

Garden of the Fugitives

Eleven a.m., and Chloe had almost finished drinking an entire pot of coffee at Jessy's kitchen table by herself. No one else had stirred yet, and they probably weren't going to for a long time. They would all have hangovers, something Chloe had never really had the pleasure of enduring; but she knew she was probably going to have to endure something else this morning. Something worse.

She asked herself if she wanted to go back to Pompeii, and the answer was no; it was a place in her living memory she had chosen to forget. Going back to Pompeii meant going to visit Dr. Edward Rapier, archaeologist, instructor for "Erotic Art of Ancient Civilizations." Like Chloe, he was obsessed in particular with the tragic death of Herculaneum's more rudely decimated sister city.

Their entire affair had come about in the heat of conflict over her senior thesis. She had been the only student called to his office, and he'd closed the door behind her when she'd come in.

"Madonna-Whore Complex? Pompeii?" He had stared down his nose at her from his wire-rimmed glasses and run a hand through his thinning, tangled sandy hair. "Now I *understand* that Pompeii and its people were a marvelous dichotomy of beauty and perversity, but *this* is taking it a little far."

She had swallowed, feeling her temperature rise. "Why? I've provided plenty of supporting evidence. There's a hundred pages there, for Christ's sake."

He'd settled in his swivel chair, rubbed his hands on his jeans. "I strongly disagree with you on the whore part of the theory. Contrary to popular belief, Pompeii was not a Sodom and Gomorrah and it certainly was not full of street orgies."

She had dropped her bag from her shoulder, let it fall to the floor. "I never said that, I never said they were immoral. What I said was that the entire city was a contradiction because its citizens were confused between what was pure and what was not."

"The human body and the earth were considered very beautiful to the Pompeiians. Sex

was pleasurable.” He’d leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms expectantly. “Phalluses were pure symbols, put on houses to ward off evil. They detested rude language and lustful glances. They were more noble than you give them credit for.”

That information had been on page twenty-nine of her paper. She had run a hand through her hair, cursing to herself when she realized she’d put a big knot in her bangs she’d have to cut out with a scissors. “Yes, I know all of that. That doesn’t mean they were moral. It means they were confused. These people had dinner parties in the tombs of their ancestors. Look, I have another class. I don’t want to debate this with you.” She reached down for the handle of her bag, then let it drop. “I sometimes wonder if with all your degrees, all your wanderings of the ruins, you didn’t miss the point.”

It had been as though she had desecrated something sacred to him; she had seen the spark of shock and pain in his eyes. His best, most passionate student had betrayed him.

She’d felt bad about herself, then. *Fuck*. She hadn’t realized she’d actually gotten angry with him. *He’s twice your age*, she’d thought. *Your parents didn’t raise you to speak to your elders like a proud cock*. She’d made her voice small, childlike. “Just — give me the F,” she’d said, the closest she could have come to an apology.

He’d let out a long sigh, stood up. “No. I gave you an A.” She’d watched a tear of sweat trickle down his temple. He’d looked wild, unkempt. “It’s brilliant.” Then he’d cast his gaze to the floor; he’d looked so humbled to her then. “You have such clarity. You should be an archaeologist as well as a writer.”

Then he’d cornered her between the shelves of dusty books and brushed his lips against hers as her hand rested against a giant piece of pumice he’d brought back from the ruins to use as a bookend. She had forgotten all about class.

That had been her first kiss. Chloe had seen colors at that moment. For once in her life, something had made sense. From then on, everything with him had made a sick sort of sense. Where once they had been student and professor, morbidly fascinated with each other and things they couldn’t have, then they had become equals, sneaking around away from the prying eyes of

his peers, her friends. It had been wonderful for awhile, hours and hours of making love and eating peaches soaked in red wine, discussing ruins and digs and erotic images on faded walls.

Eventually, she had seen that that was all it would ever be. So she had left him, and without any explanation. She had seen the warning signs and gotten out — unlike anyone in Pompeii. But now someone from Pompeii was coming back, and she had to know his name, find out why he was here. What he wanted with her.

So she would have to confront all of that. She would have to go back to Pompeii whether she wanted to or not.

“Find out who he is,” Nieve’s voice rang in her head. “Help him. He’s probably coming to you as a spirit because he needs help, and you’re the only one who can give it to him.”

