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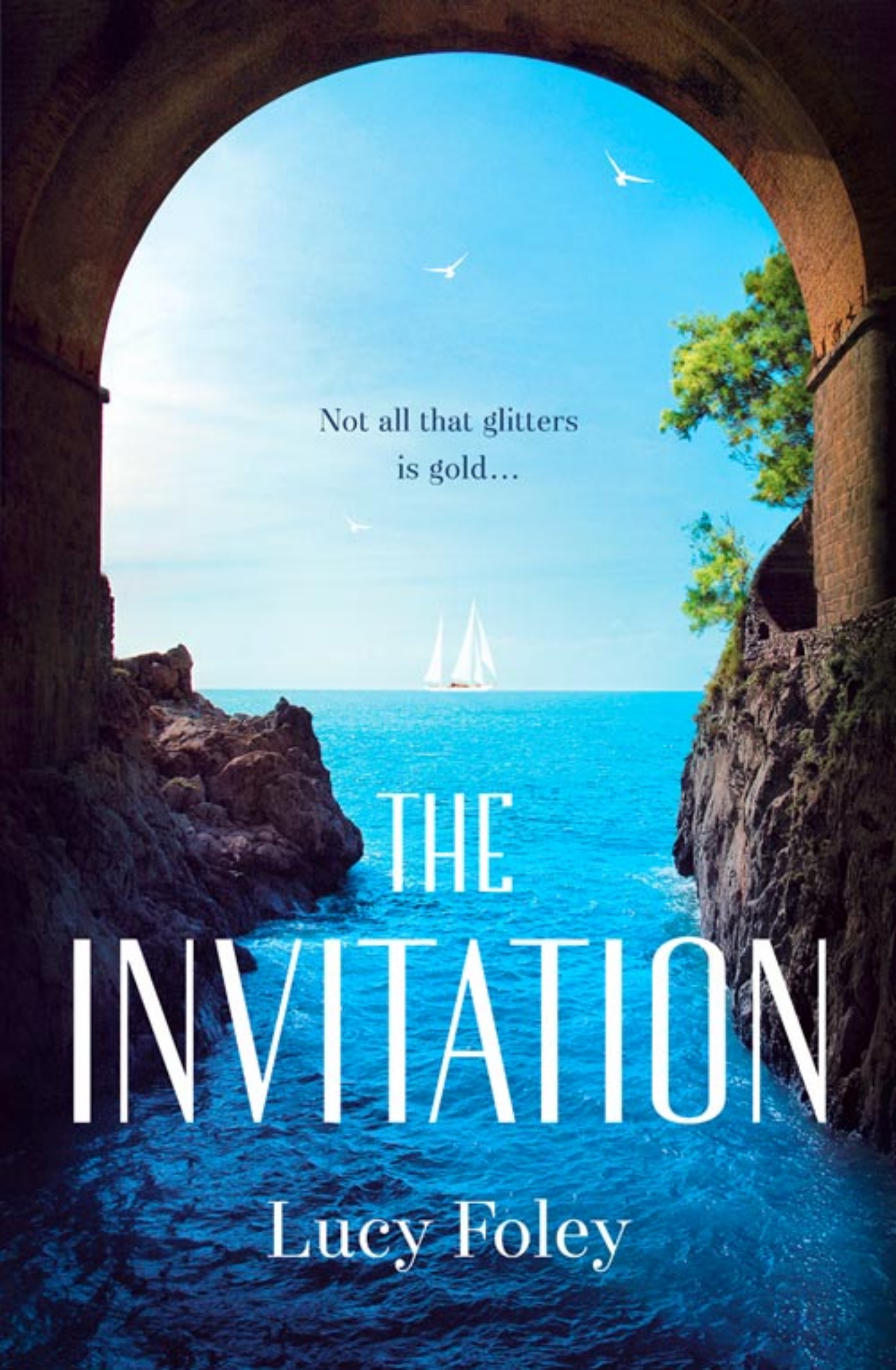
The Invitation

Written by Lucy Foley

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Not all that glitters
is gold...
THE
INVITATION
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Rome, November 1951

Now the city is at its loveliest. The crowds of summer and autumn have gone, the air has a new freshness, the light has that pale-gold quality unique to this time of year. There have been several weeks of this weather now, without a drop of rain.

When the city is like this, Hal does not mind being poor. To live in such a place is in itself a form of richness. He is self-sufficient. He has a job, he has no dependants, he has somewhere to sleep at night. A small bedsit in downmarket Trastevere, fine, but it is enough to call home. So different from the life he would have had in England that he might be living on another planet. This suits him perfectly.

Hal has been here for five years now. His father, he knows, thinks that he is treading water. If his son is going to do something as trifling as journalism he should at least have continued working for the English broadsheet. And here he

is, a freelancer, writing whimsical pieces for a local paper. His mother is more supportive. Rome, after all, is the city of her birth. He learned his Italian from her. Half the stories she read to him as a child were in her mother tongue; the most beautiful language in the world. Now he uses it so regularly that it is beginning to feel like his first language; the English left behind, a part of his old life.

When he arrives at the place Fede is already waiting for him, drinking what appears to be his second espresso. He grins. 'Hal! I like this place. I can see why you come here. So many beautiful women.' He nods to the group in the corner. None of them can be much older than eighteen, but they are dressed in mimicry of the movie stars they no doubt admire: rouged cheeks, cinched waists. One draws on a cigarette self-consciously, blowing a thin plume of smoke over her shoulder in what must be a gesture borrowed from a picture. Her friend carefully outlines her mouth with red lipstick. They are the inheritors of the economic miracle, Hal thinks, modelling themselves on the film stars and fashion models in the pages of the new glossy magazines. They might be a different species altogether from the black-clad matrons glimpsed in Trastevere hanging out their washing, heading to church, looking exactly as they might have done in centuries past. This is Rome, is Italy, all over: the modern and the timeless coexisting in uneasy, spectacular conjunction.

