mean.”

Oliver strokes his fingers lightly up and down the column of Elio’s throat and waits, hovering over his pulse point and covering the spot with his thumb just to feel it throb.

“It’s all new...I mean, I know it, and I don’t, and I think that...I think that I never really saw any of it before I...well, before...”

“Before what, Elio?”

Oliver feels light fingers cup his ass as the puff of Elio’s sigh hits the bend of his neck. “You, damn it, you.” The fingers dig in slightly, and soft lips graze his shoulder, his ear lobe, his cheek. “You.” The corner of his lips. “Just you.”

His eyes are closed when he tightens his fingers on the back of Elio’s neck to tilt his head back a little more, just enough to meet his lips fully, to nudge them open with subtle movements, his tongue swirling against Elio’s in the same way that the water licks at them as its current warms in the beams of sun that poke through the trees. He feels the delicate fingers tighten again and flutter between his cheeks, making his whole body shudder and his grip strengthen on the white throat, feels the groan inside of it before the sound ghosts past his chin, caught in the humid air between them. And he’s powerless to stop his hips from shifting against Elio, already half hard and seeking more, more of the gentle stroke of fingers and the answering press of heat against the crease of Oliver’s hip, both hypnotic and maddening.

He feels Elio pull back slightly to blink up into his eyes, chest heaving enough to shift the grip he has on the back of Elio’s neck. He sucks his bottom lip into his mouth and slides his hands up Oliver’s body, up the bends of his back to the warm skin of his shoulders, kneading them around the blades before letting his hands fall down into the crook of Oliver’s elbows. His eyes gradually focus and trap Oliver’s gaze, pupils overwhelming the rim of green that shimmers like the leaves behind them.
The corner of his strawberry lips quirks up, and he flicks his head. “Come on. You ready to swim?”

“If you are.”

When Elio starts to turn away, Oliver grabs his hand and yanks him back at the same moment he doubles over, lifting Elio up onto his shoulder in one smooth motion. Elio gasps, “Oliver! Shit, what are you doing?” He wriggles ineffectively against Oliver’s strong grasp.

“Let’s go, Elio. Time to get wet!” He wades out into the river, and when it reaches his waist, he raises Elio up and tosses him shrieking into the water.

Elio surfaces immediately and flicks his hair back from his forehead. “Oh, you’re going to pay for that!” His eyes narrow, but threats are done under by his infectious grin.

Oliver raises his eyebrows. “What, you think you can catch me?”

Elio doesn’t answer, merely takes a deep breath and disappears again, toes peeking above the surface briefly as he dives down. Oliver turns immediately and pumps downstream, glancing back in time to see Elio pop up about ten feet away. He just rolls his eyes and flops onto his back, floating and lazily paddling with his feet.

Oliver spends the next half hour bobbing and doing a lazy breaststroke, watching Elio’s limbs part and conquer the water, thick droplets pouring down the planes of his flesh, dripping from the tips of his weighted curls.

Eventually, Elio circles around him, and when Oliver doesn’t duck to evade him, he closes the distance and smiles serenely. “Having fun?”

Oliver shrugs. “Yeah, sure. I like it here.” His eyes track Elio for a moment. “Great scenery.”

“I didn’t think you’d want to come. You and my dad seemed really into it this morning.”

He chuckles. “Well, this morning I discovered that all learning is a mere prelude and that ruin is part of the building process upon which art and civilization depend.”

Elio’s face scrunches up. “Huh…well, I discovered that if I hold the muscle below my nose, I can keep myself from sneezing. So, you know, that’s something.” He laughs. “What’ve you got planned for the afternoon—global nuclear disarmament?”

“Shhh, come on, Elio—don’t ruin the surprise for next week! No, right now I’ve got rewrites to do. Lots and lots and lots of rewrites.”

“All right, while you’re doing that, I’m going to help your girlfriend.”

Oliver sticks his tongue out at him.

When Oliver first met Mafalda, he had grabbed her hand in both of his, bent onto one knee, and told her that she is both a culinary genius and his new hero. The older lady had gawked at him, face a shocked crimson, and spluttered out a hasty, “Grazie, signore,” before trundling off to the kitchen muttering to herself. “Americano…pazzo…e somiglia un muvi star…” But after that, she made him a special batch of boiled eggs at least twice a week, carefully removing their tops for him as soon as she would hear him clopping down the stairs, and while he would eat, his apricot juice somehow would refill before he even noticed the glass was low.

“I’m going over to Lake Garda for a couple of hours. Anchise’s nephew Mario has a boat, so I’m
going out with him to try to catch a couple of trout for dinner. And trust me when I tell you that Mafalda’s broiled trout is to die for.”

“You’re…do you even know how to fish?”

Elio’s jaw drops, and he splashes Oliver with water. “Of course I do!”

“When was the last time you went?”

“Ummm…ten years ago?” He grins. “What? It’ll be great!”

“And what if I miss you?”

“Come along, then.”

“Can’t. Gotta work.”

Elio scoffs, “Oh, you won’t even know I’m gone,” and sinks into the dark water.

Oliver is trying to come up with an alternative noun for *revelation* when the lights go out.

The storm had come on suddenly, and the green-black clouds had thrust an eerie twilight over the villa to the point that he could only vaguely make out the lines of the pool and fountain in the backyard. When the small circle of lamplight over his papers blinks out, he sighs and rubs his eyes. “Well…shit.” He’d really wanted to get this section done today, but so much for that.

He stands and stretches, wandering into the hallway where Samuel is lighting a candle. “Ah, Oliver, come on in with us.”

The professor leads the way into the living room where Annella is filling glasses with Sangiovese. She fills another and holds it up for him.

They lounge on the couches and sip in silence until Oliver asks, “So how did you two come to own this amazing home?”

The Perlmans exchange a look, and Annella starts giggling. “Well, Oliver, to explain will force me to tell you about my unfortunate Uncle Victor, who was either a great businessman or a better thief.”

“Oh! Okay, then…”

She is halfway through her tale when the lights finally return, rather unnecessarily it seems, as the storm’s passage allows a tired yellow glow to fill the windows. The phone in the hall begins to ring, so Samuel leaves to answer, and Annella blows out their candles and returns them to the shelf.

Oliver flips the watch on his wrist. It feels late, but he’d lost the thread of the afternoon when everything went dark.

Samuel reappears in the doorway. He claws at the molding. His face looks like parchment.

“Professor?”
Annella lays a hand on his shoulder. “What is it, darling?”

“There’s been an accident…The storm…” He wipes his face harshly a couple of times. “The lake took the brunt of it, the winds…”

Annella’s eyes are wide. “What does that mean?”

Samuel’s gaze finds Oliver’s. “Mario’s boat capsized. He’s been taken to the hospital. He’s not likely to last the night.”

Oliver grips the arm of the sofa. “Elio?”

His voice shrinks. “They haven’t…he’s presumed to be…to…” Samuel’s head makes a vague motion, and his throat scrapes around his words. “Elio’s missing.”

Chapter End Notes

Mafalda's mutterings about Oliver are (I hope) something like he's a crazy American, and he resembles a movie star.

It was a pet peeve of my high school history teacher when people claimed that in the American Civil War, Lee surrendered to Grant at a courthouse in Appomattox, rather than in a village named Appomattox Court House. I've never forgotten, Mr. Markwardt! :)

I should remind you that I take my "happy ending" tag very seriously. Oliver is headed to a dark place, but trust that he will find his way out of it. I’d never abuse my boy unnecessarily nor for too long. Please have faith, stay tuned, and (as always) share your thoughts!
With Elio’s fate uncertain, Oliver struggles to keep himself together.

After the last chapter, I wanted to make sure you did not have to wait too long. Thank you again for all of your support for this story!

The true hero, as always, is Willowbrooke, who takes all of my strangeness and idiocy in stride and keeps me moving in the right direction!

Watching Samuel makes it worse, but he cannot look away.

The perpetual semblance of surprise on his face as he hastens with jerky steps to his study, digging through drawers to find a phonebook bound in black leather. To the kitchen to grab his jacket from a peg, ripping the loop of sewn-in fabric that had held it there. Kissing his wife on the cheek at the front door, watery eyes unable to completely focus on her face.

Through it all, Oliver hovers around him like a ghost, utterly mute. He wants to comfort the professor somehow, but what is there to say? There is no solace he can offer the man, no soft words that would smooth over the terror that he wears openly, like a bird of prey clutching onto his shoulders, talons digging into the flesh and dark wings immersing his face in shadows.

And someplace ugly within Oliver taunts him with the knowledge that all he really wants is comfort for himself, for Samuel to lift up the stone in Oliver’s chest that had recently been his heart with a breath of reassurance, a robust certainty that a mere thread of hope is all they would need to permit the unlikely to morph into the possible.

As Samuel turns the knob of the door, Oliver takes an awkward step forward. “Should I…or, rather, would you like me to…?”

Annella pats his arm. “It’s all right, Oliver. It will be easier for him to go. He can talk to whomever is leading the search, and most people around here know him. He and Anchise will find out everything we need to know.” Outside, the small black car hums to life, Anchise already behind the wheel.

“I appreciate you being here with my wife, Oliver.” The professor’s lips are dry. “I will call as soon as I know…something, all right? I’ll call as soon as I can.”

Oliver nods and holds the door open for the professor, who jogs erratically to the car, his door barely closing before it zips around the circle of the drive and heads away from them toward the road. Oliver stares at the narrow glow of red from the taillights until they disappear, and all that remains is
the cool blue of the approaching night.

*Is he cold right now?*

“Come, Oliver, let’s sit for a while.” Annella places a warm hand on his back and guides him away from the door, back into the living room. His stomach turns when he sees the piano, so he falls into a chair that faces the fireplace. Annella sits gingerly in the chair opposite, arms crossed tightly in front of her, shoulders hunched.

The storm had stripped the air of its moisture and the temperature had probably fallen twenty degrees in the space of an hour. “Would you like me to make a small fire, Mrs. Perlman?”

She gives him a faint smile. “Thank you, Oliver, that would be lovely.”

He falls to his knees and starts to assemble items in the grate, relieved that his hands have something to do which doesn’t require the functioning of his mind. Campfires are a specialty of his, a skill honed by necessity when staying indoors at night was not an option, when the clink of bottles and the pungent smell of herbs was replaced by eerie silence and an acrid vinegar taint to the air that filtered through the seam at the bottom of his bedroom door. On those nights, he knew to run.

