

Chapter 11

We stumble into the maze of Trastevere and are lost. Not knowing where we are or where we're going, we run: skim across piazze, squeeze down alleys, wind through labyrinths of narrow lanes where sidewalk diners, skeins of pasta dangling from their forks, stare in disapproval at this unseemly speed on a fine Roman night. At last we find ourselves on a deserted street of sparse light and shut-up shops. We stop, panting and sweating, look at each other and laugh.

But conscience will have its say. "Will they be all right?" I ask.

He shrugs. "What can we do?"

"I guess you're right." I'm giving in too easily, of course. But I don't want to go back there, even if we could find the way. I'd as soon scale the walls of a prison to get back inside. For the first time in days, I feel free. I've shaken them all off: Ricka, Philip, even Lint. They can fight it out for themselves now.

We look at each other. Antonio's face softens into a question, a quizzical half-smile. I reach over and flick the hair out his eyes, my hand briefly brushing his cheek before dropping again to my side.

"Your face is cut," he says.

I reach up to the tender spot, but he takes my hand. "Don't touch it."

He holds my hand a moment longer but drops it at the sound of voices.

Two women, perhaps mother and daughter, appear at the end of the street, having what may be an argument or may be only the querulous back-and-forth of people who spend too much time together. They look at us dourly as they pass.

"Buona sera."

"Buona sera," we mutter in reply.

We start to move. There's no way to retrace our steps so we just walk. By unspoken agreement we don't ask directions; we don't even say much to each other. Now and then a church, a restaurant, or a fountain will look familiar, and then will look doubly familiar the second or third time we pass it in our circular wanderings. But at last we find the river and, a little upstream, a bridge. Halfway across, we stop and look down at the island dividing the Tiber's current. I ask Antonio if it has a name and what the buildings are, but he doesn't know.

We seem to be stuck there, halfway across the bridge, looking at the island not at each other. People stroll behind us, stop, point out the sights, laugh and move on. Finally I say, and it rings a little loudly in my ears, "What now?"

"Home," he says.

"To the hotel?"

"Yes." And then as if to break a pause a little too pregnant, he adds, "We can wait for the others there."

He takes my arm and leads me off the bridge. Now that the plan is set, he seems determined, and the first person he sees he stops to ask directions. We find a bus, take seats in the empty rear. And suddenly the silence feels unbearable. Antonio doesn't seem to mind. He looks out the window as if measuring our progress along the via Nazionale, jealous of every block that remains between us and the hotel. But for me the bus is moving too fast. Something hasn't been explained. Something needs to be clarified. What if I've got it all wrong? I struggle for some way to ask all my questions, then awkwardly blurt out, "I'm sorry about Ricka this morning."

He glances at me. "Hm?"

"Ricka. At the café. I mean, she's pretty tactless."

"It doesn't matter." And he turns away.

“If it’s any consolation, I already knew.”

“Yes,” he says. “Your friends told you.”

And he’s silent again, looking out the window of the bus. I’m afraid I’ve offended him, and then annoyed at his unwillingness, even now, to bare just one or two little secrets.

“Why don’t you like them?” I persist.

“Who?”

“Adam and Francesco.”

“I don’t like them?” he asks.

“You don’t seem to.”

“They remind me—of my bad summer.” I think he’s going to make me ask, but in a moment he goes on. “I met this man, their friend, Thomas, on the Lido. He’s very nice. I’m very lonely. I think maybe I’m in love. I think maybe he’s in love. But it’s only he likes nice things. I was a nice thing. *Una bella cosa, io.*”

This elliptical account seems to be all I’m going to get until he adds, “I didn’t understand. It was a game. Your friends, they understand it’s a game. Thomas understands. Me, I don’t.”

“I think it’s always a bit of a game, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

And his dark eyes look directly into mine with such seriousness, with such almost comic portent, that I feel once again as if he’s demanding from me declarations and commitments. But in one of his unexpected changes of mood he smiles and, with a quick glance around the bus, he sneaks his hand over mine. For several stops we ride like that, hands secretly clasped between the seats, until a boisterous group of locals gets on and makes its way to the rear, and Antonio releases his grip.

Once we hit the pavement, he's all business. He strides swiftly down the via Principe Amadeo, hardly noticing if I'm keeping up, jogs across the courtyard, and punches the elevator button several times. Upstairs, he snatches the key from the padrona, fumbles with the lock, and we tumble into the room barely getting the door closed before he's attacked me, clumsily, furiously, his lips bruising mine, his hands tugging at my head, my back, my waist, as if he's trying to pull me inside him. We fall onto the bed, roll over several times. It's impossible to keep up with him without meeting ferocity with ferocity. And so I seize his head, push my tongue into his mouth, pin him down, am flipped and pinned in my turn. Suddenly he stops, looks at me and laughs.

"Aspetta." He gets up from the bed and leaves the room. In a moment, he's back with a damp facecloth. He sits next to me on the bed and lays his hand against my cheek as with the other he dabs at the cut where Ricka hit me. A little blood appears on the white cloth. He lays it aside.

