

Fabio Volo

LUST FOR LIFE

Translation by Olivia Jung

Remember what it was to be me:

that is always the point.

Joan Didion

Waking up one morning and not knowing if you still love the woman sleeping next to you, the woman with whom you built a life and a family.

You don't know how it could have happened. You took it for granted that it could never happen to you and maybe that is why you weren't careful. You indulged in the luxury of getting distracted, of looking out of the window, of enjoying the landscape; and when you started not to like the view anymore, when it stopped being what you imagined, it was too late to go back.

There wasn't a specific event, a situation, a betrayal, or even a real problem that propelled us away from one another. It wasn't an explosion that drew us apart, it was a slow and silent process made of small imperceptible steps. I noticed it one day when we turned over to face each other and realized we were on opposite sides of the bedroom - it was hard to believe.

When Anna arrived into my life, everything changed. The only things that mattered were her and the time we spent together.

I never had any doubts about us, not because I was thoughtless, but simply because our love seemed capable of keeping its promises.

Chapter 1

“Do you still love me?”

We were in bed with the lights out when Anna asked me that question. We had just finished making love and I was thinking about how we hadn't done it that well in months. There was more enthusiasm, more vigor, more passion.

It wasn't the first time Anna had asked me that. Every time I promptly answered without hesitation, “Of course I still love you. What kind of question is that?”

That is what I used to say because I didn't really want to question it myself.

I cared about her, yet I didn't understand if there was something authentic in me.

Anna and I had been together for seven years, and Matteo was now five.

We had lost the complicity of an “us” that went beyond our family; without realizing it, that “us” as a couple had evaporated.

When Anna asked me if I still loved her, I realized that she was doing it in a different way, she wanted an honest answer. I couldn't just answer the way I always did.

I stayed silent. I needed to figure out if I should be honest or if I should tell her a lie that would allow me to put off answering her again. I wasn't sure if I wanted to make our crisis official. We wouldn't be able to carry on as usual if I had given her a real answer.

“Are you awake or did you fall asleep?” she asked.

“I'm awake.”

I took a deep breath and, for the first time, I told her the truth, I told her how I really felt. The words came out without much thought, I was talking and at the same time listening to what I was saying. I wasn't just talking to her; I was talking to myself.

“I don't know anymore, Anna.”

I was sad, as if I were just realizing at that moment that I had betrayed a promise.

“I am tired of everything I can't do and can't be. I'm not saying it's your fault, but I'm not happy with the way things are.”

Anna didn't say anything, I couldn't even hear her breathe or make any small movements. I knew I was hurting her, and I felt terrible about it because I never wanted to make her suffer. I waited for a reaction in that silence.

Then she said, “That's how I feel too. This isn't the life I'd imagined, and I don't understand where we went wrong. Despite being together and having a child, I feel alone most of the time.”

My stomach clenched up painfully.

I had the feeling that we had just put an end to our way of being together, to a suspended lie, to our relationship. The crisis had been declared and we could no longer live like we had up until then.

Even though my eyes were open, I couldn't see anything, only darkness.

When I pictured that moment in my mind, I always imagined that I would have felt a sense of liberation. Instead, I felt even more lost, as if I were plummeting in that darkness.

I wasn't happy with her anymore, and neither was she. And yet I was terrified by the idea of losing her.

I thought I should go sleep on the couch, as I had done other times before, but I turned around in bed and hugged her.

I was afraid she would push me away. Instead, she turned toward me, and we held onto each other tightly. We were plummeting together, we were sliding, tired, weary, perhaps defeated by our life.

It was more than hugging, we were hanging on to the person we were losing, the person we were no longer able to make happy.

And in that hug, we fell asleep.

Chapter 2

The first time I saw her was in late September.

I was at a dinner in the countryside for the inauguration of Alessio's house. I had given him a hand with the project, we were both architects at the same firm.

I knew most of the guests. The men were outside by the grill, talking and laughing with their beers in hand. The women were in the kitchen preparing salads, cutting tomatoes and mozzarella slices, and cooking up some pasta.

There was a long table set up in the garden and thousands of little lights hanging from tree branches and under the veranda like at Christmas.

I stopped by the kitchen to greet the ladies and then joined the guys.

As I approached them, I heard someone say, "Behind every angry woman stands a man who has absolutely no idea what he did wrong."