He bends and blows a targeted stream at the base of the stack, feeding the sparks until they flash bright and burn in earnest. The tantalizing smell of wood burning relaxes him for a moment, and he breathes in deeply through his nose.

“I was the one who taught Elio how to swim.”

He flinches at the soft sound of her voice, but he manages to steady himself enough to turn slightly and answer with a moderate, “Oh, really?”

She is gazing at the flames, smile playing on her lips. “Yes, Sami never really cared for the water, and I didn’t want Elio to be afraid of it. When he was…oh, maybe four years old?…I took him down to the river where the older children liked to swim.”

Oliver pokes at the fire and silently wills her to stop talking. Aloud, he says, “How did he do?”

“Oh, he was terrified!” She chuckles fondly. “I took him into the shallows, but he clung to my leg and refused to let go!” Her laughter fades. “So we sat on the shore and watched the other kids, who were diving and playing games. He was fascinated by all of it, and I watched his little face get more and more serious until he finally grabbed my hand and started trying to pull me up.”

Oliver had seen that pout a thousand times. It never meant surrender. “Did he want to leave?”

“Heavens, no, he was taking me back to the water! I asked him if he was sure, and all he said was, ‘*My turn, my turn.*’”

Oliver’s eyes close to the fire. He hears the echoes of those very words from Elio’s throat just two nights before as he had shoved Oliver flat against the mattress and pushed his legs up to fall around the delicate shoulders, nimble fingers working Oliver open until he pressed his heels into the silken skin of Elio’s back, bit at his sweat-slicked cheek, and begged in a voice that had been more heat than sound.

*Now, Elio, please!*

Soon, *I promise.* Elio’s tongue had traced the circle of Oliver’s open mouth. *I don’t want to hurt you.*
“Hurt me all you want.”

“He always has to do everything in his own time, doesn’t he?”

Oliver’s throat burns. He stands abruptly and grips the mantle. He wishes he could answer her, but he can only nod and hope that Annella sees. His nails dig into the stone, desperate to retrieve that moment, that singular moment when Elio had slid inside of him and filled him completely. He needs to feel the same potent relief, that power that only Elio has to make his mind disconnect and allow pleasure to replace any trace of rational thought, safety and desire and love radiating in all directions.

_Elio, Elio, Elio._

Behind him, Annella’s voice develops a distant note. “In the end, I suppose I didn’t teach him a thing. He’d studied the others and taught himself. And after that, it was like he’d been in the water his whole life, paddling and diving just like the bigger kids. But then, that’s my Elio!” She is quiet for a long moment. “My Elio…my sweet, clever boy…”

Oliver hears her tremulous sigh, so he grits his teeth and turns to her. Somehow he gathers the strength to take the two steps to her side and put his arm around her shoulders.

_Say something, you idiot._

But, as before, he has no words.

Thankfully, she doesn’t seem to want any. She lays her hand atop Oliver’s, and together they watch the fire turn everything to ash.

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When Mafalda requests Annella’s help, mumbling something in Italian which Oliver cannot discern, he excuses himself and returns to his work spread across the tattered fabric of the divan in the study. He stares blankly at the pages, then raises his head to gaze out the window, catching the last corner of orange daylight before it loses its fight with the horizon, using its final bit of energy to turn the clouds above it a breathtaking dimension of pinks and purples.

On their third day in Italy, Elio had shown him Monet’s berm. Elio had stretched his limbs out on the ground with all the divine symmetry of a living Vitruvian man, plucked a fat blade of grass to chew, and told Oliver how he would come here as a teenager to think, hoping to absorb some kind of inspiration for his own art, as if somehow the grass or the sky might hold the secret to greatness.

“And did it?”

“No.” A sheepish grin. “It only made me afraid.”

“Of what?”

He had tilted his face to the sun. “That if I tried to steal from Monet’s light, I’d never be able to find my own.”

_God._ Oliver’s heart had clenched so tightly he’d winced. “You can stop that, you know.”

Elio had blinked. “I can—huh?”
“Stop,” Oliver had gurgled, flopping down next to him and writhing in the grass. “I mean…stop. Really. Stop. Please. I’m begging you!” He had covered his eyes with one hand and waved his other in the air.

Elio had giggled, propping himself up on his elbows. “Oliver, what…what are you talking about?”

Oliver had merely shaken his head furiously, hand still clamped over his eyes. “Can you just please stop being amazing? Christ, enough already! Quit it. Stop being perfect. You don’t have to sell yourself to me, you know. I’m already hooked, thank you very much.” And he had tried desperately for droll, but even he could hear the wonder in his own voice.

“Oh, you are?” Elio had leered at him, grin playing across his full lips, and he had taken Oliver’s shirt sleeve in his teeth and tugged. “You sure about that? ‘Cause I can do more. I can climb a tree to save a kitten or donate a kidney or some shit like that if you want. Whatever it takes to make sure I’ve really got you—like, all of you.” He’d breathed a fog into Oliver’s shirt which made a sharp cold spot when he shifted away.

Oliver had righted himself and scooted around so that he could hold Elio to his chest. He’d folded his arms around him easily, snuggling him as close as he could with thighs clenched on either side of those slender hips, and kissed his neck in gentle succession, from the soft turn of his shoulder to the point of hair at the base of his skull. “You are the best person I’ve ever known in my entire life.” He had closed his eyes and whispered the words into Elio’s hair, like it was a confession that he’d kept inside of himself, too selfish to share it, too foolish to know that he says it every day, too greedy to drink in the flash of heat in Elio’s skin as he had blushed under the praise and liquefied further in Oliver’s embrace.

Oliver’s empty arms gather up his papers, and he squints at the last line he’d written.

Revelation?

He sneers and crumples the papers in his fist.

Apocalypse. That’s the word he’d been searching for all along.

He stops in the kitchen long enough to tell Annella that he’s going to go for a walk. She nods and gives him a sad smile. Is she disappointed in him? Probably. As if Oliver didn’t already feel like a worthless hulk. He’d thought about trying to nap, blissful hours passed without consciousness. But there was no way in hell he was going anywhere near that bedroom. The mere thought of smelling Elio’s shampoo on the pillow or seeing his composition notes on the desk was enough to make him want to board the room up with a hammer and nails and never enter the second level of the house ever again.

He wanders away from the villa in the encroaching dark, unsure of where he’s going. It finally occurs to him that he’s on a path to the water, the same one he’d walked with Elio that very same day, but at some point, he drifts off of it and tromps through the brush until he finds himself on a low ridge overlooking the water, upstream from where they had been before. The moon is higher now, afloat halfway between the earth and sky. The river churns below, small tufts of whitewater glinting in the fading light.

Somehow, being closer to the water makes him feel closer to Elio. He shuts his eyes and is swarmed
with visions from their morning swim, and how could he not be? Elio swimming is a thing of beauty, period. It is the very pinnacle of Elio’s perfection, the simple lithe beauty that guides his every movement, a symphony of skin and bone that can only find itself a song when his eyes glitter amid the spray of yellow light over the river’s waves.

But water is never the same thing twice, so the philosopher says.

Oliver’s eyes open to blackness.

Yeah? Well, fuck you and your philosophy. I want what I had. I don’t want it to change. I want it to last.

Does love have to careen through the mountains and over a cliff in order for it to exist with the same certainty as everything else? Does a heart have to die before it can live again? Because it won’t. There is no phoenix within him, Oliver is certain. Once the candle is blown out, there is nothing but oblivion in its wake. He could beg for a sign, plead into the dark for some kind of comfort, but why bother when he has read way too many books not to already know how it would end?

Him, alone. Jilted.

Should he try to pray? That’s what people do at times like this, isn’t it? Hands pressed together, some sacred symbol pushed between them, wailing to an altar or the rising sun for clemency and peace, scripted demands mumbled from unthinking lips, over and over again? But what do these people do with their penitence when the words won’t come? What god answers the mute pleas of a stranger, a single voice among millions of the devout, begging for some intervention from on high, levied by a reckless faith in mindless rituals that assure him it will come?

Oliver gurgles deep in his throat, chest so tight he can scarcely draw breath. He thinks about the flight to Italy, the hours that he squandered next to Elio’s side, the ones he’d lost somewhere in the boundary of time zones, seeping into space through the bleed hole in the window. He wants them back, every goddamn minute of them. They belong to him. More time to see his eyelashes flutter while he sleeps, to count the freckles on the bridge of his nose, to hear his breathless laughter when he is shy and eager at the same time. I want all of it. Let us argue over the thermostat and fight over what to eat for dinner and make love at dawn even though we’re both exhausted and have to work all day without a single break.

He tilts his head and looks down into the water. It is black beyond, and only his tortured face ripples back to him. Just like on the plane when he tried to peer out of his window and see the sky, he could rest his palm on the fleeting surface of it and cut himself off. Is he down there, somewhere below the surface, begging Oliver for help? Is he waiting for Oliver to rescue him and bring him home? Maybe somewhere in these depths he could find his Elio, find the pieces of him scattered on the sandy bottom, and reassemble him, remake a life from what remains of those random parts.

But how would he keep the pressure from exploding into the void? How could he prevent the panes from cracking and propelling him into the frigid, open air, desperate for anything to lessen the atmospheres which crush against his temples and shove his eyes back inside of his skull to force him to witness what he cannot bear to see. But what if he doesn’t want them there? What if he wants to let them loose to roam above the clouds where it is thin and free and all that remains are tiny crystals of ice to remind them of the vile water far, far below?

Everything hurts. Oliver’s joints are on fire, and his eyes fill with the smoke. It’s as if he has had his skin peeled off and he has to figure out how to keep his organs intact so that he can continue to exist.

Or if he should.
I’m so sorry, Samuel.

Love may endure after death, but it burns out the heart which holds onto it once the other, the one who had shared it, is gone. One soul cannot survive the crushing weight of a love that once had filled up two—the burden is just too much to carry on the surface where we live.

The pressure is too great.

There has to be a bleed hole or everything dies.

Oliver gazes out over the expanse of the river, to the scrub of trees and the valley beyond, and he swears he hears Elio’s voice, whispering to him, the teasing murmur he uses when they are tangled in one another, when his lips move to caress Oliver’s ear, soft and languid, and the words do not matter. And if he stares hard enough into the water, where it is touched by the ethereal moonlight that makes the darkness glow above his head, he is certain he sees that perfect face in the subtle waves.

