



Summer Heat

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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“Welcome to my humble abode.” Rose spreads her arms wide and gathers me in them. For the first time since leaving home, I forget that this is not the holiday I want to be on. Jenny and I had planned two weeks of island hopping in Greece—with Lesbos as the final stop—but that fell through when she told me, out of the blue, that I was no longer her preferred travel companion.

“I’m so sorry for you, darling,” my mum, a proper English lady, had said, after I reluctantly confessed that Jenny and I were no longer an item. “Why don’t you join your father and me on our annual Tuscany trip?”

I’d cried some more, messy heaving sobs kept at arm’s length from mum’s pricy Jil Sander suit, before giving into her maternal logic. I’d taken the time off work already and what good would it do to stay home and sulk in my tiny apartment? Rose certainly had room for one extra and we’d get to spend some time as a family.

The journey had been pleasant enough because I kept my disappointment at bay and allowed my parents to believe I truly wanted to spend my summer holiday with them. As if that’s all thirty-one-year-olds with demanding jobs and limited annual leave desire.

Rose spends the entire summer here and her complexion has already gone olive. I smell sunshine on her neck and nostalgia washes over me as memories of summers past swarm my brain. I was eighteen and ready to conquer the world when I came here last and Michael, Rose’s husband and my dad’s best friend, was still alive and well.

“Catherine, how lovely to see you.” Rose pushes me back and gives me a quick once-over. “Oh, the glory of youth.” I tackled most of the anger issues sprouting from my sudden break-up by spending every spare minute in the gym.

“How many times, Rose. Call me Cat.”

“Pay no mind to Miss Grumpy, dear Rose,” my dad butts in, “us OAP’s are very grateful for your hospitality.”

I roll my eyes at Rose and head for the rental’s boot to retrieve the suitcases. I let them have their moment. I know my dad always gets emotional when first laying eyes on his best friend’s widow again. It has been seven years since Michael’s fatal heart attack.

“Will this do?” Rose opens the door to a room decorated in blue and white with French windows overlooking the pool. It’s the same room I used to share with my brother when we visited as children, spruced up with contemporary furniture and fresh wallpaper.

“Perfect, as ever.” I shoot Rose a warm smile as I remember the sounds coming from the other side of the wall, mysterious grunts and groans that made Billy and me giggle during the night. Michael and dad may have been best friends but they couldn’t have been more different. Michael married late—to a woman twelve years his junior—and, by choice, never had children.

“Your mum told me what happened.” Rose leans against the door frame while I plunk my luggage on the bed. “I’ll do everything I can to make your stay as pleasant as possible.” She accompanies her statement with a bold stare into my eyes. “Let me know if there’s anything you need.” She shoots me a quick wink and closes the door behind her.

I need Jenny back, I murmur to myself, but she’s probably deep sea diving off the coast of Rhodes with that bitch Imogen. I can’t help but think of my great-aunt Imogen whenever I hear her name and it’s not a pretty thought.

“I don’t want you to lose any money over this,” Jenny, always the financial guru, had said. “I’ll pay back your share.” I knew what that meant. Imogen was in and I was out. And to think I had picked the destination.

I flip the windows open and late sunlight streams into the room. Shadow lines trace the floor and transport me back to simpler times when all Billy and I did for two weeks was skip from our bed to the pool, only breaking for sun-drenched lunches of buffalo mozzarella soaked in olive oil and suppers to the sound of a million crickets. The grown-ups talked for hours while gorging on local wine, their laughter breaking through the brick walls after they’d sent us to bed.

I'd find dad and Michael in a corner of the garden, in the shade of a big oak tree, delving into their years at Oxford. Their words didn't really register but it was enough for me to hear them, their voices husky from smoking and their smiles so convincing I believed it would be like this forever. Then puberty happened—and life got in the way.

The pool water flickers in the low sunlight and one of the benefits of summering in this part of Italy is that you never have to wonder if the water will be warm enough. I dig into my hastily packed suitcase and grab the first bikini I find. I let my damp travel clothes slide off my body and check myself in the wall mirror. I'm in better shape than I ever was with Jenny but what good will it do me now? I'm on holiday with my parents in the middle of nowhere.

"Great minds and all that." Rose appears in the window, dressed in a purple bikini. "A quick swim before dinner?" Safe from a pair of well-worn boy briefs—the ones I wear for travelling—I'm naked and I try to cover my chest with my arms.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "I didn't realise—"

"Interesting underwear." Rose beams me a broad smile and vanishes from the window. I see my cheeks flash bright crimson in the mirror. I scramble for my bikini top and quickly replace my shorts with bikini bottoms.

"Don't worry about it," I tell my reflection. "You're amongst friends and family here."

Rose is not a big part of my memories of this house. She only stepped onto the scene the last summers I came here, when my mind was already elsewhere. I've seen plenty of her in London though, as practically every family dinner included her and Michael. She stayed in our guest room for months after Michael passed away and I witnessed every stage of her grief, a display so intimate it created a bond for life. But I don't associate her with Tuscany, with endless summer days crammed into two weeks, until we had to leave and our surroundings became grey and familiar again.

I dive in and let the water wash away my awkwardness. The last time I swam must have been last year when Jenny got into a health craze and unilaterally decided we should swim at least once a week. We made it to our local pool twice.

While resting my back against the tiles on the edge of the pool, I scan the sky and all I see is deep blue. A short burst of happiness explodes inside of me, like bubbles in my stomach, and maybe all's not lost. Maybe I can recover from this hideous Jenny debacle and not feel like the scorned woman for the rest of my life.