Everyone burst into laughter.

"Where did you hear this one?"

"A friend sent it to me on WhatsApp."

I said hello to Alessio and the people I knew, and I introduced myself to the others. They immediately handed me a glass of red wine. One of the great things about being a guy is that it only takes a drink and a few stupid jokes to become best friends.

Then, I turned around and I saw her, Anna, standing under a tree, illuminated by those little lights. She hypnotized me. I don't know how long I stared at her. When she finally looked in my direction, she struck me with a smile.

I kept on looking at her from afar, while she talked, while she laughed. The features of her face were soft like the curves of her body. She was wearing a wide skirt that hid her legs, but I could picture them.

The others seemed to be at ease around her, her smile and her way of talking were a constant opening onto the world.

I thought she was one of those women who was great at making love, I could sense it from how she moved her hands, how she laughed, how she touched her hair. She was a wonderful combination of kindness, eroticism, tenderness, and sensuality. I felt the desire to brush against her, to touch her.

I started walking in her direction and was almost there when Alessio shouted: "Dinner's ready!"

A guy took her by the arm and walked her to the table.

I was taken aback. It didn't even cross my mind for a second that she might have a boyfriend.

While the other guests took their seats, the two of them were still standing, talking to another couple. Then, they headed to their respective chairs on opposite sides of the table. I followed him

with my eyes until he reached a woman, caressed her shoulder, gave her a kiss, and sat down next to her. I felt a sudden explosion of joy inside me.

There were still a few empty spots near Anna, one next to her and two across from her. I pounced, afraid that someone might take one of those seats.

We ended up sitting in front of one another. Stop staring at her, I told myself.

I started talking with the people next to me, then, as soon as I had a glass in my hand, I introduced myself.

“Hi, I’m Marco.”

“Hi Marco, I’m Anna.”

I thought about the song by Lucio Dalla “Anna e Marco,” and I think she did too because we smiled at each other without having said anything. I raised my glass.

“Cheers.”

She raised hers in return. Before I could say another word, however, the woman sitting next to her asked her a question and stole our first conversation.

I waited for what felt like an infinity.

As the minutes passed, I thought about what I would have wanted to do with her. I was certain I would try to win her over during dinner, which made me nervous, but I felt a drive that cast every uncertainty aside.

As soon as she looked at me, I asked her, “Do you know Alessio well?”

“We worked for the same firm a few years ago.”

I knew the company she was referring to, they made me a job offer in the past. If I had taken it, we would have worked side by side and maybe we would have ended up together, I thought.

I let out a giggle as I pondered that possibility.

She looked at me.

“What’s so funny?” she said, laughing as well. I really liked her.

The more we talked, the more we created a natural complicity, it seemed like we had been friends for years. She won me over in an instant, something beyond my control made me want to give myself to her immediately. I wanted to tell her: “Anna, everything I am is yours.” She was a rare creature, precious, suspended. I felt that she had to be seized immediately, otherwise she would fly away like a balloon at a town fair.

We talked in such an intense way that the people sitting near us also joined the conversation.

Someone got up to greet a guy who had just arrived and went straight to Alessio at the head of the table. “Sorry if I’m late, I was in a meeting that seemed to never end.”

I had seen him before. Everyone called him Gabo, he worked with Alessio at the same firm as Anna.

He was a jovial fellow, the kind that seduces anyone in an instant.

“I taught this guy everything he knows,” said Alessio as Gabo stood in front of us taking it in with a thirty-three toothed smile.

“It’s true, he taught me everything. I can say I’m a lesser version of him.”

A guy moved from his seat and exclaimed, “Come, sit here, there’s a glass of wine waiting for you.”

Before taking his place, he went over to Anna and kissed her on the lips.

I felt another blow to my stomach, as if she were my girlfriend and I had just seen her betray me with another man.

In an instant, I went from the pure joy of finding her to the deep sorrow of losing her.

Gabo went to sit with the group of people I would have been with if I hadn’t seen Anna, the group where you laugh and have fun.

The two of us kept on talking, but something had changed. There was a sense of embarrassment for her too, maybe because she could see how disappointed I was despite trying to hide it.

I got up with an excuse halfway through dinner and joined some other friends who were sitting far from Anna and her boyfriend.