God, I miss you. Are you waiting for me, Elio? Do you miss me, too?

Oliver’s breath runs short.

He could do it.

He could join Elio there, down in the waves. It would be so easy, really, so quick. All he has to do is to move to the edge and let gravity do the rest, just tip over into the water and sink lower and lower until the acid filling his chest dissipates and he floats quietly away, cradled by the sediment and the tendrils of Elio’s hair brushing across his cheeks, fingers outstretched to pull him in and welcome him home, to welcome back all of the lost hours and the stolen years, regained in the steady embrace of the only arms that have ever welcomed him—all of him—and sheltered him from everything that he had once fought alone.

He shuffles forward, toes extended over open air.

He closes his eyes.

“Elio,” he whispers.

“Oliver?”

He gasps and stumbles backward on the rock, small pebbles breaking loose and splashing into the water. He squints and makes out the shape of Annella on the path behind him. “Oliver, come. They have found him.”

His throat closes. He cannot bring himself to ask the question.

“Yes, sweetheart. He’s alive.”

Chapter End Notes

Oliver references “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” by Katherine Anne Porter, a story whose main character is on the verge of her death and asks for a sign from God, some kind of comfort before she passes. She does not get it.
I told you all would be well! I always hope that I can surprise you, but I will never deceive you; I’ve too much respect for all of you and these characters!

Stick around for the next chapter when Elio comes home! ❤️
Chapter Summary

Elio returns, but Oliver’s fears do not give up on him so easily.

Chapter Notes

When we were living in a dream world,
Clouds got in the way
We gave it up in a moment of madness
And threw it all away
“Don’t Answer Me,” The Alan Parsons Project (1984)

It takes a special brand of saint to put up with me and my penchant for idiocy, one which necessitates multiple drafts, so for Willowbrooke to deal with all of that and help me be less a fool, I am eternally grateful!

I’ve had the kind of week that makes me feel like a perpetual failure, so finishing this chapter was very difficult, and posting it is a leap I feared to take. I really hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver paces in the gravel, the soft crunch under his toes and the sombre dribble of water from the fountain of the pool around back the only sounds in the heavy air that had fattened on moisture reclaimed from the ground with the aid of the afternoon sun.

Where are they?

Last night, Annella had led him away from the water, her frazzled relief enough to tamp down any awareness she might normally have had about Oliver’s behavior. She didn’t seem to notice the depth of the tremor in his limbs, the odd stiffness in his stance, the oil slicks where his eyes should have been. She had reached out without hesitation and held on with both hands to his arm, plodding slowly back along the path to the house and speaking in hushed tones about Samuel’s quick call from the hospital.

Apparently, Elio had been pulled from the lake by the crew of a passing trawler who had witnessed him being tossed into the water when Mario’s vessel had been swamped. He had been barely conscious, and in the mayhem of the storm, the crew made the choice to take him to the hospital immediately after docking since no emergency personnel had yet arrived on the scene. They didn’t know that Mario had been clinging to the other side of the sinking boat. They didn’t even know Elio’s name.

It was pure luck, then, that the captain of the trawler had seen Samuel back at one of the dock stations waving Elio’s picture at several of the rescue workers and imploring information. Otherwise, depending on Elio’s condition, it could’ve been days before they’d known what had
become of him.

Random luck of the universe.

Annella’s mind had been soothed enough by the news of her son’s survival that she had decided she could rest, so Oliver had walked her up to her bedroom, nearly carrying her on the last few steps. She had leaned heavily against him, her exhaustion seeming to saturate her completely once the massive prop of her anxiety had perforated and wilted at its edges. She had hugged him tightly and murmured, “Thank you for taking such good care of everyone, Oliver,” touching his cheek with weary affection before disappearing behind the heavy mahogany door.

He had stared at his feet until the latch had clicked into place, unable to meet her eyes. She was only being kind, he knew. He hadn’t done a thing. She should have scoffed at him, berated him, been enraged that he had folded inward and let her down, let Samuel down.

And Elio.

He had pivoted on his heel and glanced down the hall at the entrance to his bedroom—Elio’s bedroom—and felt a wave of nausea. That place was not for him. He had earned no sanctuary. Instead, he had retreated to the study so he could marinate properly in his own disgust, surrounded by awards and letters of correspondence and candid pictures of Elio with Annella in small gold frames—mementos of a life well lived and immediate reminders for why he himself is no one’s son.

Oliver had passed the rest of the night perched in the corner of the divan, fingers tracing the nubs of the brick red fabric while his eyes stared blankly at the shadows that waxed and waned on the empty ceiling. He’d followed the minute cracks in the plaster which ran from wall to wall like the lifelines of an enormous palm. What did all of it mean? What could the mystics have deduced from their sharp jags or from the fissures that broke off the main veins and chiseled half-hearted new capillaries that aborted themselves without reason? Are those what the other ways look like, the trails of the travaiamento of which the professor had once spoken, those different turns in life that some fear to take? “Some never come back,” he had said, his discriminating gaze turned to the slides he was sorting, not drilling into Oliver’s face as it should’ve been.

Oh, God. A new horror had sunk into Oliver’s blood. He tried to tell me and I didn’t listen.

But shouldn’t Oliver have been able to read the signs for himself? Had this very room foreshadowed the imminent tragedy all along, if only Oliver would have bothered to notice, to look up and see what was etched out for him decades before he’d even arrived? Does it still? Are these lines carved because permanence is the true enemy that he should fear, permanence in all forms? When a fissure is made, nothing heals it, not really. It can be covered, it can be filled in and painted over, but it’s still there, and when the house shifts again, it will reappear and expand, deeper and uglier, just when you had deluded yourself into believing that the walls were solid.

It made perfect sense, really. Oliver had forgotten his place, had let himself get comfortable, and life had reminded him of his error. It was as simple as that. When a man like him develops a farsightedness, when he dares to consider a future and look into the distance for the answers he seeks, he will always fall into the trap that opens right in front of him. He had been too careless with his heart, and this is what inevitably results from such negligence. He knows, should have known, but he’d been stupid enough to think that the lightning he’d captured wouldn’t be followed by a thunder so loud it would easily crack his foundation as it split the plaster anew.

But this time, Elio had nearly paid for Oliver’s mistakes with his own life.

That is unforgivable.
He can never let something like this happen again.

Samuel had called that morning with an update. Thankfully, Mario had taken a turn for the better; his doctors seemed satisfied that he was out of critical condition and on a slow path of recovery, so Anchise would be staying there with him until more of their family arrived. Elio, though, was awake and anxious to come home. The doctors insisted upon running a couple more tests on him, however, but if all went well, they’d be back to the villa that afternoon.

That was three hours ago.

Oliver stalks around the covered table and chairs to the chinaberry tree and presses both hands into its trunk just to feel something solid, to center himself. He runs his hands against the rough scrape of the bark, fingertips dipping into its crevices as he thinks back to a week ago, when Elio had stood here leaning casually against the tree, letting his hand raise to flutter some of the thick leaves while the other held a cigarette to his lips.

“So what do you think?” he’d asked, taking a long draw through the filter.

Oliver had rubbed at his nose as he considered his response, trying to keep his smile in check. He wiped it again, then again, while Elio had blown smoke over his head before crushing the butt under his heel. Then, he’d reached up with both arms and wrapped his hands around a low branch, throwing his head back to look up into the canopy of branches. “Weeeellllll?” he’d drawled playfully.

Oliver had exhaled slowly, eyes closing for a moment because Jesus, how is he like this? before he had taken a long step forward. “Do you really want to make me happy, Elio?”

Elio had chuckled breathlessly and hung from the branch, twisting at the waist with his legs bent slightly so they could lift off the ground. When he had settled his feet back into the stones, he’d leaned his head around his forearms and pinned Oliver with thirsty eyes. “Insanely,” he’d purred, resting his top teeth on the pillow of his bottom lip.

Oliver had moved forward again until his feet straddled Elio’s, and he had angled his head so that it fit around Elio’s elbow. He could feel the back of his head run up and down Elio’s forearm where it had remained hooked to the tree limb. “Don’t cut it, then. Don’t ever cut it,” he had murmured.

“Why?” The word was a mere breath.

“Because, Elio,” he had pleaded quietly, “what am I going to do with my fingers when I…” He’d felt Elio’s hot breath on the back of his neck, “when I want to lose them in pure bliss?” His nose had grazed the soft cheek, fingers hovering over his jaw, working up the back of his neck. “What am I going to stroke,” and he had snarled a handful of the silken strands, “what am I going to tug,” and he had heard Elio gasp as he had yanked his face to his own, “when I am on the edge and I need more of you? What would I do, Elio? How would you ever know?”

Elio had swallowed and licked his lips, and he had been so close to Oliver’s face, the tip of his tongue had flickered across Oliver’s mouth as he’d done it. His body shifted as his arms fell back behind him, trailing around the swell of the trunk, a calculated surrender. “And what do you need right now, Oliver?” he had whispered to him, a rustle of words that seemed to have fallen from the leaves above them.

Oliver’s hands had both fallen heavily against the trunk above each of Elio’s shoulders, and his body had pressed tight against Elio’s, trapping him between the rough bark of the tree and the hard line of Oliver’s own body. “Do you really want to know?”
Strong fingers had prickled up around Oliver’s hips and dug into his skin through the thin fabric of his shorts. “Say it. Anything, just say it.”

“Boxers.”

A pause. “What?”

Oliver had cleared his throat and stepped back, cracking his neck. “Yeah, I gotta change my shorts because these things are really chaffing and—“ He looks at Elio slack-jawed. “Wait a sec—that’s what’s wrong! I’m not wearing any!” He had smacked his forehead with his palm and staggered toward the house.

“Oliver!” Elio’s hands flew to his hips, and his smile had rippled like a wave from one side of his mouth to the other.

Oliver had flapped his arms at him. “Sorry, Elio, sorry but I’ve got to do something about this! I mean, what’m I supposed to do without any—“ He tripped up the front steps. “Oh, lord, I’ve gotta get upstairs now!”

He’d heard a bubble of laughter and the fast tick of Elio’s feet in pursuit before he’d taken a single step inside.