God is not the world.

Don’t do it, Chloe. Get out one of your old books. Perhaps his name will leap out at you.

But the Voice said she shouldn’t deny her calling, she should do it. Because if she didn’t, it would make Charred Toga Man come back for another glass of wine.

And that was the last thing she wanted.

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The campus was haunted with a now-empty familiarity. She passed Edwards Hall, where she’d done a play and seen a talk on exorcism. She glimpsed the quad, where she’d played more than a few games of Frisbee. But the people she had known had all gone on to their lives — save for a few professors — and here she was, revisiting the place they had abandoned years before. It was raining, and cold for the end of April.

Washburn Hall had that same familiar smell of dusty books and metal student desks, old chalk and paper. Professors lectured from behind closed doors; she caught glimpses of bored faces, not much younger than hers...no, they had been much younger than hers. They hadn’t seen anything yet. Just wait until they got out of here and the world crushed every hope and dream they’d ever had.

Half of her wanted Edward to be in his office; half of her did not. If he’d even kept the

same office. But there it was, the same 112 on the door, chipped and worn, RAPIER still hastily scrawled in black magic marker on the light wood grain.

She knocked softly.

“Yes?”

It was his voice. *Walk away, Chloe, walk away...*

She gripped the doorknob.

He was leaning back in a wooden chair on wheels, Chloe noticing first the bottoms of his loafers, then his face, frozen deep inside a train of intense thought as he studied a book on his lap. He looked a little older, a little thinner. But he was the same man. The same glasses, the same jeans. Probably the same goddamn book in his lap he'd had when she'd left him.

He looked up, squinted at her, then his face softened, a half-smile forming on his lips.

“Chloe. I — what a surprise, I didn't expect —”

“To see me again?” she cut in. She smiled, too. Something in her settled, felt at peace. It was as though the last five or six years had never happened. She had wanted desperately to forget, yet now she was here begging for his help so she could forget something else.

“That's it?” He closed the book, sat forward. “Little Miss Madonna-Whore Complex?”

He seemed warmer than she'd remembered. She laughed. “You remember that?” But the question was silly the minute it was out of her mouth.

“I remember too many things, Chloe.” He shifted, cleared a chair of assorted books and papers. She slid into it, set her bag on the floor, crossed her legs. He watched closely.

“Well, I come peacefully. I need to pick your brain.”

“After you tell me about your life.”

“There isn't much to tell.” She had no desire to tell him anything. Part of the wonder of being with him had been the desire to bury secrets even as he had spent much of his life uncovering the very same. “I've moved back to Newport.”

There was an uneasy silence between them. He was waiting to hear more, the more she didn't want to give.

“Dwelling in the Garden of the Fugitives, are we?”

The Garden of the Fugitives. They had found thirteen bodies, gasping and choking, death impacted in one solid moment. They had probably stayed in their houses too long, running at the very last minute, and in the end it hadn't mattered where they had run, the most beautiful place in the city or the darkest catacomb. They had still died.

Wherever you go, there you are, she thought.

“Edward,” she sighed. “You could always get everything out of me.”

He picked up a pencil, tucked it slowly behind his ear. “Except for this — whatever this is that brought you here.”

She did not meet his gaze. He knew. He knew everything, and she hadn't had to say a word.

He stood up, turned his back to her, went to the window. The rain patted softly on the pane. Silence. A small clock on his desk chimed 1 p.m.

“How are the ruins?” she asked.

“The same.” He let his arms drop to his sides. “You stand in the streets and wait for someone to appear. No one ever does. But the place is alive.” He turned to her. “Oh, so definitely alive.”

Chloe squirmed in her seat; shivers shot up her back. *There is more left alive of Pompeii than you imagine, Doctor*, she thought. *And you do not have to stand on its streets to figure that out.*

“We lost some of the House of the Ancient Hunt in the most recent quake, but we're okay.” He slid an ashtray in her direction.

“Doesn't anyone know enough to get out?” The whole area was still active; hell, the last eruption had only been in 1944. Continuous earthquakes, rumblings since then. She pulled a cigarette from her bag.

“No.” He lit her cigarette for her, watched her blow the smoke through a small opening in her lips. “It's a morbid fascination with being there, Chloe. And she may blow again, God help

us all.”