The more I watched them, the more I convinced myself that he was the wrong man for her. There was one thing that astonished me: he didn’t stick around her, he wasn’t worried or jealous. He was relaxed, he was enjoying the evening. I ended up getting drunk and a friend took me home.

The following morning, while I dealt with the hangover, everything seemed more difficult, headache, nausea, dry mouth, and dehydration. The sadness of the previous evening lingered on, a guy called Gabo was with the woman of my life. Because that is what she was, I was certain.

Like all the people we feel attracted to, the ones we like and don’t have a chance to really get to know. Maybe we shouldn’t meet them ever again and just let them live out their perfection in our mind.

Chapter 3

A few months later, I had to go to the dentist. It was afternoon, and I was looking for a taxi. I called and got no answer, then I remembered there was a station two blocks away. When I arrived, it was empty. I started looking for an alternative solution when a taxi stopped nearby. I ran up to it and, as I approached it, I saw someone's head leaning forward between the two front seats to pay for the ride.

I waited for the person to exit the taxi.

"Anna?"

She looked at me surprised. We were standing in front of one another, embarrassed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm going to visit a client, and you?"

"Dentist. Thrilling, I know."

She smiled.

We didn't know what to say, it was clear from the pauses between our answers. She was even more beautiful than I remembered. She didn't know it, but I told myself for weeks that she was the woman of my life.

"Do you need a taxi or not? If you don't need a ride, could you close the door?" said the taxi driver, annoyed.

Anna and I looked at each other for a moment. I answered, "No thank you, I don't need it."

Then I told her, "I'll walk you there."

She pointed at the door right in front of us, "That's it, that's where I'm going."

"Ah yes, of course," I said, feeling like an idiot.

Before disappearing in the doorway, she added, "We could meet later if you'd like, maybe for happy hour?"

I didn't expect it.

"Sure."

"Take my number, we can text when we're done with our appointments."

I liked her sense of initiative, she was less bumbling than me.

I asked the dentist not to overdo it with the anesthetic, I didn't want to meet Anna while mumbling words with a drooping lip.

We started hanging out after that entirely fortuitous encounter. I discovered that she wasn't with Gabo anymore and that he wasn't how I had pictured him at all: he wasn't laid back, on the contrary, he was very jealous. He threw a crazy hissy fit on their way home from Alessio's dinner

and didn't talk to her for days. Suddenly, the guy who seemed so self-assured wasn't so confident anymore.

Our story was born out of a coincidence and it made me think that we were part of a bigger picture. "We'll turn chance into destiny," said Jeanne in *Last Tango in Paris*, and maybe that is what I subconsciously wished for.

Chapter 4

I could see the way her face looks when she wakes up, how she stirs her coffee, how she tilts her head when I say something she doesn't understand or doesn't expect, how she stops chewing when she notices me watching her.

If I thought about all of that, our difficulties became suspended, unreal, and I had a hard time seeing our separation as a possibility.

Everything was clear when I met her: we loved one other. Yet, after all the years we spent together, I didn't know what that even meant, and I couldn't understand how it was possible. I no longer knew what to think about the main issues in life: love, happiness, God, UFOs.

Anna and I were full of energy, we had a thousand plans, a future to build, and the idea of achieving them all excited us. Then, it's as if we got stuck, we didn't know where we were going, there wasn't a destination anymore.

"How do you see us in ten years?" she asked me one evening on the couch. I wasn't prepared.

"I have to think about it," I answered to buy myself some time. But when I tried to picture us, all I saw was the us from now, so I ended up saying, "Like now, but older."

I will never forget the disappointment on her face.

The next morning, I wanted to call her on my way to work and tell her that I had found an answer, something romantic maybe, like a line from a movie. Instead, I came up with nothing.

There wasn't an exciting future anymore, we didn't have to look for a house, decorate it, prepare the room for our first baby, we didn't have to expand our love radius. It seemed more important to keep everything running, we were focused on keeping it all together. Maybe we should have had a second child immediately, before we reached this point, so we could have had a confirmation that what we had was what we wanted. Maybe later. The fact that we didn't even talk about it meant something in itself. The strain and disruption that Matteo brought to our lives made us realize that another baby would have broken us. We would have fallen apart.