It takes him several moments to realize that the sound he now hears in the stones isn’t coming from a memory; it is coming from a distance. Breathlessly, he watches as the little black car ambles carefully up the drive and parks by the front door. Oliver sees Samuel pop out of the driver’s side and call, “Annella! Siamo qui!”

Oliver drifts forward.

He needs to see him, just to see his face once to know he’s really here, that he’s really safe.

Mrs. Perlman rushes out of the door, beaming, as Samuel opens the passenger door and reaches inside to help Elio to his feet. He rises slowly, and Oliver gasps when he sees his head appear over the roof of the car. His skin looks a shade paler, his hair a disheveled mass seeming to hover over his head. He bends to let his mother kiss him, and amid the murmurings of Italian that they exchange, Oliver thinks he hears the syllables of his own name.

Is he in pain?

There’s a tightness to Elio’s face that Oliver hates immediately, a large darkened bruise around his right eye. He can see the falter in Elio’s gait as his parents guide him toward the steps. But before he turns to mount them, his eyes sweep around the yard and stop where Oliver stands at the ring of trees and widen for a moment. A plea. His mouth moves, but that’s when Annella puts her arm around his hunched shoulders and leads him inside.

Oliver’s hands drop to his knees. His vision has gone black, and he sways as if he might pass out. Then, he bows and vomits into the grass.

At least an hour passes before Oliver attempts to go inside. He can hear activity in the kitchen, murmurs and chuckles, the clinking of plates and silverware. Oliver turns toward the stairs and
climbs on flat, leaden feet, a condemned man heading for the rope.

The bedroom door creaks when he opens it, though he moves it inch by inch, caution he attributes to concern, not to the lump of molten lead in his throat. The room is dim, the shutters closed partially to keep out the sun’s rays as they slant down in their early evening slump. There’s a glass of water on the side table, next to a plate with a small arc of bread crust left on it. The watch that Elio always wears is flung there, the face blank.

Oliver moves the desk chair over to the side of the bed and sits down next to where Elio is sleeping, soft snores percolating from his half-opened mouth. His body is partially twisted in the sheet, but his limbs are arranged with care. His left leg is bent out so the long cut on its underside is allowed the air it needs to heal. His right arm is crossed over his stomach, a bandage wrapped neatly around the forearm and clipped with a metal tab near his elbow.

It’s so quiet, and the air feels heavy and stale. Oliver has a hard time inhaling it until he learns to match his breath to the rhythm that Elio has set. Oliver reaches over him, tugs the sheet around to cover his feet properly, because they always get cold. He tucks it around his knee, his bicep, flattens its edges with a light palm.

He has to swallow down another acid gurgle of nausea before he can look up at Elio’s face.

The bruise around his eye curves from forehead to cheekbone, nearly black in the shadowed light. There’s a jagged cut near his hairline, and Oliver can feel the heat rise beneath his skin. He is plagued by visions of Elio being tossed by the waves, flung into railings. Did he scream? Was he afraid?

His dark head has slid to the back of the pillow so it is tilted up, chin pointing to the ceiling. It reminds Oliver of when they had been walking home from dinner on Valentine’s Day and the snow had begun to fall. Elio had spun in a circle, face to the sky, trying to catch the fat flakes on his tongue.

“You shouldn’t do that, Elio,” Oliver had warned. He had reached out to stop him and ended up getting pulled into the twirl, as if he ever could have resisted it. He’d giggled and stumbled around with him, snaking his hands to the back of Elio’s neck and cradling his head.

“What do you mean?”

“Snow is like an atmospheric scrub brush. Do you have any idea how gross the air in New York City is?”

“But I love when it snows!”

“You might as well lick the floor of a taxicab. Trust me, you do not want that in your mouth!”

Elio had stopped dead. “Oh, yeah?” He’d grabbed onto Oliver’s coat collar and hauled him closer. “Give me a better option, then.”

Their cold cheeks had touched a moment before their lips, teeth clicking while laughter had pressed out of the corners of their mouths. He’d tasted like strawberries from the dessert he’d just eaten, a perfect blend with Oliver’s last sip of champagne. His tongue had curled under Oliver’s upper lip in a slow slide that made him immediately weak. He’d hung there, helpless in Elio’s grip, chasing the warmth that bled from Elio’s mouth to his, slick and wonderful.

The thick brows are drawn together now, warping the triangle of skin above his nose, like he’s concentrating on something, like when he’s searching for the right chord or tasting for the right
combination of spice in his tomato sauce. When he’s debating how to appease a customer who suddenly decides he’s lactose intolerant after consuming most of his latte. Or when he’s processing some stupid thing Oliver has said, trying to keep it in his brain and work through it before it can sink into his heart and manage to hurt him, when Oliver wants to take it all back but he can’t find the words in time. *Not the ones you need.*

*He aches.* Oliver can see it, sunken into the lines of his face.

*Why did you do this, Elio? Why did you go?*

*I need to know why.*

Oliver’s gut roils again, and he clenches his teeth. He feels a haunting emptiness, as if he’s been hollowed out and set adrift. It is familiar, an old enemy that he’d thought he’d defeated, the false Oliver back from the shadows, that depraved version of himself that refused to die. This Oliver had starved himself for so long, he had forgotten what it felt like to feel full. Or is it that he’d never known? Because he’d told himself he craved the absence and cultivated his nothingness as the goal, like it was a victory, the satisfaction to be found in a man who is never satisfied.

The deep gnaw bends him down, his forehead hitting the cool sheet next to Elio’s hand. He scoops his own hand under Elio’s fingers, nudging them lightly into his grip. He tilts his head so that the fingers press against his mouth, his cheek.

*Why did you leave me?*

“Oliver?” The voice is muzzled by sleep, but the fingers come to life and curl a soft circle against his face.

He jumps back like he’s been burned. “Sorry.” He lets go of the hand. “Sleep.” He tips his head to his chest. “Please.”

He sees the pleading in Elio’s eyes, hears it in his voice. “No! Stay. I—”

The door bangs shut behind him.

Oliver loves this pool. The dribble of the fountain, the quiet swish of the water in the cavernous rectangle. Mysterious yet contained. *Sounds familiar.*

He closes his eyes, raises his head into the breeze that runs ahead of the setting sun. Evening is his favorite time of day. The insistent glare of afternoon is gone, the indecency of its light and its heat, leaving the ambiguity of the impending night as all that remains. Quiet, cool, haunted by the moon that hangs fat above the horizon, like a shy dancer edging through the curtained wings of a stage.

“There you are.”

Oliver gasps and whips around, his feet sloshing the tranquil waters as he tucks them under his thighs on the lip of the pool, prepared to flee. “What are you doing out here?”

Elio stands there for a while, seeming to waver in the breeze. He has on a dark sweater that swamps him, seems to pull down the color from his hair, the shade of cold blood under the bluish light of the
moon. “Where have you been, Oliver?” His voice is quiet, guileless, and it feels like a hand around Oliver’s throat.

Oliver turns away. “You needed to rest.”

He hears Elio sigh. “You could have stayed. I’m okay, you know.”

“I know.” Too quick.

There’s another long pause. “Will you tell me?”

“Stay away from me, Elio. Go back to bed.”

“Will you tell me?”

He doesn’t have to ask what. “Everything’s fine, Elio,” he grinds out, the metal edge glinting in every word.

He hears Elio take a few steps closer, his flip-flops clicking softly in the grass. “Oliver, please. I know you had to have been… I know that you were worried. Believe me, my dad gave me an earful all the way back here! But everything’s all right now, isn’t it? We’re all okay, so there’s no need to be so upset.” There was a note of something there that made the hair on Oliver’s arms stand up. Was it sadness? Maybe frustration? Or desperation? Oliver didn’t want to guess.

“Isn’t there?”

“No, I promise you. Not anymore.”

The words hit Oliver like a bucket of ice. Not anymore.

“You’re a liar, Elio.” Oliver’s voice is so low, it feels like it has merely vibrated in his throat and never moved past his lips.

Then he hears Elio’s breath catch. “What?”

“You lied to me,” he growls, pivoting around to face him, “over and over.” Elio’s forehead pinches in the center, just as it had before, marring the perfect canvas of white skin. “Because I believed that shit. I believed you, but you didn’t mean a word of it, did you?”

Elio’s head falls back, exposing his throat to the sky. “What are you…” Oliver watches the column ripple as Elio swallows slowly. “No, Oliver.” His head tips down and his eyes connect with Oliver’s, a weariness in them, a pain that Oliver hates perhaps more than he hates himself. “You know me. You know I’d never lie to you.”

He can’t stop himself. “I mean, who the fuck was I kidding, anyway?”

He rips the penny from his pocket and holds it up to glint in dim light. He tosses it up and catches it casually. “Why am I bothering to carry this around? I mean, what the fuck does luck matter if you’re just deliberately going to throw yourself away and end up dead? Luck is for suckers, right?”

He cocks his arm and stops. He hears a soft gasp behind him, and his muscles freeze. His nostrils are flared, and he feels the heat crawl up his neck, that brand of livid fury that he’s only let overtake him a few times in his life.
But then he realizes that he’s listening. Waiting.

Resisting.

There’s a sniff behind him. *Fuck.*

*Just do it. Why not? What does it matter?*

But he can’t. And it does.

All he can do is whip around, seething under the effort. He lunges forward and grabs Elio’s wrist, feeling the fine bones beneath his fingers. He cannot look at his face. He slams the coin into his palm and stalks away.

The small spare bedroom is a jungle of shadows. The large window holds a solitary shaft of eerie light from the moon, now perfect and round in a cloudless sky. It skims the top of Oliver’s head where he sits below it on the floor, knees bent in front of him, forearms crossed and resting on their caps. His heart is thudding, and Oliver wonders if it could crack one of his ribs. He already feels broken—thinking Elio was gone, that someone as vibrant as Elio Perlman could simply cease to exist, is enough to shatter even a substance as strong as bone.

It’s funny, though. When bones crack, it is a pain so shocking that it numbs, the body rushing to stamp out the sudden, overwhelming bite of it, a protective measure shielding the victim from the trauma of knowing what no one should ever have to. But few consider the damage done to the soft tissue, the whiplash, the deep bruise that leaves a dull, persistent ache that forces the body to feel every gnawing bit of it. Soft tissue accepts the abuse it is offered and savors it.