He's very gentle now. He presses his lips softly against mine, then stops to gaze into my eyes. He runs his lips along my cheek, kisses my neck, takes my hand and kisses the palm. I turn his head towards me again, lift his hair away from his face, kiss him. He starts to unbutton my shirt, pushes it off me, slides out of his own. We take off our shoes and socks, stand. He pulls me to him again, this time gently. We kiss, run our hands over each other, feel our chests, our stomachs, warm and damp in the heat of the room, press against each other. Even now, though, I'm afraid to take the last step, the presumption of stripping private prickly Antonio bare. He doesn't wait for me. He undoes his belt and steps delicately out of his pants, and he's standing there naked, expectant; and I, ashamed not to meet his courage with my own, strip naked, too, and we stand there just a moment looking at each other. Then

he takes my hand and pulls me towards him.

And the bottom falls out. I feel myself falling and, as I fall, wondering if I've ever felt like this before and kind of thinking maybe I haven't and wondering what it is about this situation that's different and, even as I do, realizing that each of these thoughts is like a hand scrabbling at air to break my fall, but there's no breaking the fall and I keep falling.

We're on the bed and all the wildness, the urgency, the ferocity has returned. I want to get him back for making me feel so stripped and vulnerable so I drag my mouth down his chest and stomach, and jab my tongue at the tender place just inside his hip. I'm rewarded by a sharp, almost frightened gasp. I rub my cheek up and down against his dick and, where my hands are clutching his waist, I feel a tremor run through him. I take it in my mouth and the tremor increases and his breath comes in quick, childlike cries until, unable to bear it, he yanks me up to meet his mouth, kisses me furiously, shoves me over on my back, runs his hands along my body as if frantically searching for something lost.

I'll stop here. I could detail the whole thing as an historian might reconstruct the advances and retreats, the relative positions of the Belgian, French, and English armies at Waterloo. I could lay out move and countermove with such insights into tactics and strategies as a careful sifting of contemporary accounts can provide. Instead I'll skip to the moment after when, despite the heat of the room and the sweat soaking our bodies and the wet stickiness where our bellies meet, we cling to each other as if there *has* been a battle and we are the survivors. Our breathing slows, my hand is playing in Antonio's hair, the other twines around his fingers. For a long time we lie like that, quietly, contentedly.

Then Antonio raises himself up a little, puts his hand on my chest, and looks

into my eyes. "I love you," he says.

Which brings me up short. I think first of my knapsack, propped in the corner and heading for Greece; then guiltily I wonder if, before any of this started, I should have told him I was going away, and how will I tell him now? He's looking down at me, and with every second that passes his words linger more heavily on the air. I have to do something. So I gaze into his eyes, kiss him very tenderly, and hope he won't notice that this isn't an answer. He does, of course, gazes back at me, makes note of it, seems to accept it, and lays his head on my chest.

We fall asleep like that, but at some point we must have changed position because, when the pounding on the door starts, I've got my arms wrapped around him from behind and he is holding my hand against his chest.

We both jerk awake and scurry for cover, then realize he can't get in. We've got the key.

"Mark! Antonio!" Philip rattles the handle and pounds the door. A sharp Italian voice shouts something down the hall. Philip pays it no heed, keeps pounding and yelling. "Mark! Antoniooooo!"

"Just a second!" I call. "Hang on, Philip!"

Antonio and I trip over each other trying to find our clothes, fumble into our pants and throw on our shirts. I open the door.

Philip falls into the room, still a little drunk. His gaze takes in Antonio and me, sweeps the rumpled bed and unused cot.

"Having a nap?" he says.

"Where are Lint and Ricka?"

"At a police station. Just after you two left, the police arrived."

“We saw the police. That’s why we left.”

“How noble. In any case, the police have Ricka and seem disinclined to let her go.”

“Because she took the fruitbasket?”

“Oh, that was nothing,” says Philip, warming to his story. “When we got to the police station Ricka lost what at that point remained of her mind. She started screaming and hitting people, biting, scratching, what will you...”

“By ‘people’, do you mean the police?”

“In general. Though there was a matron of some kind who stood in for a fair share of it.”

“Oh God.”

“In times of trial the apostate calls on his Creator,” he notes. “So while you and Antonio have been otherwise engaged, we’ve been fending off the forces of the Italian police state.”

“They let you go.”

“They would have let us all go if it weren’t for Ricka. Lint’s there keeping an eye on things.”

“Can’t we call the embassy?”

“At two in the morning?”

I sigh. “I suppose we should go down there then.”

“Only if you’ve nothing better to do.”

“I’ll go, too,” says Antonio. “You will need someone who speaks Italian.”

“I speak Italian,” says Philip in an offended tone.

Antonio smiles. “But you are *not* Italian.”

He sits on the bed and puts on his socks and shoes.

Philip murmurs blandly, "Perhaps you should button your shirt before we go, Mark."

I follow his gaze and quickly pull my shirt closed. There's a trail of powdery white stains on my stomach. Antonio stands up. "*Andiamo?*" he says.

The police station could be worse. By the time our taxi stops in front of it, it has become in my imagination a fascist horror from some half-remembered World War II movie. But it is only dingy and depressing and choked with smoke from the cigarettes of the two or three officers still on duty at this unholy hour.

Lint is in the waiting room, head drooping, dark circles under his reddened eyes. "Is this absolute bullshit?" he says when he sees me.

"Where's Ricka?"

"They've got her in a cell."

"Can we see her?"

"You'll have to ask Signor Policeman over there. He's been a little touchy about the whole thing."

