

**Daniele Mencarelli**

**Sempre tornare**

**Always Return**

**Translation by Olivia Jung**

## Chapter 1

They are shouting, but I can't hear them.

They surround me, they push me, but nothing and no one will make me change my mind.

"Just stop and get in the car."

Alessio grabs me forcefully by the arm. He is taller and bigger than me, but I don't budge.

"We're not kidding, really. We've had some fun, but it's time to cut it out now."

Claudio, who already tends to spittle when he talks, is sputtering like a fountain spurting saliva and cuss words.

I look at them both.

"I'm telling you, again, that it's got nothing to do with what happened tonight. I've decided to go back home on my own. My mom ain't expecting me back until the end of the month, she's not even home, I just wanna be on my own, that's all."

Alessio runs his hand through his sweat-soaked hair, his eyes tired from the night turning into day without a single minute of sleep.

"That's all? Do you realize we're in Misano and that your home is 250 miles away? Can you hear yourself? Do you think what you're sayin' sounds sober? Are you thinking straight, Danny? I don't think so. I think you're still out of it after tonight."

I don't want to get into an argument, but there is no other way out.

"I don't know how many times I gotta tell you. I'm leaving. See you in September."

I grab my suitcase and walk down this tongue of asphalt leading to who knows where.

"Danny, I'll tell you one last time. Get in the car," Alessio's voice reaches me.

His words are followed by my steps, which are certainly not headed back towards him.

"Watch your back, don't trust no one."

When I turn around, I see the worried look on his face, so I smile.

"Come on, who would ever mess with me? Don't worry, guys. Have fun."

I turn and look at the road ahead. I hear the sound of the car doors closing, the engine starting, then the wheels start doing their job, and the car that took us through half of Italy drives off.

When I turn back around, Alessio's Volkswagen Polo is just a car among the others heading in the opposite direction from the one I've taken.

I'm not exactly sure how much my suitcase weighs, but if I had to guess I'd say no less than forty pounds. I pick it up and stand on the side of the road. I never wear a watch, it must be at least noon considering that we left Cocoricò at seven in the morning, going from Negroni to coffee without even

stopping for a croissant. The sun is shining straight down, beating on the back of my neck, crushing me and making it even more difficult to endure this slow rebirth after the shame I experienced last night. After embarrassing myself like that. It was supposed to be the perfect party. The party at Cocoricò on August 15: twelve hours of unbridled fun and frenzy, one of those events that you remember forever. And it was supposed to be just the beginning, the appetizer to my first vacation without my family, two weeks of unprecedented freedom with only two instincts to fulfill, just like everyone else. I thought that these days would be memorable, that I'd remember them for the rest of my entire life, that I'd look back at them fondly, overcome by nostalgia. "The summer of '91, my first summer, you can't even imagine, I was barely seventeen."

And instead.

You can never rest easy when I'm around.

The night was a disaster. I made a total ass of myself and all my friends will be talking about it in no time.

But that's not why I'm here, by myself, on a road heading to who knows where, with a suitcase that weighs like a block of marble, rectangular and pea green.

That's not why.

I don't talk about it with anyone.

Except those who can't answer me.

Animals. Nature. The endless beauty of things.

I have to understand.

I'm here because I have to understand.

I can't ignore it any longer.

It's not my fault if I always see a descent to discover, an enigma asking me to be solved, as if it were possible.

It's not my fault if every gesture, feeling, breath, asks me to pick a side, because there is a battle in everything, the same conflict I've carried in my heart since the day they took me out of my mother's womb.

There is a duel raging in my heart every day, and it's always the same.

One duelist is called All. His opponent is called Nothing.

They contend for what I experience. One against the other with my life at stake, I am the ground they seek to gain, always and forever.

My father says that being an adult means knowing how to mediate, knowing how to live in the greys, because there can't only be black and white. He might have his reasons. But he is certainly wrong about

one thing: there can be no middle ground between All and Nothing. There can be no grey. Me, everything, there are no possible compromises.

We are children of All or children of Nothing.

On the one hand, God. On the other, Chaos.

But we can't say this out loud.

I have to pretend that everything is normal. That life, the world, the drops of sweat gliding down my back, it's all something that I've already experienced and archived.

I can't be a part of this play anymore, I can't be in this sandbox where the winner is the least surprising person, the one who takes other people's discoveries at face value.

I have fifteen days and a lot of road ahead.

This trip will be my turning point.

I will be able to understand. The answers will come to me. They might come from whom I least expect it.

Like this yellow wildflower growing on the side of the road. Maybe, if I stare at it long enough, if I look at it lovingly, it will talk to me.

It will tell me everything.