The far door creaks on its hinges, and a few seconds later, the inner one moans once. He can hear Elio breathing, and it’s too labored for merely navigating the stairs. Oliver pinches his eyes shut.

There’s a rustle of fabric and a dull thud. He can smell a faint antiseptic odor, the bandage most likely, and there’s a soft creak from the bedsprings. He opens his eyes slowly, looks up through his lashes, to see Elio on the floor across from him, head propped on the mattress of the small twin bed, gazing out the window, the moon like a spotlight on his face, the bruise around his eye an ethereal purple.

They sit there in silence, the space between them mere inches, but to Oliver, it feels infinite. He’s never felt more alone.

Or maybe he just realizes that’s how it should be, how it should’ve been all along.

“You should run, Elio,” he whispers. “Go. *Now.*”

Elio makes a gurgling noise in the back of his throat and falls forward, reaches out and grasps Oliver’s forearm. He doesn’t pull it, merely holds it firmly. Oliver’s muscles clench, and he tries to jerk away, but Elio won’t let go, applying the same steady pressure as before.

Oliver dips his head, letting his eyes escape to the dark corner. “*Stop* it. Leave me alone. Let me *go.*** He tries to jerk his arm back again, with less vigor this time, his eyes swelling with tears. “*Just stop.*” His voice drags across broken glass.
Elio slides closer across the floor. His eyes glint a deep emerald in the shaft of moonlight. “Elio.”

Oliver’s chest heaves and the tears flow in earnest, blinding him. His legs writhe, heels pushing ineffective lines against the grain of the patterned wood of the floor “No…” Just a breath.

Softer now, pulling the limp arm slowly toward his own chest. “Elio.”

When Oliver sinks forward, he barely gets it out of his mouth. It’s small and garbled and stuck to the roof of his mouth. But it comes out. “Oliver.”

And the rest does, too. Once the anger steps aside, the door is thrown wide to what it has guarded like Cerberus, keeping the cursed man inside of him safe behind its wrath. All of the terror he’d shoved down in his gut, all of the anguish at what he thought he’d lost, all of his vicious guilt for not being there, for staying at the villa when he could’ve been out there on the lake and helped, some way, somehow.

All of it.

He grabs at Elio’s shirt, claws at him to drag him closer, to pull him into his body, as tight as he can, into his lap, into his skin, his blood.

“Are you still here?” He feels the soft scrape of ratted curls against his face, the silken smear of Elio’s tears on his temple, in his hair. “Are you? Are you?” His shoulder absorbs the steam of Elio’s breath.

He doesn’t recognize the voice, doesn’t know if it is his or Elio’s. It doesn’t matter. The answer comes in the squeeze of his hands along the handle of Elio’s spine, around his waist, in the press his face to the warm bend of his neck, in the muscles which stiffen and slacken as the tears empty from suppressed layers too long ignored.

Somewhere in his mind, Oliver traces over the imperceptible cracks in the ceiling of the study, the lifelines etched in plaster, and he realizes that this is where the lines converge, where one impossibility collides with another and deepens the groove. It isn’t a fracture; it’s a triumph, graphic evidence of a real life. And without this, nothing else is real, Oliver isn’t real. Without this, Oliver would not have had to pray or to curse, to make a choice between staying on dry land or stepping into the abyss, because it already would have swallowed him whole.

Chapter End Notes

While writing this, I thought of two different things for Oliver:

1) I’ve long believed that anger isn’t a real emotion; it’s a front man, a guard dog, an easier sell than hurt or embarrassment or fear. That’s how I’m seeing Oliver’s behavior in this chapter, funneling that energy into something he thinks will protect him, but in the end, can’t be maintained because isn’t real. The only thing that is real for him is his love for Elio.

2) Have you ever watched The Dog Whisperer? Cesar Millan often showed dogs who have to work through their anxiety—they lash out, they shiver uncontrollably, but in the end, they end up calm and balanced.

I don’t know if I’m making this up or not, but I swear I have seen images of Timmy hanging from a tree limb on the film’s set. Whether it happened or not, it is what I had in
my mind as I constructed Oliver’s memory.

It was a biologist friend of mine who awakened me to the reality of “fresh” snow. Alas, I guess it’s all to be avoided, not just the yellow stuff…

The next chapter will be as fluffy as a Bichon pup on a cumulus cloud resting on cotton. We have earned it!
Healing

Chapter Summary

Torn connections are mended, progress is made, and things finally are good for all.

Chapter Notes

“She turns to me sometimes and asks me what I’m dreaming
And I realize I must have gone a million miles away
And I ask her how she knew to reach out for me that moment
And she smiles because it’s understood there are no words to say.”
“It’s All About Soul” Billy Joel

My overwhelming gratitude to the wonderful Willowbrooke, who is always willing to have a go at whatever glob of words I plop into her inbox. The fact that she not sick of me yet is shocking! You are a saint!

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

His fingers work in circles, around the ribs of the sweater’s hem, until the pads of them feel stripped of their prints, around and around and around. He flattens his hand and squeezes tighter against Elio’s back, hoisting that delicate frame a little higher in Oliver’s lap and tucking him closer with one arm while the other hand secures Elio’s against the opposite shoulder so that his bandaged arm hangs safely across Oliver’s chest. Oliver has propped himself up with their pillows against the headboard of their bed, Elio protected in the gully of Oliver’s legs. He lets his feet dangle at the edge of the mattress, calves resting over the cushion of Oliver’s left thigh.

There’s a contented sigh, and Oliver smiles, pets the top of Elio’s head with a sweep of his cheek, and closes his eyes. “Were you scared?”

Elio hums, words soft and rambling. “No…no, not really. It all happened so fast, I didn’t get a chance to…well, to think about the danger.” He clears his throat. “Mario had seen the weather reports, but…he figured we had at least a couple hours before the storm would reach us, so we headed out…thought we could just catch a few and get back, no problem.”

Oliver massages Elio’s hip, rotates a gentle thumb into the grooves of his lumbar, kisses his forehead over the soft baby strands at his hairline.

“The sky got dark suddenly, like someone’d shut a door…and it was this eerie kind of yellowish green almost…and the winds were unbelievable. So one minute, Mario was yelling at me to reel in my line and stow my gear, and the next…I was on a gurney with a penlight in my face…I had no
idea how I got there.”

“That had to be unnerving.”

Elio grunts softly. “My head hurt, so they took a bunch of x-rays…wouldn’t let me sleep for more than an hour at a time…gave me some painkillers. But once they realized I didn’t have a blood clot or anything major, they basically left me alone.” He lets out a slow breath. “My dad, of course, did the opposite. Once he was sure I was all right, he lectured me for a solid hour about being an adult and taking stupid risks. I felt like I was twelve years old again.”

Oliver chuckles. “I can’t even picture Samuel angry.”

Elio snorts. “Yeah, well, you’ve never put his car in a ditch because you wanted to drag race Jimmy Francona.”

Oliver shakes with silent laughter, and Elio tilts his head to kiss the hinge of Oliver’s jaw. “Now you. Tell me about you.”

Oliver snugs his arms tighter around Elio, and they’re quiet for a few minutes, listening to the birds chirp and flutter in the tree outside. “I was out of my mind, Elio,” he declares simply. “They found Mario half dead and you were…you were just gone.” He caresses his forehead against Elio’s temple, every admission spilled directly into the bends of his ear. “The thing is, when you grow up in a toxic environment, one with constant havoc, your response to crisis gets thrown off. Back then, I…I learned how to keep my head down and disconnect, to focus on work, but…all of that crawling into myself to survive makes any havoc a trigger for it. And then…then I just get so…” He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, making his lungs throb, but when the words fail, the air rushes out to take its place, leaving him abruptly deflated, shoulder sagging in. “Damn it, I’m so tired.”

“Did you not sleep at all?”

“No, I did a little…or I think I did. But I don’t mean that. I mean that I’m tired. I’m tired of my own game, of running myself in circles and being afraid all the time. I’m tired of blaming myself for everything that’s ever gone wrong, and…hating myself just because that’s what feels…safe and…normal.”

Elio sits up a little so he can see Oliver’s face. He’s quiet for a few moments, as if weighing his words, then he takes a quick breath. “You get a look on your face, you know. When you do that. When you go there.”

Oliver angles his head slightly. “What do you mean? Go where?”

Elio’s eyes flit back and forth between his for a moment. “When you go back to where you were as a kid, when you start to eat yourself up on the inside. There’s a…I don’t know, a strain around your eyes and your mouth. I can’t even tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it.”

Oliver huffs, brushing Elio’s hair from his temple. “Is there anything you don’t know?” he teases mildly.

Elio’s mouth compresses, and his throat clunks when he swallows. “How to make you stop.”

He touches Elio’s cheek. “I want to stop, I do. It’s exhausting.” He keeps his eyes on the soft, bruised flesh, brushes a gentle thumb beneath the crescent of purple. “In some ways it’s easier, though, you know?”

“Easier than what?”
His gaze connects with Elio’s, determined not to hide. “Easier than feeling the fear. Because then I’m just helpless. If I’m busy berating myself, then at least my mind has something to latch onto, something to do with itself. And at the time, it feels like some kind of a solution, like I’m keeping ahead of the problem, which is completely idiotic, I know, but the fear…the fear is worse.”

He feels the fingertips of Elio’s injured arm palpate the skin of his neck. “No, I get it, I get it…it’s kind of like tightening your stomach muscles in case you get punched.”

Oliver blinks and considers that. “Yeah, sort of. Or maybe it’s like slapping myself around before anyone else gets a chance to because then…then it won’t hurt as bad when I finally do get punched. And the more afraid I get, the harder I hit.”

Elio twists and cradles his face with both hands. “And all your wounds stay on the inside. No one gets to know how bad you’re hurting.”

Oliver smirks ruefully, resting a hand on Elio’s exposed wrist and massaging the soft flesh lightly. “If I’m lucky. If I’m unlucky, then the person I love most in the world gets hurt, too.” He gives the wrist a light squeeze so Elio will look him in the eye. “It’s not an excuse, though. I am very sorry, Elio. I’m sorry if it seemed like my fear was more important than you. Letting shit that happened years ago keep me from being here for you in the present is not fair to you or your parents.”

Elio’s fingers brush the edges of his hair, his eyebrows. “According to my mom, you were her rock, so you must’ve done something right.”

Oliver’s face heats, and he flicks his head quickly, like throwing the compliment off of him before it starts to burn. “She’s just being nice to me.”