In the beginning, we were happy to see each other again when we got back from work and we would cook together. There was always music, an open bottle of red wine, kisses on the neck, light touches, laughter. We didn't need a special occasion to celebrate, the excuse for doing do was being together, being happy. Even the moments of silence were shared, I never thought about stuff on my own, I was always connected with her.

I couldn't remember the first time when we didn't turn the music on, when the radio stayed off, when we didn't open the wine, or when the light touches and kisses on the neck ended. It must have been a slow process.

Then one day, a "No thank you, I don't want to drink, I'm tired, I'll fall asleep at the table if I drink."

And then one day, I thought about caressing her but, instead, a sort of weariness and surrender prevented me from doing so. I was bored.

And then another day, during an argument, she left the room and I didn't get up to follow her even though I knew she expected me to. That is all it would have taken for things to settle down, but I didn't do it.

The silences increased and became ever more present. I felt a little embarrassed the first few times, but then I slowly got used to them and started enjoying them, until they became a corner where I could find shelter.

Suddenly, I found myself living in a dense distance, like gelatin; I didn't know what to call it because I had never experienced it before. It was a space that kept us constantly separated, which I had learned to deal with.

After all those years together, I didn't feel completely at ease around her. I was afraid of saying something wrong and finding myself in one of those days when we didn't speak. There was tension, the silences became like a blow to the stomach.

Sometimes I was more relaxed around people who didn't know me that well rather than at home with her. Anna and I walked on eggshells around each other without even knowing the reason why.

Chapter 5

Oscar, the head of the firm, was looking for me at work. “Can you come see me tomorrow afternoon by five?”

“For what?”

“See you at five.”

I spent the entire day wondering why he had summoned me. The only thing I could come up with was an argument I had with Sergio, the head of the project. We don't get each other, as people say at the office.

I enjoy following someone who has a clear, innovative, brave vision. Sergio, instead, has to give his input on everything, not because he is involved in it all, but because he knows that we could do everything without him, which forces him to never give us that chance.

We immediately butted heads, and the situation was never repaired. When we would try to fix it, something would happen that would bring us back to square one.

“I'm always right, especially when I'm wrong,” is a sentence that Sergio had made his own.

He doesn't like being contradicted, particularly in front of other people, and I can't refrain from pointing out to him that he can make mistakes too.

I know he would be happy to fire me, but my projects are very successful, and the firm wants to hold on to me tightly.

Dario, a coworker, told me one day, “Sergio is the kind of person that can be admired, but never truly appreciated. His entire life is an unsuccessful attempt to get people to like him.”

He was partly right.

“People like Sergio are like Cinderella's stepsisters, they are dying to go to the party, but then no one wants to dance with them.”

Ten days before Oscar's request, we were in a meeting when Sergio launched into one of his usual monologues that always find a way to get under my skin. I had refrained from speaking up several times, but the temptation of showing him why he was wrong was stronger. Very calmly, I listed the reasons, one after the other. As soon as I finished making a fool of him, a little voice in my head whispered that the dumbass there was me.

Sergio made a face I had never seen him do before.

“I am pleased to hear what you really think, but no one asked for your opinion. So, we'll still do what I said for a series of reasons that I don't feel the need to have to explain to you. But here is one: you work for me and you do what I say.”

An intelligent, calm, mature man would have taken the hit to avoid making things even more difficult for himself. Instead, I wasn't able to keep my mouth shut, again. I felt a surge of heat burning up my face.

“I just want to point out that I don’t work for you, I work with you. You are the project manager, but the firm isn’t yours. You and I work for the same company.”

“Too bad that I’m the one who decides who stays and who goes, and if you don’t agree, that’s the door.”

We looked at each other. We had passed the limit.

I wasn’t scared of getting fired, it was more of a nuisance: I would have to start looking around. It’s just that I liked the people I worked with, and I especially liked the projects that our office undertook.

There was an expectant silence in the room, everyone was waiting for the next move, and it was up to me. I didn’t know what to do. In the end, I said, “I’ll think about it.”

I thought these words were enough to carry on with the meeting, but he didn’t see it that way and wouldn’t let go: “If anything, I’m the one who will think about it.”

I couldn’t even say a word. Sergio shook me from my hesitation. “Let’s do this: you go home, spend time with your family, have a nice weekend. You don’t have to tell me right now if you want to stay and keep working for me, or if you want to go. But let one thing be clear: if you stay, you have to change this arrogant attitude of yours because, from this moment on, it’s no longer acceptable.”