I go up to the desk. "*Per favore,*" I begin hesitantly, "*posso vedere la ragazza americana chi—*"

Here Antonio takes over. A long conversation ensues, none of which I can follow. The officer goes into long explanations; Antonio offers complicated counterarguments. I'm beginning to think that they've fallen into the Italian habit of discussing something for the sake of discussing it and that we'll have to listen to a lot more of this before they both shrug and turn away concluding, in the Italian fashion, that there's nothing to be done, when the officer stands up and summons a colleague. The new man leads us back to the cells. Antonio murmurs to me, "They don't want to

let her go. They think she's crazy. They want someone to be responsible."

"Can't we be responsible for her?"

"They don't trust us. Naturally."

Abruptly we're standing in front of Ricka's cell, and there she is, sitting on the edge of a low bunk and looking, in the harsh fluorescent light, as pale and drawn as a saint in a quattrocento fresco. She doesn't look up.

"Ricka," I say. "Hey, Ricka."

Very slowly she turns her head. Her eyes are blank, and I wonder if she even recognizes me. She looks as if she's suddenly thought of the saddest thing possible, and it's left her incapable of thinking anything further.

"Ricka, are you all right?"

For a long time she only stares back at me. Then, "I'm OK," she says.

"We're trying to get you out. We're talking to the man. We're seeing what we can do." I find myself speaking in the loud bright tones with which one addresses a special education class.

Another pause and, "OK," Ricka says.

The man leads us back to the front desk, and Antonio resumes his argument with the desk officer. Meanwhile, I explain the situation to Philip and Lint.

"So there's nothing we can do," says Philip, "until the embassy opens."

"There must be *something* we can do. They can't be that eager to keep an American girl locked up here all night."

"Getting some of their own back if they ask me. They way some of these American tourists behave *should* be illegal. When I was last in Rome, I—" He seems ready to pile on with the anecdotal evidence, but I interrupt him with a sudden thought.

“What about her mother?”

“Her mother?”

“Isn’t her mother in Florence? Isn’t she studying art there or something?”

“If you say so.”

“I mean, can’t we call her then?”

“I leave it in your hands,” Philip says irritatingly.

I go back to the desk. “I just thought of something. Ricka’s mother is in Florence. Ask him if we can call Ricka’s mother.”

Antonio asks. “He says you can’t call Florence from this phone.”

“If we reverse the charges.”

This three-way conversation goes on a bit longer, but finally we’re led back again to Ricka’s cell.

“Ricka, we’re going to call your mother.”

“My mother?”

“Isn’t your mother in Florence?”

She hesitates, as if trying to remember, then says, “Yes.”

“Do you have her number?”

Her brow wrinkles very slightly in concentration. “It’s in my purse,” she finally says.

“Where’s your purse?”

This, too, makes her think. “They have it.”

Back to the desk. Another negotiation over whether we can have the purse, but they finally produce it, a monstrous bag of purple leather. I scabble through the Tampax and the lipsticks, the nail files and matchbooks, the loose coins, Kleenex, postcards, scissors, wallet, and used rolls of film until I find, buried as if on purpose

at the very bottom, a little address book, tattered, its leaves falling out, pages scribbled over in Ricka's sprawling hand.

"Stein, I suppose," I say to no one in particular, but it is under M for Mom that, after much searching, I find the number and give it to Antonio. "Call the operator and see if you can reverse the charges. Tell her it's an emergency. Tell her it's about Ricka."

He dials the operator, makes his explanation, gives the number, hands the phone to me. The phone rings once, twice, six times before it's answered. "*Pronto*," a sleepy Italian voice, a woman's, answers. The operator says something in rapid Italian of which I catch only "Signora Stein" and "Ricka," sounding exotic with its trilled "R" and European "i."

"*Uno momento*," says the voice. Another minute goes by, then an American voice sounds on the line. The operator repeats her request, and the voice answers, a little irritably, "Si, si."

"Mrs. Stein?"

"Yes," says the voice, crisp even in its sleepiness. "Who is this?"

"This is Mark Dearborn. I'm a friend of Ricka's. We're in Rome and, um, Ricka's in jail."

This narrative leap earns a moment's silence at the other end. "Shit," Ricka's mother says at last. "What happened?"

As briefly as possible I tell the story. Now her questions come briskly.

"How does she seem?"

"She seems pretty down. Apathetic."

"But how has she been?"

"She was in pretty high spirits before all this happened. Really high spirits."

“Shit,” says Mrs. Stein again. “Can I talk to her?”

“Well, they’ve got her locked up. You’d have to ask the man here.”

“Will you put him on?”

I put my hand on the receiver. “She wants to talk to the man in charge,” I tell Antonio.

He conveys this to the officer and hands him the phone. Further torrents of Italian ripple forth for Ricka’s sake. Then the officer hands me the phone.

“Mark? It *is* Mark?”

“Yes.”

“Are you good friends with Ricka?”

“Pretty good. We’ve been traveling together for a month or so.”

“Good. I’ve told the man to send Ricka with you, and you’ll bring her up to Florence on the train tomorrow. Don’t argue because it took all sorts of name-dropping and vague threats to get us that far. If it’s not convenient, just stick her on the train and I’ll come get her. I realize I can’t ask you to interrupt your travel plans to take care of my daughter.”

“Um, no,” I say, “that’s OK. I can do that—take her up to Florence.”