Pink lips purse. “And maybe you’re just not. It didn’t matter how bad you were ripping yourself up at the time, you still made her feel better. Doesn’t that make some kind of a difference?”

Oliver lets his head fall back against the pile of pillows, eyes rolling to the ceiling. “It would make more of one if I hadn’t been too scared to get near you, if I hadn’t barked at you like a stray dog hiding under the porch.” His eyes close and his hands clutch around Elio’s waist. “It’s like…every time it happens, every time I crawl into myself to hide, it’s harder to find my way back out again, and that’s not…” Oliver feels something shift inside of himself, like he’s unplugged a fan and let the blades slow their rotation and stop. “I think I just figured something out.” His voice creaks, his throat still raw from the force of all the tears he’d shed, that they’d shed together. “God, Elio, it’s not fair to me!”

And it has taken him so long to start to recognize that, let alone believe it. Oliver feels a prick of numbness wipe away the clutter of emotions like fallen leaves. All I’ve done is give myself the scraps of my own life. Because, sure, the kid no one wanted only ever deserves what’s left over, right? Apparently that’s another thing he had learned well from his childhood—how to treat himself as miserably as everyone else had.

He has a flash then, a mixture of despair and amazement that drains his blood to his feet. At this moment, he is not sure how he had ever found it within himself to go back to Insomniac to solidify a connection to Elio. It was out of character for him to grit his teeth and return when Elio had seemed to spurn him that second night, for him to plant his feet and refuse to flee. But what does it say about him and his life that it was even more surprising for him to go back after the first night, when things had been thrilling and new, when he’d seen someone who had captured his attention, made him flirt without thinking, made him stare without shame?

Somehow, he must have known even then that Elio was worth the risk, that knowing him would
change everything. And loving Elio has made him realize just how ruthless he has been with that emotion when it comes to himself.

They’re both missing out.

Elio turns his shoulder and pushes it under Oliver’s to clutch him tightly, folding his head down to rest on Oliver’s shoulder, which is raised as his long arm wraps tighter against Elio’s frame. He feels a light press of lips to his neck and he squeezes Elio’s thigh, strokes it slowly back and forth across the line of his nylon shorts. “Are you ever afraid, Elio?” he whispers.

“Sure.”

“Are you afraid of doing the wrong thing?”

“Sometimes,” is the quiet murmur. Another kiss to his neck, slower.

“So what do you do then?”

“Mmmm…” A soft nudge behind his ear.

“How?”

“Afraid of…regret…” A wet slurp, a small lick of tongue. “…more scared of what I haven’t done… an’ once I do it, it’s not as scary…” A gentle nip at his jawline, smoothed over with another soft kiss. “Tastes like exhilaration, then, not fear…”

Oliver huffs a surprised chuckle, “Wait, are you saying that you rebrand your fear?”

Elio pulls back enough to see his eyes, chews on the inside of his cheek as he thinks, head tipping back and forth slightly. “It’s a performance thing, I guess. Musicians, athletes…performance anxiety is pretty common, so thinking of fear as excitement or thrill helps you use the fear to your advantage.” He shrugs. “I mean, it’s not foolproof, and it definitely has its limits, but… it helps, I think.”

And there it is again, that soft wave of calm, that sigh the universe lets loose when the dial stops spinning and the tumblers find their niche, when everything is perfectly balanced for that one moment, and it all makes sense somehow that something which could have meant disaster suddenly becomes a genuine benefit.

He is suspended for a moment before he lets his head fall forward, rubbing his nose into Elio’s hair. He inhales slowly and sighs, “Oh, Elio…it’s fucking brilliant.”

Over the next week, the world feels new.

It’s as if someone has wiped the frost off the windshield of Oliver’s car or slipped corrective lenses onto his nose, allowing him to see truly for the very first time.

His movements feel slower, but his limbs have lightened. His laughter comes easier, sleep is deeper, the color of the sky more vibrant. He savors every morsel of food, every drink.

Oliver can’t help but lay back under the trees, hands tucked beneath his head, and think again of
Hawthorne. His wretched heroine had worn her shame literally, the scarlet letter buttoned garishly to her clothes, every single day for seven long years. It is not until she finally removes it in the forest, rips it off and tosses it aside in a fit of passion, that she finally realizes the terrible toll it has taken on her, the suffocating leaden weight of it on her soul.

*I didn’t know either, Hester. I didn’t have any idea.*

The only time he’d had any sense of this kind of freedom was that Sunday with Elio, their first night together, how his chest had burned and his heart had gone weightless for the very first time, when he’d willingly traded away his name and fit Elio into the empty spaces Oliver’s body had made especially for him.

But that had been a drop on the tongue, a taste of what was to come.

Oliver has no memory to match this. He feels rested. The usual gnawing in the back of his mind, the downhill slide, some rendition of dread, has quieted. The anxious cloud that would darken every word, every movement, charting the geometry for how failure would crush him in this moment or that, blueprints of escape routes meticulously drawn and stuffed into his pockets, have taken on a sense of unreality, but what remains is the knowledge that darting around waiting for the sky to fall, lugging his desperation and self-loathing with every step, had drained him, carved him up, in ways he never could have imagined.

His fever has broken.

And now, he’s just here. Oliver. The man beneath, for better or worse, is wholly present.

“Elio, play for me.”

Elio pats his palm onto the guitar strings to cease their lingering vibration. “What do you want to hear?”

It’s a lazy afternoon, and the heat sizzles off the grass around them. The Perlmans had left for the day, visiting Anchise and his sister’s family now that Mario finally had come home from the hospital, so the world of the villa is theirs alone. Oliver had tried to do a few laps in the pool, but the intense rays drove him into the shade of the tree to stretch out on a towel with a book of poems held above his face. When Elio joined him, he’d abandoned the book to watch Elio’s gorgeous distraction as he’d plucked randomly at his guitar and watched the fluffy clouds morph and disappear in the running track beyond the reach of the tree’s limbs.

“Whatever’s inside of you.”

Elio bites his lip and straightens his posture, letting the ball of his foot pendulum in the dirt for a few seconds before he strums a preliminary chord, ticks a tuning peg, and lets a soft fan of lyricism spill out around them like a bridal train, a swish and yaw of notes with their edges sanded by the silk and taffeta of Elio’s fingers.

Oliver wants to close his eyes, to let the melody envelop him like bathwater, to coat his skin in the pure, tactile layers of sound, but he cannot seem to look away from Elio’s face, the marble concentration of his furrowed brow just above the soft bellows of his mouth which flexes smaller and wider as the notes rise and fall. It’s mesmerizing, erotic, and Oliver props himself up on his elbow for a better view, about to call Elio to his side because he suddenly needs to touch him, to make Elio’s skin a part of the sounds, to complete that loop from one to the other.

But before he can say a word, Elio’s gaze centers on him, and he realizes that Elio’s mouth is not just
following the lil’ of the music. He’s singing.

_Sun drenched_

_Wind swept—_

_Take me to heaven._

_Ocean blue_

_inside you,

_Take me to heaven…_

Oliver feels lightheaded. The soft tenor, like a secret whispered into his ears, the answer to a question he’d not figured out how to ask. _My God_. He makes no effort to conceal his reaction, letting the naked awe and desire overwhelm his features as he sits up fully and turns toward the bench.

Elio’s skin flushes, and his lips curve upward in a shy smile that trips up his words and turns his eyes down to his hands, which gradually lose their rhythm on the strings. He clears his throat awkwardly. “So I’ve been experimenting a little with some lyrics…I hope you don’t mind.”

Oliver gathers his feet beneath him and pushes up onto his knees. “Mind?”

He shrugs, pulling the guitar against him like a shield. “Yeah, ‘cause it’s…” He wipes his nose. “Well, it’s about you.”

“Is it?”

Elio finally looks up again and meets his eyes. “Yeah. Wasn’t it obvious?”


Elio’s cheeks pink anew. “Here, I guess.” He looks around casually at their small bubble of the protected yard, the pool forming one boundary, the rear veranda of the house the other, and finally settles his attention back on Oliver’s face, eyes full. “Right where you are.”

Oliver holds up a hand and wiggles his fingers. Elio licks his lips and props the guitar against the bench, hiking up his denim shorts and taking a few long steps over to take it, aligning their fingertips and pulling them into his palm. Oliver nudges him to the opposite end of the golden towel so they can sit facing one another, and Oliver fits his legs under Elio’s and locks his ankles at the small of his back. As they slide together, he feels Elio’s calves snug securely around his waist.

“Much better,” Oliver murmurs.

Elio’s hands run up and down Oliver’s thighs, gripping occasionally in a light massage, bright eyes watching Oliver’s face keenly. He doesn’t speak, but Oliver can see the internal mosaic of thoughts as they circulate just below the surface of his skin.

“What’s happening in that mind of yours, Elio?”

Elio’s lips pucker as he weighs his words, gaze arcing up to the threaded canopy of leaves. “I like the breeze when it’s warm instead of cool, even if it’s hot outside.” He stretches forward and draws
his hands back, slower this time. “I love when you sweat and your skin gets slick, even your fur.” Oliver chuckles and pinches Elio’s knee, drawing a light gasp and the full force of the twinkling jade stare that vibrates incessantly even when Elio is perfectly still. “And I think I want to start performing again.”

Oliver’s eyebrows raise. “You mean change your degree?”

Elio bites his bottom lip. “More like add to it.”

“Can you do that?”

One shoulder lifts minutely. “It’s rare, but most of my comp coursework is done. I’m pretty sure I can swing a double.”

Oliver nods firmly. He’s no idea what any of this would entail, but it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t have to. It’s Elio. “Why, though?”

“I’ve realized how much I miss it.”

Oliver thinks back to one of the first real conversations they’d ever had, across from one another at Insomniac when Elio had told him that he’d relished his time at a piano, how it would center him, how experiencing the sound physically and emotionally could fill him in a way that nothing else could. He smiles. “Why now?”

“I feel like I’ve wasted so much time, you know? Trying to convince myself it’s not what I want. I mean, I still want to compose, but that’s just not enough for me, and…” He lifts his hand and rests his fingers lightly on Oliver’s cheek, eyes ablaze. “And I have to be fair to me, right?”