I could have stood up and told him to go fuck himself in front of our coworkers, but I didn’t do it. Finally, after years of poorly managing my emotions, I gave an answer that surprised everybody, including me: “Alright.”

That altercation was the only reason I could think of for why Oscar would call me in. Maybe he was also fed up with my attitude, and it was time to end our collaboration.

That evening, before falling asleep, I thought about those movies where the main character gets fired and dumped by his wife in a matter of days.

Maybe, at forty-five, it was about to happen to me too.

Chapter 6

One Sunday, we were on our way home from lunch at Anna's parents. We were on the highway, the sunset was casting a gorgeous light and the clouds were shades of green, pink, and red.

Matteo was in the backseat sleeping. He was around two years old at the time. At a certain point, Anna asked, looking at the sky, "Why don't we go live somewhere else?"

"What do you mean?"

"Live in a new place."

Sometimes I have a hard time following her when she suddenly starts a conversation out of nowhere.

"Leaving and starting over in another place."

"But where?"

"California, Australia, Barcelona."

Maybe the sunset had inspired her to daydream. "It's a little late for that thought, maybe in a second life."

She stayed quiet for a moment, then said, "This is it, there is no other life."

She seemed sad, so I added, "Okay, let's go home, pack our bags, and leave."

She insisted, "We could go to a warm place, by the sea, in a country that isn't very expensive. We could get a house by the beach, Matteo could play outside all day instead of always being indoors."

"I could be a fisherman. It's something I've always dreamed of doing."

Anna turned toward me, "I'm not saying forever, just for a while. Before Matteo starts school. We still have a few years."

She was serious. It happened to me too to feel a sudden drive from within, a sudden urge to leave and, for just a moment, it seems like the only right thing to do.

But that time, it lasted longer for Anna. It went on for weeks.

It was the cause of one of our first crises, maybe the biggest one up until the one we were currently experiencing. Then, we didn't talk about it anymore for the next couple of years.

One day, on my way back from work, she presented me with a series of options, places, and solutions. She had chosen Ibiza, it seemed like a good compromise between nature and city. She even started looking online for a place to live. One evening, she made me a list of the things we owned and didn't need.

"And then we could rent out our house, sell my car, and we might not have to dip into our savings, life outside the city costs less."

I didn't recognize her anymore, I started getting scared.

I tried to explain that I couldn't leave the firm, "I love my job, I love expressing myself. I would fall apart if I didn't work, I wouldn't even be able to keep our family afloat. For me, work is a way to participate in life, and you know it."

It was so obvious that I felt weird having to explain it to the person I was with and with whom I had built a family. I couldn't see myself being happy on a beach or in the countryside surrounded by nature. It was fine for a vacation, but not for life. I always liked the adrenaline of a job and the city.

"I'm fine here, Anna. And aside from my job, we finally have the house we wanted. We chose it because you liked it and you decorated with everything you wanted. We have a little bit of money set aside, not much, but it's enough to get us through an emergency. And last but not least, we have a son, it's not just you and me anymore. Our life here isn't that bad. Sure, it's not fireworks every day, but we are a lot better off than many others. I like our life."

"But don't you get bored? Aren't you bored most of the time?"

"I don't have much time to be bored, I work all day."

My sentence sparked a furious argument. Anna interpreted it to mean that I worked all day and she did nothing. When Matteo was born, we both agreed that she would stay at home with him for the first year. Then, she realized that going back to a full-time job wouldn't be so easy because the commitment required by a project wouldn't be very compatible with Matteo's life, and she didn't feel like leaving him with someone else for ten hours a day. In the end, we opted for a softer solution where she would work a few mornings a week. That didn't pan out: it was hard for her to accept doing her work only halfway. I got a raise at the time, which allowed us to stay afloat with just one source of income, mine. Anna slowly got used to living with Matteo, or at least that is how it seemed until her furious reaction.

It was the first time we ran the risk of breaking up.

One evening, to mend the situation a little bit, I pretended to take into consideration the hypothesis of moving. I was sure that if Anna saw an opening on my part, she would have softened, which would then make it easier for me to make her understand why it couldn't be done. Maybe all I needed to do was stop butting heads with her and try to make her reason.