“You’re a prince.”

“Do you want to talk to Ricka?”

“No, it’s all taken care of. Tell the man to give her to you and he will. I’ll see you some time tomorrow. Take a taxi when you get to the station, and I’ll reimburse you. Here’s the address.”

“What?” says Antonio. I realize that, after hanging up with Mrs. Stein, I’ve stared for a full minute at the address I’ve scribbled down as if I’m trying to work out how to get there.

I explain. "Could you tell the man to bring Ricka out?"

As he does, I return to Lint and Philip.

"I got her out."

"Well, aren't you clever," says Lint.

"Yes. There's a catch, though. We have to take her up to Florence tomorrow."

"We?" says Lint.

"You promised this?" says Philip. "Without consulting us?"

"Actually I only promised that *I'd* take her. If it's not convenient for you guys..."

I'm trying not to sound pissy.

"As it happens," says Philip, "I was hoping to meet with one of my professors tomorrow. I go back to school very soon, and it would be a great help to me."

"Then you don't have to go. It doesn't need four of us." I look at Lint, but his look tells me only that we'll talk later.

I feel a hand on my arm. "Here is Ricka," says Antonio.

We all turn to look at her. She looks back at us with the fearful uncertainty of a child in a roomful of grownups.

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"OK."

"I called your mother. We're going to take you up to Florence tomorrow."

"OK."

Her purse is still on the officer's desk, and I fetch it for her. She accepts it wordlessly.

"Do we need to do anything else?" I ask Antonio.

"No."

This seems odd after all the fuss they've made, but I don't question it. "I called

a taxi,” says Antonio, and we step outside to wait for it. Nobody says anything the whole way back to the pensione. Ricka stares out the window holding an unlit cigarette, as if the act of lighting it would tap a source of will that’s now depleted.

Back at the pensione we get her to bed, fussing over her like the parents of an ailing child. But the Ricka who would preen and purr under such attention has gone missing, and she accepts our ministrations with bone-deep apathy.

We shut out the light and, unsure what to do, gather in the other room. I pull the train schedule out of my knapsack. The trains to Florence are reasonably frequent, and I’m trying to decide which one makes the most sense when I notice Lint looking at me. He jerks his head towards the door; I follow him out.

“Let’s talk,” he says.

We sit in the stairwell. I’m still clutching the train schedule, and perhaps to forestall what’s coming I say, “There’s a train at 9:35. It gets into Florence at—”

“I’m not going.”

“No?”

“No. And you shouldn’t either. This is bullshit. She can’t expect everyone to clean up after her every time she messes her pants.”

“Lint...”

“I’m not going.”

“Then don’t.” Silence. Lint avoids my gaze, lights a cigarette. “Where will you go?” I ask.

“To Greece. Like we planned. I can take a train to Brindisi tomorrow, and then the boat to Greece. In two days I’ll be in Athens. Are you coming with me?”

I shake my head.

“Mark, you can’t solve everyone else’s problems. You can’t be responsible for

her like that.”

“What am I supposed to do? Put her on a train by herself? The way she’s been acting?”

“It wouldn’t kill her. It would probably be good for her. She’d have to fend for herself. She wouldn’t have people rushing to kiss and make it better every time she cuts her finger.”

“I think she’s done more than cut her finger. I think she’s flipped out.”

“I’ll say.”

“So we just leave her? Bye? It’s been real? Catch you when you’re feeling better?”

“Don’t get mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you.” But I am, of course. He’s the one who got us into this, I perhaps unfairly think. He’s the one who befriended Ricka, insisted on going to Venice with her and Philip. And because of him, I’m stuck shuttling his friend up to Florence. He liked Ricka well enough when they were making silly jokes about boys, but now that she’s in trouble it’s a different story.

But hard on this thought comes another. Lint is scared. He doesn’t like what’s happened to Ricka and he wants nothing to do with it. He wants to get as far away from it as possible. The flip side of Lint’s brave embrace of life is an impatience for, a resentment of all the ways in which life can fall apart, decay, turn on you. There will come a time, in a few years, when Lint will be forced to stand his ground in the face of greater horrors, and he will stand it beautifully. But now he is only young and afraid and resentful, and his recoil from the spectacle of Ricka’s collapse is all the more powerful for being entirely instinctive.

“I’ll wait for you here,” he says as if offering a concession. “You’re not going to

stay there, are you?"

"I thought I might stay the night. Just to see Florence. I might as well."

"So I'll wait here. When you get back, we'll go to Greece."

I hesitate.

"What?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to figure something out. Things got kind of complicated last night. With, um, Antonio."

His eyebrows lift and he takes a long drag on his cigarette before drawling, "Oh, really?"

"Yes, so I don't know what I'm doing."

He considers this. "There are Greek boys, too, you know."

"I know. Listen, I'll call you tomorrow night. From Florence. I'll let you know what I'm doing. If worse comes to worse, we'll meet up in Athens or somewhere."

"All right," he says, standing up. "But don't miss Greece chasing after a little Italian tail."

When I get back to the room, Antonio is sitting on the edge of the bed. He shrugs, smiles, casts a glance over his shoulder. Philip, in what feels like a grand self-abnegating gesture, has taken the cot. Apparently asleep, he lies on his side, pajama-clad back turned to the room. So I set my travel alarm for eight, get out of my clothes and, sliding into bed, wrap my arms around Antonio.