All the air leaves Oliver’s lungs. He grabs at Elio’s hips and practically lifts him off the ground to wrap him up and pull him closer, to tuck him tight into the cradle of his own pelvis. His eyes close as he feels Elio’s cool arms around his back, feels the drape of those dark curls fall over his face when Elio rests his cheek against his forehead. “Yes,” he whispers. “Yes, you do. Always.”

Elio’s grip tightens. “You sure you’re okay with this? It’ll probably take an extra year.”

Oliver’s heart soars. It’s clear Elio’s not asking for permission; he’s conveying information, simply letting Oliver know what lies ahead. But what he offers unspoken is so much more than that. This affects you, too. Because Oliver is a part of Elio’s life, because he’s not alone in any of this. At least, not anymore, and that is not “simple” to Oliver. The natural assumption that what one does, they do together? That’s everything.

He raises his head and cups his hands around Elio’s face, pulling his thumbs across the perfect ridges of those cheekbones. Elio smiles down at him, love evident in the soft corners of his eyes, in the small bubble of pink tongue which shows in the thin gap between his lips, in the gentle hand that rises to caress Oliver’s jaw.

Oliver’s grin goes supernova. “Let’s do it.”
A week later, Oliver finds himself in the same spot in the yard, staggering after Annella in a zigzag pattern, hanging paper lanterns from whatever limbs she points to.

“There…yes, and that one, too, dear.” When he’s tied the last one in place, she pats his arm. “Thank you, Oliver! You’ve saved me from dragging that old, heavy ladder from the shed. You’re better company than it is, besides.” She winks at him.

He smirks and bows to her. “Grazie, signora.”

“Can you help me put some more chairs around the veranda, and maybe bring up the case of prosecco from the basement, the one right next to the stairs?”

“Of course.”

The Perlmans had decided that, in a summer so punctuated by hardship and pain, it was time to celebrate the victories, so they’d put together a small backyard soiree to bring everyone together to let food and wine and music flow free now that the tears were no longer needed.

And judging by the number of people who swarm onto the villa’s property as dusk approaches, it seems to be what half the town needed. Oliver only recognizes a few faces—some older gentlemen who populate the small cafe in town, the ones who’d let him play a few hands of poker and had slapped him heartily on the back when he succeeded in bluffing them with a pair of threes; a smattering of Elio’s old friends who were also visiting for the summer; the young girl who works at the post office and blushes terribly whenever he comes in to mail packages, accompanied by someone Oliver can only assume is her boyfriend, who glares at Oliver whenever their eyes meet and slides his arm around the girl’s waist.

When Mario arrives, he makes a grand entrance, raising his crutches triumphantly into the air and shouting, “Here’s Johnny!” with a wild grin, relishing the laughter and jeers of the crowd.

Oliver looks questioningly at Elio, who merely shrugs and says, “He loves horror movies.”

Elio drifts away, working his way around the cloud of people and their ebullient chatter, so Oliver pours himself a glass of Cabernet and finds a chair on the edge of the action, content to relax and observe. A small group has gathered around Elio and Mario on the other side of the yard, the latter gesticulating wildly as he talks, apparently spinning the tail of their day on the lake, something which will no doubt evolve into legend the more times Mario recounts it. Elio throws in comments and shakes his head as the others gasp, then squeezes his eyes shut and laughs as Mario throws back his arms and shimmies lower in his seat as if he’s sinking into the water.

Oliver wants to laugh, too. He knows that people deal with a crisis in retrospect by molding it into something they can handle, so joking about nearly dying makes perfect sense, but the specter of that event is not one he’ll fully defeat, not when it nearly took away the only thing of value in Oliver’s whole life. That is something he knows he will grapple with in quiet times and low points for many years to come. Oliver would never have labeled himself a lucky man in any sense of the word. Misfortune had become his constant companion, and when you feel like you’ve spent a lot of your life dodging bullets, the one that comes so close to piercing your heart will always leave a shadow to mark the spot.

The advancing darkness makes the lanterns glow brighter in the thickened air, and the buzz of conversation hushes and mellows with the wine, making the soft music more distinct in the pockets of sound that swell and breathe among the bodies. At some point, Samuel grabs Annella’s hand and spins her in a circle, her surprised laughter glittering, and once they start to dance, more of their guests join them. Even a blushing Mafalda allows herself to be drug away from the tables of food.
and into the yard by a stately older man in a cream-colored suit. Oliver can’t help but raise his glass to her amused scowl as they circle past.

Eventually, Elio winds his way over and stands before him, hands on his hips. He’s wearing Oliver’s light blue button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, and the fabric puffs wide as he clamps it to his body.

When Oliver notices the devilish look on his face, he holds up a hand. “Oh, no.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, Elio. You know I can’t dance.”

“I’m not asking you to!” He snatches Oliver’s hand and hauls him up from the chair. “I want you to dance with me.”

Oliver groans. Dancing is the stuff of nightmares to a person who towers over the others while possessing a limited sense of rhythm. He doesn’t expect that one like Elio could conceive of the horrors of it when Elio’s entire body seems made of rubber, able to flex and shimmy like the tones emanated from his very own tendons.

Elio leads him a few steps away and clamps his arms around Oliver’s waist as if he’s certain Oliver will bolt if given the chance. *He’s not far off,* Oliver grumbles silently. He rolls his eyes, standing stock-still as Elio begins to sway, refusing to even look down at his face because he knows he won’t be able to hold out if he sees—

He sucks in a breath when he feels a cool leg coil around his, frigid toes climbing up the back of his calf.

Oliver’s head drops. His pathetic veneer of irritation is no match for the crooked grin, the pink tongue swiping at the plush bottom lip, the intent dark eyes just waiting for his to sink into their trap. “You’re pure evil, you know that, don’t you?”

Elio doesn’t answer, merely loosens his grip, lets his arms slide up Oliver’s back, his hands clinging lightly to the shoulder blades before clutching a handful of Oliver’s green shirt and pressing his fist against Oliver’s spine once, twice, and letting it linger. A few minutes pass before Elio sighs against his chest.

“Is this all right, Oliver?”

Surrounded by Elio’s scent, the sound of his breath, the warm hands that caress and link together around the back of his neck, all he can do is huff a laugh and exhale Elio’s name, trace the strong cheekbone with his nose, kiss it where it meets his ear.

“Tell me what you’re thinking right now.” Elio’s voice is warm taffy.

“I’m happy, Elio. I’m just happy.”

Elio and Oliver dance. At some point, Elio’s bare feet inch their way on top of Oliver’s espadrilles so that he stands on Oliver’s feet, sharing the same space. They cling to one another and sway
slowly to the music, losing track of the activity around them. Time is irrelevant. Oliver feels like clay, molded to the cup of Elio’s hands around his neck and the clench of his toes around the bones of his ankles. And he thinks it will never stop, the way that his love for Elio shapes him, changes his dimensions to a configuration he never could have achieved alone. His whole world fits into the heavy orb of Elio’s pupils, which have pushed away the green to an outer rim beyond which is nothing, the Oort Cloud where the rest of humanity hides.

“Can I tell you something, Elio?”

“Yes, please.”

“The only thing I could have imagined less than losing you was finding you at all. That’s just not…that’s never been my luck.”

Elio’s head lowers, and his mouth compresses and cinches to the side—a move so familiar to Oliver now, it’s nearly a muscle memory that he can feel beneath the skin of his own face, and he dips his head to kiss the taut corner of Elio’s lips, the silken cheek pulled against the bone. Elio slips down into the grass as his hand disappears into his pocket.

His other grabs Oliver’s and flips it over, flattens out the palm with firm strokes of his thumb before placing something at its center. The penny.

Elio closes Oliver’s fingers over it, and Oliver clenches them tight, desperately reclaiming that warmth once again, the heat retained like another precious memory held in the bend of Elio’s hip. Both of Elio’s hands close around Oliver’s fist, and he inches back up onto Oliver’s feet to murmur in his ear, “How many times do I have to tell you, Oliver? Your luck is changing.”

_Jesus, I am so in love with him._ Oliver’s chest is so tight that his breath is reduced to a thin wheeze. He tips his head down to rest against Elio’s forehead, trapping the stray S of a curl between them.

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“Yeah?” He is so close that his lips move Elio’s slightly as he talks. “Why, Elio? Why me? Of all the people in the world, how could you possibly have chosen me?”

Elio licks his lips, slicking Oliver’s, too. “The fact that you could even ask that question is one reason.” He moves his hand around to push his fingertips into Oliver’s chest, punctuating his words with touch. “You’re good, Oliver. Every part of you. And you’re the only one who can’t see it.”

“Elio,” he breathes, “I love you…I love you so much…Elio, Elio, Elio…”

Oliver needs a translator, a way to interpret his new language to his old self, the one that relied on a vocabulary of hunger and dust. His eyes close, and his cheek rests against Elio’s temple, feels the throb of his heartbeat through the thin layer of skin, matches the sway of his hips to it, the gentle rhythm only they can hear. Out there, the music has changed, gone faster and slower, shriek to drone. Maybe it has stopped altogether. But they just sway, sharing space and breath and time, the only two who will be left when night becomes day and the world keeps to its motion like nothing has changed, like fantasy is different than destiny, when there never was a difference at all. They remain, swaying to a song only they can hear, there in the middle of the garden, just the crickets and the greenery of their heaven whispering around them in the gentle breeze of a sky filled with stars.

Chapter End Notes

“Here’s Johnny!” was uttered by Jack Nicholson in _The Shining_. Of course, it was
originally the oft-spoken phrase of Ed McMahon on *The Tonight Show* to introduce iconic host Johnny Carson. [Fun fact: did you know that Johnny Carson’s 1949 senior thesis for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was entitled “How to Write Comedy for Radio”? It was a scholarly examination of the techniques and devices that radio comedy writers used to construct the jokes and gags in comedy radio shows.]

The whole time I was writing the first scene with Elio describing his experience on the lake, I again had the dulcet tones of Mr. Chalamet in my head from *Playback* podcast interview that he did in October. The soft, rambling quality to his voice is quite unique.

For months I’ve had written the scene with Oliver and Elio dancing to their own music. The whole chapter began with the idea of them losing themselves that completely in one another. I’m excited about the relationship of Elio and Oliver leading to growth and happiness for both of them, which to my mind shows that they are meant to be and meant to last. If both gets what he needs and finds himself able to fulfill his dreams, there can be no better indication of true love!