"I'm not saying that I'm not thinking about it. I am thinking about it and I also understand the appeal of the adventure. It's just that I don't think it's the right time for it."

"There will never be a right time for it. Ibiza is less than two hours away, it's not on the other side of the world. Think about Matteo playing outside in nature all day. Think about the gift you'd give him."

It always annoyed me when she dragged Matteo into our arguments, I found it unfair.

"In any case, we wouldn't have to go all the way to Ibiza to let Matteo grow around nature, we can also find a place here in Italy."

"I don't know, I never thought about it. Why does it necessarily have to be Ibiza?"

"Because it has what we like. It's surrounded by nature, but it also has an energetic vibe, there's movement, things going on. There wouldn't be anything to do in a small town near here and we'd get bored. We grew up in the city, we need movement too."

I found her request so absurd that I had a hard time coming up with answers and having a normal conversation.

“One day, after we first got together, we told each other that something wonderful, something special would happen to us. Do you remember? We felt we would experience something unique that we couldn’t quite see yet.”

I remembered. It was one of those things you say when you’re in love, carried away by a constant enthusiasm.

“Do you think this is it? That special something is moving to Ibiza?”

“I don’t know, maybe not necessarily Ibiza, maybe it’s just the ability to be open to change. That’s the only way something wonderful and exciting could happen, otherwise we’ll end up like everyone else always leading the same life. Don’t you think?”

She was exhausting me, so I resorted to the final argument. “We don’t have the money to do what you have in mind, we can’t afford it.”

She wouldn’t let it go, “We can use some of the money my father gave me when he sold the house.”

“Weren’t we saving that for Matteo?” I used our son to stop her.

“The truth is that you don’t want to and you’re using money as an excuse.”

“You’re out of this world, trust me.”

She didn’t answer. She stayed quiet for a moment and then, as if surrendering, she went to bed. By that point, I was convinced she had completely lost her mind.

The topic came up a few times over the following days, she tried to change my mind with new hypotheses, but I was good at resisting, until we eventually stopped talking about it altogether.

Even though I believed I was right, I knew I had somehow crushed a dream of hers, and this is never a good thing between two people who love each other.

She had given up on her job and ambitions for Matteo, and it hadn’t been easy. I realized I had to do something. I remembered a wish that she confessed to me a few years back: she would have liked to go to Australia and New Zealand during the summer, when it’s winter over here.

One evening, after putting Matteo to bed, I told her that we would go there. I was expecting a burst of enthusiasm, instead she looked at me with a serious expression, “We’ll never go there. You won’t have the courage to take a two-month leave from work. It will just be one of the many unkept promises.”

“I give you my word,” I told her, shaking a little bit inside because I knew that it would be really hard to take it back.

I felt almost safe when Anna finally found a job. She decided a few months back that she would start working full-time again when Matteo started school. Neither of us expected her to find something so quickly; the pay was low, but at least the office was near our house.

Then, she suddenly brought up the trip idea.

“Both Matteo and I start in September. It’s our last chance to take that vacation you promised us.”

I didn’t have the nerve to object, all hell would have broken loose. So we decided to leave in March.

Matteo didn't talk about anything else for weeks. We even bought him a globe and showed him where we would go on the map.

“See? Australia and New Zealand are down here, and we will be upside-down for a bunch of days.”

That idea really tickled him.

We got him a backpack shaped like a kangaroo and a stuffed koala, which became his inseparable companion. He brought it to school, to the playground, pushed it on the swing, and always fell asleep hugging it.

Every now and then he would ask how long it was until the trip, so I drew him a calendar on a sheet of paper and hung it on his wall. Every morning, when he woke up, he would cross out the day that had just ended.

Now that our crisis was in the open, I wondered if that trip still made sense. Maybe it would end up putting even more pressure on us.

Chapter 7

As I went to Oscar's office, my head was exploding, I felt a weight on my chest and on my shoulders.

The situation with Anna, deciding whether to cancel the trip that we already booked, the fear of getting fired, everything seemed like one big joke. I remembered something my father used to often say: life is a game that always starts over, just as you think you have it all figured out, you don't understand a thing.