"The oldies must be down for the count." Rose joins me and spreads her arms so one of them rests behind my back.

"I'm sure the prospect of a gin and tonic will wake them from their slumber soon enough."

Rose's laugh ripples through the water. "I would expect so." From the corner of my eye I notice how she turns her head towards me. "I seem to have under-stocked on books this year. Do you happen to have brought anything good?"

I think of the lesbian detective I packed, the lesbian vampire novel and the lesbian erotica anthology. "I'm not sure our tastes are the same." I face her and grin. "I tend to read very niche literature."

"I'm an open-minded woman. I'm sure I can manage." Her cheeks dimple when she smiles and her green eyes catch the last of the sun before it dips behind the trees.

"Why don't I drive into town tomorrow and get you some from that international bookstore just off the main square?"

"It really has been a long time since you were here. That shop has long gone." She scrunches her lips together and raises her eyebrows. "Looks like one of yours is my only option."

"Stop by my room after dinner. I'll lend you the least offensive one." I find it hard to draw my gaze away from her.

"Will you be dressed this time?" She splashes some water in my face and ducks under, away from me. I swallow hard and try to process what just happened. Then I remember that processing

was more Jenny's thing and I shrug it off as friendly banter.

* * *

"Jenny was a nice girl," my mother inappropriately says, "apart from that enormous tattoo on her back." She sips from her glass of wine. Sometimes, when I get really bored with dinner conversation, I count the glasses and hold them against her later. This time I'm more annoyed—on the verge of a breakdown, really—than bored. "Very well-mannered and with a promising career in the city." I half-expect her to say, "If Catherine really has to be with another woman, Jenny was an acceptable choice."

"She can't have been that stellar, what with the way she treated Cat." Rose comes to my rescue. I could kiss her, but only metaphorically, of course.

"I suppose not." Mum's eyes drift off and she stifles a yawn.

"Darn straight," dad says, "excuse the pun Kit-Kat." A wide grin crosses his face. He always thinks he's so funny and ever since he retired he's been watching too many westerns, hence the Texas vocabulary.

The way they're talking about me makes me feel sixteen years old again, except that some of my parents' dreams have been categorically dashed since then and, apparently, on top of everything else, I can't hold on to a decent girlfriend.

"You look positively shattered, Helen." Rose doesn't usually speak like this, being more than a decade younger than my parents. "It's getting late. Maybe you and John should retire to your boudoir."

"I believe we might." Dad stands up and makes a clumsy effort to clear some dishes.

"I'll take care of that." I pull at his hot pink polo shirt and smirk at the memory of his last birthday when Billy successfully made him believe that all men his age wear bright colours now. He was so desperate to believe it, and so tired of his starched shirts in all shades of beige, that it made him stubborn enough to ignore mum's disdainful pout. Wearing ghetto colours, as Billy calls it, constitutes his own mini mid-life crisis and, despite not doing wonders for his pale complexion, I can only applaud it—from a daughter's perspective, it beats getting a bit on the side.

"How are you holding up?" Rose glares at me from the sink while I dry the last wine glass, my behind leaning against a cream-coloured kitchen cabinet. "How long were you and Jenny—"

"I'm fine. Really. I just don't want to talk about it all the time." My stomach tightens as I remember Jenny's close-cropped blond hair and the way it stuck out to all sides in the morning. Waking up alone has been the hardest. Jenny had this rule of never leaving the bed without an extensive hug—not even for a bathroom visit in the middle of the night. From dusk till dawn, her skin clung to mine and could only be torn away with great difficulty.

"I'm sorry." Her eyes find mine. "It can't be easy."

I swallow back some tears, but not enough to keep one from plopping down on the just-dried glass in my hands.

"Hey." She closes the distance between us and takes the glass from me before brushing away a lingering teardrop from my cheek with her thumb. Her other hand curls around my neck and presses my face against her shoulder. The smell of fresh tomatoes mixed with wine and herbs fills my nostrils and I inhale deeply. "It's all right."

The second hit comes from her perfume, which is fruity and nutty and so indisputably feminine it makes my knees go weak. I close my eyes for a split second and accept the unexpected tenderness.

"Did you want that book?" I manage to ask.

"Tomorrow's fine." Rose's fingers caress my scalp and draw me closer. "I promise I won't mention her anymore," she whispers in my ear and, suddenly, the painful memory of Jenny seems far away. She releases her hold on me and I notice a few damp drops on her top. "It's been a while

since someone cried on my shoulder.” Despite the fiery red of her lipstick, her smile is gentle and kind and sparks a whole slew of unsuitable mixed emotions in my brain. “Good night.”

I retreat to my empty bedroom. We’re both adults now, but I wish Billy were here. We quibbled endlessly in this bed, not willing to give in to the night just because a parent said we should go to sleep. We lost ourselves in ongoing stories born from exhausted lips. We could always push for one more sentence until one of us fell asleep mid-word and the other, as if waiting for the signal, soon followed.

At least mum can be proud of him. At thirty-three he’s about to make partner at the accountancy firm he works for. He’s happily married to a gorgeous redhead—I experienced unhealthy pangs of sibling rivalry when I first met my sister-in-law—and father to three incredibly misbehaved, freckled boys. You couldn’t dream up a son more perfect. To stand next to him as a recently dumped lesbian during family events is quite the challenge.

I read a few pages in the Stella Duffy book I brought, more to gauge if it’s something I can share with Rose than being in the mood for it, and drift off after a couple of pages. I dream of Jenny and Rose and somehow it’s not entirely unpleasant.

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