There will be a short, loving final chapter following this. I hope that the journey has been an enjoyable one for you so far and that you’ll come back for the end! :)
**A New Day**

Chapter Summary

Elio and Oliver make the most of their last morning in Italy, and Oliver’s development comes full circle.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this chapter comes as close to skirting the Explicit rating as I’ve ever written!

Willowbrooke, there are no words for how much you’ve helped me; thank you for being patient and supportive, even when you probably (and rightly so) wanted to slap me. You’re a saint! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun is hesitant today, like it knows we’re leaving and the higher it rises, the faster it will push us toward the door. Elio is asleep, flat on his back, heavy in the crux of my arm, and my hand drifts over his naked chest, a light suggestion of caresses that barely connect with the swoop of his ribcage, the air clogging out of his nose a stuttered snore.

I blink into the golden air, my thoughts fattened and indistinct. This summer has been a lot, too much to go back through in detail, so I can only hover next to the knowledge that I’ve lived a lifetime in the weeks we’ve been here, climbed a mountain into the clouds, and when I look out around me, I can scarcely make out the shapes that haunt the foothills where I once was. The man I am now will have to venture on and leave that other world behind.

Elio stirs, flips his head one way, then the other, and he pushes himself up on his elbows to look out the window. I can’t stop my hand from drifting up his neck, carding through the soft hair at the base of his skull. He hasn’t said a word, hasn’t even turned to look at me, but he twists his neck like he’s shrugging off my hand.

It flops uselessly to the mattress.

I must have irritated him, awakened him before he was ready, which he hates, makes him grumpy and out of sorts. Perhaps I’ve clutched at him too much in the night, though I’ve been careful with his body, unwilling to push him too far or expect too much from him physically before he’s healed completely, and though he assures me that he has, I still resist.

As his head angles my way, I prepare a hesitant smile that’s both greeting and apology in one.

He sits up fully and throws off the blanket, kicks it to the bottom of the bed, and finally turns to look at me.

*Oh.*
His lips are puffy, his eyes dark and hooded. He rolls up onto his knees and climbs over my leg, and I automatically spread both of them wider to accommodate him. He smirks down at me, lets his unruly hair fall over his face, and casually reaches down and takes himself in hand, gives himself long, almost lazy strokes, down to the root and over the tip. His mouth falls open and he shuts his eyes, moans softly when he twitches his wrist.

My eyes are full of him, this marble statue of pure lust, and my body reacts as if it is me he is touching, me he feels harder under that skilled and patient hand. My breath quickens, and when I can’t take it anymore, I move a hand to copy his movements, but he grabs my wrist in a vice and just shakes his head.

I groan and shift my legs wider still, but I obey. I grab handfuls of the sheet out of desperation. I can’t stop my hips from rocking in time to his hand, like it is magnetized, and when I feel a hot drizzle of precum fall onto my abdomen, a broken gasp chokes me. Holy shit. He hasn’t even touched me, hasn’t said a single word, and I am already on the edge, hard and desperate and ready.

I watch in awe as his fingers circle around, gathering up more and coating themselves in that viscose nectar, and I lick my lips, desperate for a taste. He sees me, follows my tongue with his gaze just before he falls over me and chases it with his own, pushing deep into my mouth, owning it, bruising my lips, stealing my breath, and I dig my nails into the mattress to keep my arms from crushing him to me. I just loosen my jaw and pray for him to take everything I have.

I feel his finger circle my entrance, slick and smooth, around and around, as slowly as he’d moved before, and I am so ready I just whimper and push down at it, try to take it into me by force, but he pulls back and keeps circling gently, lets his face fall to my neck, laps at it, gnaws on the skin, breathes hot into my ear, “Fuck, you taste good.”

And then he’s gone, shifting down to bury his face in the hair of my groin, rooting in deep and groaning obscenely, and I hiss when his cheek brushes against the underside of my flushed, sensitive skin.

That’s when the finger disappears and his tongue takes its place, slurps at me hungrily, and when I cry out, it pushes inside, works me open until I’m sure I’m about to faint, my own tongue loosened and spilling nonsense out, slurred curses and mumbled versions of his name, my name, vague syllables with no meaning beyond sheer want.

Finally, he sits up, grabs at my hips to drag them closer, to prop me at exactly the right angle before he holds himself over me with strong arms and slides inside at the same slow pace he’s kept the whole time, letting me adjust to him, letting me be the first to roll my hips, to pull him in bit by bit, as far as he can go, allowing me a smile when I clench around him and win a strangled gasp in response. Because he knows me, knows my body and what it needs, knows how to thrust to make me see fireworks, knows how to kiss the corner of my mouth and pull my bottom lip between his until I’m delirious, knows when it’s time to touch me and when I’m so far gone he doesn’t even have to.

I close my eyes and listen to the stream of noises we make, my own breathless moans and his thick pants of air, and I realize that this is how Elio has always been. How he’s taking care of me right now is how he’s taken care of me from the start, given me everything while letting me learn how to accept it, so that every moment of our lives can be unforgettable.

I feel him shift, and I keen helplessly under his perfect friction. I know I’m close. So does he. His thrusts get deeper and harder, shooting electricity across every synapse, encouragements falling from his mouth to my ear, sinking down to my heart, pumping them through my entire body with every breath. And when I open my eyes and see him, flushed and sweaty and wonderful, that’s it. I spill
between us, and in seconds, I feel his inside me, a warm gush that fills me up and makes my mind bliss out entirely.

And when he collapses on top of me, smears kisses on my cheek, muttering, “Ohmygodohmygodohmygod…” And when I grab onto him, shove my palm against his ass and beg hoarsely, “Not yet, please… just…stay with me a little longer.” And when we can’t stop grinning, can’t stop touching each other, skimming fingertips over an eyebrow, a chin, trading kisses, unable to look away, I know what it is to be satisfied and loved and complete.

When the car’s loaded up (which basically consists of us throwing our backpacks into the trunk), Elio and I decide to take one last walk along the river since we’ll be folded into one tiny seat or another for the better part of the next twenty-four hours. We amble along the bank, occasionally bumping shoulders, soaking in the fragrance of the wildflowers stirred up in the gentle breeze, kicking off our shoes and sloshing into the shallows, and giggling like kids, flicking each other with wet toes.

We settle into silence, stopping to listen to the surge and swish of the quickened current where it shallows around a bend, rocks and sand built up to make the bed of the river nearly merge with its surface at the bank. Elio’s head settles onto my shoulder, and I slide my arm around him.

“This is my favorite part of the river,” he murmurs.

“Why is that?”

“I like how the water comes around the bend, how it’s really deep on one side and shallow on the other, but you’d never know there’s even a difference to look at its surface. It’s just…artful, I guess.” One of his curls flutters up to tickle my nose. “According to my dad, though, this whole basin used to flood all the time.”

I rub up and down Elio’s arm, look around at the willow tree overhanging the bank, the blanket of green behind us. “Really?”

He hums lightly. “Filled the whole valley, I think.”

It makes sense, really. Thoreau is the one who reminds us that it was not always dry land where we dwell. But it’s not the flood that’s life-giving; it’s how the retreat is accomplished, the balance that is achieved, else feast overwhelms famine to complete the destruction that it should have solved. Life finds a way, finds its footing, staking its claim at the exact moment that all hope seems washed away.

“It really is beautiful here, Elio.”

He sighs contentedly, leans into me. “Yeah.”

“I’m going to miss the quiet. It’s been a long time since I woke up to birdsong instead of car horns and sirens.”

Elio’s nose crinkles. “When I first moved to New York, I had to sleep next to a fan just for the white noise.”
“Can we come back?”

He rolls his eyes. “You have to be joking. My mother would murder me if I didn’t bring you back here. Every time she calls, she’s going to pressure us, so just be ready.”

I smile at that. “I wish I knew how to thank them properly.”

“For what?”

I curl toward him, suddenly abashed. Finally, I whisper, “For giving me a family.”

Elio looks up at me and blinks. He kisses my cheek and nods quickly, gives me a watery smile.

I tuck one of his curls behind his ear, let my eyes crawl across the soft constellations of freckles on his face, ones I could trace from memory even if I were not to see his face again for a thousand years.

*So this is it. This is what love really is.*

In a way, it feels like an inevitable conclusion, an answer so obvious that it couldn’t possibly warrant all of the mystery which humans have attached to it, the epics and sonnets and frightful tomes devoted to its discovery and its loss. Still, it has taken me more than two decades to believe it even exists and is not simply a trope, a gimmick to enslave a desperate public to the artist’s mind.

But Elio has always defied my understanding of what the world is supposed to be. He has been the exception to every rule I thought I had, and he has rewritten my perspective on what lies within the limitless scope of my heart. Because I know him, I know that love isn’t a destination or a prize; it cannot be taken by force, and regardless of the flair with which it is described, it cannot be condensed into the pages of a book. It is learning more about each other every day, seeing it all, the good parts and the terrible parts, the joy and the pain, and still being amazed, still losing your breath just from a touch and a quiet smile. It’s one of the paradoxes that drives us and outlives us, an unseen connective medium binding the universe together even as it expands, the “new knowledge that is centuries old,” as the professor had once said. Just like starlight, which fills the night sky for millions of years after its source is long dead.

But Elio has already given me the stars, all of their heat, all of their light. And when I look down into his face, into the pyroclastic eyes, the gentle bend of lips anchored by a single white arrow of a tooth, it finally becomes clear to me.

*We are* the stars.

Because that’s what love really is.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it has taken me nearly a year to bring to you what amounts to nearly a year in Oliver’s life. I can’t believe this story has come to an end, and the very thought makes me want to cry!

When I started this story, it was going to be eight chapters of light-hearted fun. That grew to eleven chapters, and that became twenty-one, and *that* evolved into THIS! This could never have happened without the generous love and support of all of you, the readers who have been kind enough to keep reading and wanting more.
I don’t even know how to express my gratitude to all of you who have come along for Oliver’s journey from a man who never used the word “love” in any context to a man with a bone-deep knowledge of what it means on every level. I am honored to have been able to tell his tale.

If you have enjoyed this, I would love for you to check out some of my other works and let me know what you think. Your thoughts will always awe and inspire me!

End Notes

You, blessed readers, are my only sustenance, and I feed entirely on your comments. If you don't talk to me, no one will! Let me know what you think, and I am forever in your debt.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!