"Will you return to Venice?"

I've been expecting the question, of course, but I still don't have an answer, so I'm glad it's Philip asking. We've all walked to the station together. Getting Ricka up and ready for a 9:30 train proved impossible, so we aimed instead for 10:30 and that

got by us, too. The 12 o'clock required a supplement, and so we are now waiting for the one o'clock train which gets us into Florence a little before four. Antonio will come with us as far as Florence and then change trains for Venice.

"I don't know," I tell Philip. "Lint's going to Greece."

"I know." Part of the morning's arrangements included giving up the larger room at the pensione which meant that Lint and Philip would be sharing a room and a bed for the night, a circumstance I'm still having trouble picturing.

"Well, so, yeah," I say lamely, even evasively, "I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"Whatever," he says. "*Mi casa...* I'll stay a day or two longer in Rome. You can mail the key to me if you don't decide to return."

With this he gives me a benedictory kiss on each cheek. A strange person, Philip. Two days ago he warned me off Antonio in tones of Biblical portent; now that it's happened, he seems to be almost papally blessing it, as if it's what he'd intended all along. It gives me the uneasy feeling that I'll have failed another test with Philip if I don't follow Antonio back to Venice, if I don't sanctify the dalliances of the flesh with holy union.

Lint is hugging Ricka good-bye. She's clinging to him very hard, the most emotion she's shown since the police station, if it could even be called emotion instead of some animal need for comfort, protection, safety. Her hands dig into his back, and he stands it as long as he can, then extricates himself.

"Take care of yourself, babe," he says.

I shoulder my knapsack. Lint hugs me. "Call me," he says.

The moment seems terribly sad. The little group I'd chafed against for so long is breaking up, and now I want to hold onto it just a few minutes longer. But the

train's about to leave; Antonio and I help Ricka on board. We find seats and look out the window to see Lint and Philip still waiting on the platform. They wave at us and walk away.

Ricka was no trouble at all on the train. Indeed she barely moved. She sat with her head back against the seat, her eyes sunken as with an ancient and unassuageable sorrow. No attempt to engage her in conversation produced more than one syllable replies.

I had one moment's anxiety about an hour outside of Rome. She stood up, and I asked a little too quickly, "Where are you going?"

"Bathroom."

She was gone a long time, and I finally went to check on her. I knocked on the door.

"Ricka? Are you OK?"

No answer. I tried the door. It was unlocked. Ricka was standing there, leaning against the wall, smoking, like a mannequin someone had propped there as a joke and as little likely to move. I took her hand and led her back to her seat as if she were an elderly dotty parent who had wandered off.

Antonio and I made small talk. Ricka gave us a pretext for avoiding talk about the night before and avoiding especially the question of what happens next. Our silence on this point became stranger and heavier as the train moved closer and closer to Florence and the moment when we'd go our separate ways. It took a certain amount of ingenuity on either side to skirt the obvious question of where I would go after Florence, but he never asked and I didn't offer.

Meanwhile, my mind was going furiously in circles. Now and then I'd catch

Antonio's eye in a certain way and he'd smile and my heart would leap. He'd seem more beautiful and mysterious than ever, and I was sure that I was going to follow him to Venice and stay there for the rest of my life. Then I'd think of Lint waiting for me in Rome and the ferry churning from Brindisi to Patras and the new country and the new adventure opening up before us. I'd think of the time ticking away on my Eurail pass and all the places I hadn't seen. I'd think even of the nude beach on Mykonos and it seemed all at once the most alluring place in the world. I'd think of all that had happened in the past few weeks and want, like Lint, to get as far away from it as possible. And I'd look again at Antonio and wonder if he even wanted me to come, and if he did, why wasn't he asking? Maybe he was regretting his hasty words last night and hoping that when we said good-bye in Florence he'd be well rid of me. And even if he did want me to come, what did he want from me? He'd said, "I love you." What was I getting myself into?

Antonio had about half an hour between trains so he helped Ricka and me out of the station and offered to get us a cab.

We stood a moment uncertainly in front of the station. I looked at Antonio, and he looked at me, and I realized that even now he wasn't going to ask, and at first I was annoyed since he was putting it all on me, and then I realized with one of those insights that come to us from time to time in the murk of human intercourse that he was waiting for me. He'd made his declaration the night before. Now it was up to me. And with a surge of cowardice, it occurred to me that if he wasn't going to ask, I could get away without answering. And I wondered if it was another kind of cowardice that made me say, as if it was what I'd intended all along, "I'll come up to Venice tomorrow."

He nodded and, reaching into his pocket, handed me a slip of paper. On it, in

precise, even fussy handwriting, he'd written his name and number. And the sight of this paper, prepared in advance to be offered if and only if asked for, with his name appended as if to distinguish it from all the other boys' phone numbers I'd collected over the week, was so unbearably touching, seemed so weighted with uncertainty and hope and trepidation, that I could hardly meet his eyes. When I did, I wanted to kiss him, but it was 1985 and we were in Italy, and the only thing that distinguished our farewell hug from any two friends saying good-bye at a train station was the way his lips brushed against my ear as he pulled away.

"Call me," he said.

