

3.1

She is there a little before one. A nervous glance at me, a quick, tentative smile. I don't take her hand nor she mine.

"I've never been here before," I tell her.

"Never?"

"No. Though I've often meant to."

"Well, should we wander around?" she asks.

"Yes. Or we could go somewhere else for a coffee instead, if you'd like. Or a bite."

"I've had lunch," she says. "But if you haven't –"

"I'm not hungry," I say.

"The first time you went to an art gallery in Vienna it was with me, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I reply.

"So it's only appropriate that I should be your guide here as well."

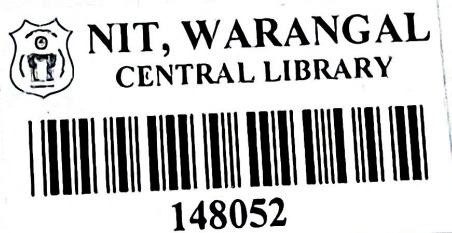
"Except that Vienna is your city, and London is mine."

"Since when has London been your city?" Julia smiles.

"No, it's not really," I say, then smile back at her. "But I'm getting naturalised."

"Against your will?"

"Not entirely."



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"The others are Londoners, aren't they? In the Maggiore, I mean."
"Sort of. Billy's London born and bred, Piers and Helen are from the West Country originally, but they're basically Londoners now."

"I remember Alec most of all."

"Alex," I say.

Julia looks a bit puzzled, then nods. "It was a shock to see you there instead of him."

"Naturally."

"I remember him reciting some Canadian poet, to the astonishment of our hosts. Service?"

"Yes. Rollicking stuff."

"And I remember lying awake in Banff listening to the trains," says Julia.

"So do I."

"Why did he leave? Weren't Piers and he lovers?" Julia is looking at me with a very direct gaze, tender and attentive.

"I suppose so," I say. "But after a few years — well, anyway, Piers doesn't like to talk about it. Things just fell apart, I think, as they sometimes do. Musically as much as anything else. You remember, they used to alternate first and second violin."

"Recipe for disaster."

"Yes. We don't do that since I joined five years ago . . . And you — are you naturalised in London? Oh, by the way, I'm so sorry about your father."

Julia looks startled.

"Julia, I'm sorry that sounded so casual," I say, suddenly feeling guilty and dismayed. "I didn't mean it in that sense. After I saw you that day, I tried to track you down again. But the trail petered out in Oxford. I am so sorry. I liked him. And I know you adored him."

Julia looks down at her gentle, tapering fingers, which she crosses, and then slowly disengages, as if to let her thoughts run through them.

"Should we look around?" I ask.

She doesn't answer for a while, then looks up and says: "Well, should we go in?"

I nod.

When she met me first, my mother was dead, and now her father is. Though he shut me off from knowledge of her when I most needed it, he was at heart a kind man. Pacific by nature, he wrote with objective clarity

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