“And you want to be there when it happens, don’t you, Edward?”

She saw his back stiffen. “Is that why you left me?” he murmured. “Is it?”

Something told her he had been through a couple of Chloes between then and now. This mountain, this old city had come between him and other lovers.

Give him his answer so he doesn’t have to dig any more. “Yes.” Maybe this is like the ruins themselves: the more you dig up, the more it will be exposed to the elements, and destroyed...

He nodded sagely. “I see.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “I was young. I was not ready to commit to anything.” She thought the truth unsatisfying for him. Like digging for years and only coming up with a broken piece of pottery.

“We could have gotten around that.” It was like he hadn’t heard, the same old Edward who had not really listened to her. He heard, but he had never listened.

“That’s what they all said. And pride cometh before the fall.”

“To see that — it would’ve had such a profound effect on you. You were a good student.” Chloe had never been to the actual ruins, though he had tried so many times to convince her to go with him. She had never felt the compelling need to go. Something in her heart told her she had been there before, and she was terrified to look at one of the plaster casts of bodies, frozen in death, and recognize her own.

“You understood the tragedy. Really understood it. In all its pathetic glory. You had passion.”

And it’s that same passion that drives me to the brink, Edward, she thought. That’s the part of me you didn’t know. And that’s why I’m here now, because if you just help me with this one thing I might be able to escape. For once. She tried changing the subject again. “Do we know who these people were? By name, I mean?”

He massaged his temple. “Why do you ask?”

Because I think I'm being visited by one of them, she thought. *Oh, sure. Tell this hard-core man of science that. He'll relate to you immediately.* Deep inside her she knew she could have told him that and he would have accepted it. She was convinced that he had once loved her so much he had accepted everything about her.

But he didn't have that privilege anymore.

"Because that's what I came here to find out."

She thought she saw disappointment register on his face. Out in the hallway a door slammed.

"I need names." She breathed, serious, pleading. She bit her lip. "If you have any census, any idea — at all, Edward — I need names."

He cocked an eyebrow. "An interesting pursuit?"

"One I can't —" she swallowed, "talk about now." She blushed, smiled; looked him full in the eyes for the first time in over five years. "But it has something to do with a Madonna-Whore Complex."

At this, he reached out to her, set his palm against her cheek.

And because Dr. Edward Rapier was a man who still loved her more than a great enigma, he helped her.

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Chloe sped up on Route 138, the car slamming into potholes. So Charred Toga Man had a name, huh?

As soon as Chloe had told Edward of *God is not the world*, he had taken a copy of the most recent translations of the Pompeii scrolls off the shelf, a spiral-bound, typewritten thing someone on the project over there had sent him.

Obviously not for public eyes just yet.

He'd gone page after page until he'd come up to what he'd needed:

"'God is not the world?' Was that it?" He pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

"Yes."

“Here. His name was Philodemus. Epicurean philosopher. Lived at one of the villas under someone’s patronage, but we’re not sure. These scrolls are rumored to be his — journals. Interesting,” he’d said. “Apparently they liked to ask the same questions about the world that we do.”

She hadn’t cared what questions they had been asking; she had just wanted to know what Philodemus wanted with her, and something had told her she’d have to figure that out on her own. Chloe had run her fingers over the linen pages, textured and imprinted, bumpy and alive. “Yes.” She’d nodded.

Now the wide expanse of Newport Harbor opened beneath her on the bridge.

What did Philodemus want? Was he real, asking her to do something like expose the world to his lost journals? Or was it not him at all? Did he represent someone she knew soon to be in need of her help? Or was it a precursor to something much worse? Carefully she recounted each time she’d seen them.

Oh, my God.

These specters. They were precursors, portents of death. In the flesh, so to speak. Cooper had been Liam’s — disappearance? No, death. She knew he was dead — Joan her own, though by some miracle she had not been killed in the accident. They weren’t asking for her help.

They were warning her.

When she got home she realized she had gotten the subtext, missed the overall concept; gotten the tonic without the gin. She had answered some questions, and been posed more.

When Mike told her they’d found Liam’s body, she was not surprised.

And she forgot all about whatever it was Philodemus had been trying to tell her.