The taxi bumps and squeezes and feints its way out of the narrow streets of the center, somehow managing not to knock over any tourists or to be rammed in turn by the Vespas that buzz and dart around us. We rise up into the hills and stop in front of a little stucco villa on a winding street. The driver helps us with our bags. I spoke a little Italian to him at the outset, and ever since he's kept up a jolly stream of conversation, pointing out sights and asking questions, seeming not to notice or care that I understand hardly a word of it. Now he rattles off something that seems like wishes for a pleasant stay, takes his money and departs.

The door is opened by a short woman with a wiry dark ponytail. She smiles broadly at us. Not Mrs. Stein, I decide, and indeed when she speaks it is with a thick Italian accent.

"Ricka? Mark? Come in, *prego!* Come in. Molly is no here. She return," she says tapping her watch and holding up five fingers and a thumb. "Six. Six. She return."

"Molly?" I think, then realize that this is Mrs. Stein's improbable first name.

An American voice calls from somewhere in the house. "Is that Ricka?"

"And her fren' Mark," the woman calls back. She smiles at us and leads us into the house. A tall gangly man with grey hair fringing a bare scalp comes out to greet us. He puts his hand out. "Ben Feldman," he says to me. "And this is my wife Malina. Molly's not here right now, but she said to make you at home. Hey, Ricka," he says, turning his attention to her. "How's it going? Bet you don't remember me."

Ricka silently shakes her head.

"We met when you were just so high. But I've known your mother a long time. Since she was plain old Molly Ryan."

This seems to make no impression on Ricka and she only stares back at him.

"Ricka is tire," says Malina. "She need rest."

"I'm afraid none of us got much sleep last night," I tell them.

Malina takes Ricka's hand, nodding and smiling at her, as you would with a very young child. "You wanna sleep, Ricka?" Ricka nods, and Malina gently leads her away. I follow with her backpack.

We step into a messy little room. Overflowing ashtrays and books and clothes and typed manuscript pages are strewn randomly about.

"This your mamma room," says Malina. "You sleep here." She pulls at the covers and takes a few books off the bed and starts to help Ricka undress. I put the knapsack down and leave the room.

"I'm afraid it's the sofa for you, young man," says Ben when he sees me. "We're fresh out of beds."

"Oh, you don't need to put me up," I say. "I can stay at the hostel."

"The hostel? You won't find a bed at the hostel this time of year. Not at the hostel." He frowns and shakes his head as if we're having an academic argument and

I've urged an untenable point. "You're much better off here."

And since I don't really want to go searching for the hostel this late in the day, I thank him and consent.

"Would you like a beer?" he says.

"Actually I was thinking I might try to see a little of the city."

"Well, it's all shutting up now, of course. You can't go *into* anything. You could walk *around*," he allows dubiously.

"That's all I want to do. Can I walk from here?"

"Hmm. It's a longish walk, but if you go out the door and turn left..." He then floods me with directions and bus numbers and suggestions for sights to see along the way so that it's several minutes before I'm able to interrupt him and ask to use the bathroom. With my face washed, I'm feeling a little better, and Ben leads me to the door with a further shower of instructions, the last of which, shouted at me as I head away from the house, is, "Dinner at eight, young man!"

I end up walking the whole way, trying to keep the Duomo in sight, getting tangled up and turned around, but eventually finding my way to the center. And as I walk I try to make sense of the last few days, but there's no making sense of it. Now that he's gone, I miss Antonio. I want to talk to him. I want to tell him all the things I didn't tell him on our three hour train ride. I want to hold him. I feel the ache of empty arms, and this makes me uneasy because the last time I remember feeling this was when Lint stopped sneaking into my bed after we shut out the lights in our dorm room.

I cross the Ponte Vecchio and somewhere near the Pitti Palace I find an outdoor café and order a beer, open my journal and try to write. But the words won't come. There's too much to tell and the thought of trying to get it all down defeats me. So I

sit and drink my beer and watch the sun get lower and the Duomo burn in its slanting rays. Then, realizing it's getting late, I make my way back to the center, find one of the buses Ben mentioned, and arrive back at the house with twenty minutes to spare before dinner.

"We thought we'd lost you," Ben says jovially at the door. "We were just about to open your knapsack and divide the spoils. The ladies are in the kitchen."

And I can hear coming from the kitchen the dry definite voice I'd last heard over the phone at the Trastevere police station. In another moment, she's in view, sticking out her hand to me. "Mark. Molly Stein. I must thank you for a safe delivery."

Automatically I look for Ricka in her mother's face. It's there in the green eyes and the fine bone structure; and there's something, too, in her air of carrying her daily drama around with her, like a suitcase full of props. But otherwise Mrs. Stein is red-haired, freckled, and dry. Her arms and legs, sticking out of her gingham summer frock, are thin and sinewy, and she has the kind of complexion that comes from too much sun and too much smoking. Her gaze is intelligent, investigative, and unsettling, as if she's pulling you apart and categorizing you with every word you say.

"I suppose you need a drink," she says, tipping some red wine into a glass before I can answer. She holds it out to me. "You *do* drink, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you," I say and take it from her, aware as I take my first sip that those blunt green eyes are still trained on me.

Malina rescues me. "How you like Florence?" she says.

"It's beautiful," I reply, conventionally.

"Spectacular!" Mrs. Stein amends. "You should stay here several days. I'm sure the sofa's free as long as you need it."