I wondered if the argument with Sergio was enough of a reason to lose my job. When Matteo was born, my performance suffered. Previously, I would stay late into the night if necessary, and I would keep going until I was satisfied with my work. I even spent the entire night there when I had to finish a project. Nights in the office with your shoes off under the table and the desk in the back of the room covered in empty takeout boxes and a few leftovers. Work is a matter of discipline, of trade, of rules, but also of moments of inspiration, and you never know when you are going to get them.

I started experiencing family like an obstacle to the things I wanted to do, which is also where the problems with Anna started from. When she got pregnant, she wanted me to take her to every doctor's appointment. And when Matteo was born, she would ask me to go with her to the pediatrician. I thought it should have been up to her, or at most she could ask her mother. I was surprised by these requests, Anna knew my job well, she knew how challenging it was. In the end, I felt guilty for neglecting Anna and Matteo for work, and guilty for neglecting work for them.

When I got to Oscar's office, he was on the phone. He nodded at me to come in.

I sat down waiting for him to finish the call. I was still thinking about Anna, and for the first time I seriously asked myself how my life would have been without her, outside from our family.

I thought about all the spare time I would get back, the dinners out with friends, the girls I would meet and the ones I would make love to. I wouldn't have to deal with weekend anxiety, which are the hardest when you're in a crisis with your partner, and you just look forward to Monday so at least you can go back to work.

Those fantasies didn't scare me. On the contrary, they were a pleasant escape, I felt excited, turned on, they made me daydream. They filled my heart, I felt fired up. My imaginary life often accompanied me for days, and I would convince myself that it was really possible.

I felt a force inside me that wanted to rebel itself to everything, a force that reminded me that I was still alive, and I could still experience and feel certain emotions. What I lacked was room for the unexpected. I was convinced that I could truly be myself only in that freedom.

Oscar said goodbye to the person he was talking to over the phone.

"Do you want a coffee? Water?"

"No thanks, I'm alright."

"How are you? All good? Your wife? Your son?" It always caught me off guard when people called Anna my wife, even those who knew we weren't married.

“All good.”

Oscar called his secretary and asked her for a decaf.

“I’ve had too many today,” he told me. He asked me some questions about a new client, then drank his coffee, and finally got to the point.

“Are you ready for the trip?”

I would have wanted to say that we might not be going anymore, but I opted not to.

“Last few things to deal with, but we’re ready.”

“You’re doing something great, it will be an unforgettable experience for you and your family. It’s obviously not in my interest to say so.”

Maybe he was about to tell me that I could extend my trip because I was out of a job.

“As you know, we took on a major project in Amsterdam,” he said instead, “I need a project manager who will stay there.”

I knew that Oscar was talking in terms of years and about a position that would have been closed in Milan.

“I need to know if you’d be interested.”

“When would it be?”

“Starting in September.”

We looked at each other in silence.

“It’s perfect for you. We’ll say goodbye for now, go on vacation with your family, and in September you’ll start a new adventure.”

“Indeed.”

It was the only thing I managed to say on the spot.

“I don’t expect you to give me an answer now. You have a few days to think about it. I imagine you have to talk about it at home. Besides, you might not even get it, I just need to know if you’re available.”

Our meeting took less than ten minutes. I couldn’t even figure out if I was happy about it.

I thought it over on my way home. Amsterdam could be the career boost I had been waiting for years, so I could then return to Milan and take Sergio’s place. I started getting that feeling inside me, the taste of a challenge, the yearning for a new horizon.

But I knew it wouldn’t be easy to convince Anna, moving was no small thing, especially in our condition.

I went back to thinking that everything would be simpler if I had been alone, I wouldn’t even have to go to Australia and New Zealand. I would have canceled the trip, because nothing could energize me more than that challenge.

It suddenly started to rain. I couldn’t remember the last time there was a downpour like that.

I was sitting in my car at a red light, I could see the other cars' red brake lights, the windshield wipers seemed to be moving water by the gallon.

Sting's song "Fragile" came up on the radio. I always used to listen to it with my friends when I was a kid. A surge of memories from those days flooded my mind. I often experienced moments of deep nostalgia, memories and images of normal everyday life: doing my homework on the kitchen table while my mother washed the dishes; my father in the summer, sitting in his armchair watching television in his undershirt and boxers, or when he shaved in the bathroom with the door open.

I felt a wave of heat in my chest and, without understanding why, I found myself with tears in my eyes.

Chapter 8

And now it was my turn to convince Anna to leave Milan and move to another city...