“I’d love to, but I can’t. I have to go up to Venice tomorrow. To see a friend. I was going to see what I can tomorrow and take an afternoon train.”

She stares at me. “That’s insane. You can’t see Florence in a single morning.”

“Well, maybe I’ll come back,” I say weakly.

“Malina!” says Mrs. Stein. “Young Mark is giving your city just one morning of his young life.”

Malina, who seems to understand English better than she speaks it, cries, “Oh no! You stay. Stay here, Mark. You are welcome. There is much to see in Florence.”

“Ricka’s still asleep,” Mrs. Stein says, changing the subject. “Best thing for her right now. Lots of sleep. We’ll eat without her. You probably want to wash up.”

I do, of course, and when I return, a table is set in the dining room with candles and wine and a little feast of chicken and pasta and sautéed spinach.

Conversation around the table is chaotic, leaping from subject to subject and lapsing into Italian whenever Malina needs a point clarified or doesn’t know the English for what she wants to say. Ben and Mrs. Stein hold irreconcilable estimations of a certain Bronzino in the Uffizi, and these need to be hashed out at length. I am quizzed extensively about my travels, and Ben manages to convince me that I spent a month in Venice without seeing anything of any importance whatsoever. At some point, I say something in Italian to Malina and she cries triumphantly, “*Ah, parliamo Italiano!*” and refuses to speak English to me for the rest of the meal. She seems a different woman in Italian, warm and funny and teasing and infinitely patient with my bad Italian. She listens with unforced sympathy to all my tales, and I find myself telling her more than I probably should. When I explain about having to go up to Venice to see Antonio, she says, “Yes, he is your special friend,” and I wonder if this is as euphemistic in Italian as it is in English.

Eventually we're interrupted by a plaintive cry from Mrs. Stein's bedroom.

"Mom! Momma!"

"That's the child," says Mrs. Stein, and gets up and goes into the bedroom.

The rest of us look at each other awkwardly, brought back suddenly to the crisis at hand. "*Povera,*" Malina murmurs.

In another moment, Mrs. Stein reappears, slops some food onto a plate, and takes it into the bedroom. And that's the last we see of her for a while.

After dinner I offer to help Malina with the dishes, but she has an Italian woman's horror of men doing housework so she allows me only to stand in the kitchen and talk to her as I sip my wine. My eyelids are drooping, though, and finally, putting her hand on my cheek, she cries, "*Sei stanco, Marco! Alla cama!*" and shoos me into the living room.

Ben is there watching TV, but he gets up to give me my privacy only asking, as he goes, if I'd like a ride to the center tomorrow.

"That would be great," I tell him. "I thought I'd leave my stuff at the station and wander around."

"Sound scheme," he says, and goes.

Malina comes in with an armful of bedclothes and is starting to make up the sofa when I remember that I have to call Lint. I ask Malina if it's OK to call Rome, and she interrupts my apologies and explanations with a "*Si! Si! Certo!*" and leads me to the phone.

Neither Lint nor Philip is at the pensione. I wonder if they've gone out somewhere together or if, more likely, Lint has ditched Philip for the night and is off having his own adventures. And now I'm faced with the problem of leaving a message for Lint. The padrona's English isn't good, and Lint won't understand much Italian. I

think I manage to leave an English message that says, “Going to Venice. Call me at Philip’s,” but I can’t be sure.

Back in the living room, the sofa is made up and Malina has discreetly disappeared. I go into the bathroom, brush my teeth, change into t-shirt and gym shorts.

When I’ve settled in bed with a book, I hear the door of Mrs. Stein’s room open, and she appears in the living room, a bottle of scotch in one hand and a smoking cigarette in the other.

“Drink?” she says.

“Um...”

“I never drink alone. It’s a sign of alcoholism. Or so I was raised to believe.”

“Yes, please, then.”

“You’re a polite young man, Mark.”

She goes to the kitchen and returns with two glasses of ice, hands one to me, pours me a shot, then one for herself, clinks her glass against mine, and settles into a worn armchair opposite me. For a moment we drink in silence.

Then, “I imagine you’ve had an exhausting day,” she says.

I smile. “All in all, yes.”

“All in all,” she murmurs, though not as if she’s really heard me. “My daughter, at the best of times, can be a little fatiguing.”

“What will happen to her?” I ask.

“Now that’s a problem, isn’t it? We can’t very well send her bouncing around Europe by herself in her condition—her excited state—now can we? And I can’t afford a paid companion.”

I wonder if I’m supposed to volunteer, but she goes on, “She can stay here for a

while, though there's no room, and it's an imposition on Ben and Malina. But I can't see sending her back to her father in New York. He'll have some crazy idea about sending her to one of those places again."

"What places?" I ask, feeling a little chill.

"Oh, last time he found this farm. He was quite sold on it. They go there, you know, the kids, and they plant vegetables and take care of chickens and this was supposed to teach them something. The work itself was supposed to be curative. Something Chekhovian in that notion. Anyway she was there three months and hated it. It did her no good at all."

"She's done this before?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Gotten arrested?"

"No, I mean..." I search for a word. "Flipped out" seems too blunt, but I can't think of anything else and fall silent.

"Ricka's problem is she's never learned moderation," she continues. "You're either her best friend or her worst enemy. It's either the best thing that's ever happened to her or utter disaster. People are either on her side or lined up against her. And God forbid you should change sides. Right now she's convinced that this man Klaus and your friend Lance—"

"Lint."

"Lint. Consciously and with malice aforethought betrayed her. You, right now, are her knight in shining armor. And that, as I'm sure you know already, is not an easy role to play."

I accept this in silence.

"What you hope is that life itself will teach her moderation. As, in the natural course of things, it should. I don't mean to blight your young hopes, but in time you

learn to compromise. You settle for less. You learn that most things are not all good or all bad but some vaguely unsatisfactory mixed bag. I suppose it's a terrible thing to say that your best hope for your child is the daily grind of disillusion, but it's better than swinging up and down all the time. That'll kill you."

"Isn't there anything—I mean, like, a psychiatrist could do?"

"She's had psychiatrists. Unless you mean drugs. There are drugs, of course. I don't know that I trust them, but it may come to that. Is that your recommendation? Drugs?"

I'm startled by this abrupt appeal to my expertise, then catch the satiric light in her eyes and smile uncertainly back. But her gaze has turned inward, and she takes a weary sip at her drink. I watch her drawn, fatigued face, circled with cigarette smoke, and feel a little sorry for her. She doesn't seem particularly equipped for children much less a child as needy and fragile as Ricka. And when I think of fragile, needy Ricka nestled for years against this prickly surface, I have a painful glimpse of the journey that got her here.

She stays a bit longer, questioning me in a desultory way about my travels, making recommendations, finding out about my family. She thinks vaguely she may have heard of Judith or read one of her articles during a past flirtation with anthropology, but she can't be sure.

At last she stands up. "Well, I shouldn't keep you chatting all night. Sweet dreams. Thanks for bringing Ricka. You're a mensch."

The next morning I said good-bye to Ricka. When she heard I was going to tour Florence, she wanted to come along, of course, but her mother discreetly shook her head at me. "I think you should rest today, Ricka. Maybe some other time. Mark will

come back.”

“Yes, I’ll come back and see you,” I said, wondering if this was a promise I was likely to keep or if, like Mrs. Stein, I was only humoring a fractious child.

At the door she clung to me. “I love you, Mark,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

I held her hand a moment, and she gazed anxiously into my eyes as if I’d forgotten to tell her something she desperately needed to know. But I didn’t know what to tell her, so I kissed her cheek and said good-bye.

Ben drove me to the station and, when he wasn’t swearing at the traffic, tried to give me a history of Florence. But I was distracted and got mostly lost among the Guelphs and Ghibellines.

I stowed my bag and walked around, took in the Uffizi and the Bargello, went to the Accademia to see David and the Signoria to see Perseus, climbed to the top of the Duomo, and in short had as efficient and inclusive a tour of Florence as you can have in five or six hours.

I was a restless and inattentive tourist, though. Early on I’d decided on a 4:30 train, but I had a hard time making myself stick it out till then. I wanted to be back in Venice. I wanted to call Antonio. And when I was at the station, it occurred to me that I could. There was no answer, though, and I spent a certain amount of the journey to Venice fretfully calculating whether it would be too late to call him when I arrived at Philip’s.

Once again it was evening when I arrived in Venice and the boat ride to Philip’s had echoes of that first boat ride, and because of that it was tinged with melancholy. I struggled up the stairs with my knapsack, got out my key, and was about to stick it in the lock when a head appeared over the banister above me.

“Signore! Signore!”

A short dark woman in a shiny purple dress trotted down the stairs waving an envelope at me.

It seemed strange that in all the time we'd stayed at Philip's I'd never seen the mysterious upstairs neighbor. We'd joked about her from time to time, heard her steps above us, but we'd never seen her and that, of course, had become part of the joke. I struggled to remember her name. “Signora Balducelli?” I said.

“Si, si! A man come. He look for you. He give me this.”

She held the letter at arm's length and read. “Mark...”

“Yes, that's me.”

But this was not enough for her. She tried to make out my last name with its un-Italian combinations of vowels and consonants.

“Day-ar...”

“Yes, thank you,” I said, holding out my hand for it. “That's me. *Mille grazie.*”

Reluctantly she handed it over. My first fearful thought was that it was from Antonio, that he was calling the whole thing off, that returning to Venice he'd returned to his senses. But the stationery seemed too fine for Antonio, and indeed when I turned the envelope over the name engraved on the flap was ADAM PILCHERT. I gazed at it a moment as if it were an artifact from an ancient and poorly understood civilization. I looked up to see Signora Baludcelli staring avidly at me.

“*Grazie,*” I said again. “*Buona sera.*”

Her face crumpled in disappointment, but I put my key in the lock and made my escape.

I opened the letter. It was just a card with Adam's name engraved on the front, and on the back two short lines.

Dear Mark,

Please call me as soon as you get this. I must speak to you.

Adam

My first wild, irrational thought was that Francesco had left him and he was turning to me at last. I stifled that one, only to worry that he was angry with me about something. What else accounted for the curtness of the closing? No “love” or “your friend” or even “best wishes.” This fear was quickly swamped by another. What if he’s sick? What if he’s sick and calling to tell me? Contact your sexual partners. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?

When he answered the phone, however, the hushed gravity of his tone and his oddly conventional insistence that I be sitting down made his news, when it came, almost inevitable.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Mark. But your father died the night before last.”