'They're not women,' he says to Fede, watching as the trio explodes into sudden laughter. 'They're girls. They're schoolgirls playing truant.'

'That's how I like them.' Fede pinches the air between thumb and forefinger. 'Tender as the finest *vitello*. Look, she's making eyes at you.'

Hal glances back. Fede is right – one of them is looking

at him. Even this look of hers is modern in its boldness. She is beautiful, in the way that green, unblemished things are. Hal can at least see that, but he can't *feel* it. It is like this with all beauty for him now. He looks away. 'You're vile,' he says to Fede, teasing. 'I don't know why I bother with you.'

Fede raises an eyebrow. 'Because we help each other out. That's why.'

Hal's espresso comes and he knocks it back. 'Well. Do you have anything for me?'

Fede throws up his hands. 'Nothing at the moment, my friend. It's slow at this time of year.'

The biggest and most interesting of Hal's interviews tend to come through Fede, who works in the city's nascent institute for culture.

'Oh.' Hal finds it hard to disguise his disappointment. There are slim pickings on the interview front all round. His editor at *The Tiber* has made it quite clear that another whimsical 'expat in the city' piece won't cut it – and he can't afford to lose this job.

'*But* . . .' Fede says, thoughtfully, 'there is a party.'

'A party?'

'Yes. A contessa is throwing one for her rich friends. Trying to attract investment for a film, I heard. I have an invitation, but cannot go. It is next month – I must be in Puglia by then, for Christmas.' He glances at Hal, sidewise. 'Unless you are returning to your family, too?' One evening, when he'd had too much to drink, Hal made the mistake of telling him about Suze, about the engagement. Ever since, Fede has been unremittingly curious about Hal's former life in England.

'No,' Hal says. 'I'll be staying here.' He knows his mother, in particular, will be disappointed. But he doesn't want to

face her worry for him, his father's pointed questions about when he is going to make something of himself.

'OK then. Well, I thought you could go instead of me.'

It could be interesting, Hal thinks. 'How would I get in?'

'Well,' Fede says, patiently, 'you could pretend to be me. I think we do not look all that different.'

Hal chooses not to point out the obvious. Fede is half a foot shorter, with a broken nose and brown eyes where Hal's are blue. The only similarity is their dark hair.

Now Fede is expounding his idea. 'And think of all those rich women, looking for a little excitement.' He winks. 'Trust me, *amico*, it's the best Christmas present I could give you.'

He fishes a card from his bag. Hal takes it, turns it over in his hand, studies the embossed gold lettering. And he thinks: Why not? What, after all, does he have to lose?

December

He walks all the way from his apartment. He likes walking: there is always something new to see in this city. It seems to shift and grow, revealing glimpses of other lives, other times. There are layers of history here, times at which the barrier between the present and past appears tissue-thin. He might rip at it and reveal another age entirely: Roman, Medieval, Renaissance. This reminder that the present and his place in it are just as transient has a strong appeal. Beside so much history, one's own past becomes rather insignificant.

Of course, there is a more recent time that must be banished from conversation and thought. The war meant humiliation, tragedy. It meant hardship and poverty too. People want prosperity now, they want nice clothes, food on the table,

things. It is the same in England. There was the jubilation over the victory, the hailing of the returned heroes. And then there was the great forgetting.

The address is a little way beyond the Roman Forum, and Hal skirts the edge of it. The stones at this time are in silhouette, backlit by the lights of the city. At this time they appear older yet: as though placed by the very first men.

The place turns out to be a red-brick medieval tower, soaring several storeys above the surrounding rooftops. He has seen it before and wondered about it. He had guessed an embassy, a department of state affairs, the temple of some strange sect, even. Never had he imagined that it might be a private residence.

Torches have been lit in brackets about the entrance, and Hal can see several gleaming motor cars circling like carp, disclosing guests in their evening finery. There are bow ties and tails, full-length gowns. He is not prepared for this. His suit is well-made but old and worn with use, faded at the elbows of the jacket and frayed at the pockets of the trousers. He has lost weight, too, since he last wore it, thanks to his poor diet of coffee and the occasional sandwich. He can't afford to eat properly. When he first wore it he had been much broader about the chest and shoulders. Now he feels almost like a boy borrowing his father's clothes.

All day it has been threatening rain, but there have been several grey days like this without a drop, so he hasn't bothered with an umbrella or raincoat. But only twenty yards or so from the entrance the heavens finally open, like a bad joke. There is no warning, only the sudden chaos of the downpour, rain smoking across the pavement towards him. Instantly his hair, shirt and suit are drenched. If he appeared bedraggled before he must seem now like something that has

crawled its way out of the Tiber. He swears. A woman, emerging from one of the sleek cars, darts an alarmed glance in his direction and hurries in through the doorway.

At the entrance he feels the doorman's gaze irradiate his person, find him wanting. '*Cognome, per favore?*'

'Fiori.'

The man looks at his list, frowns. '*E nome?*'

'Federico.'

He knows even before the man looks back up at him that it has not worked. 'You are not he,' the doorman says, with evident pleasure. 'I know that man. He works for the Ministero. It is my job to remember faces. You are not he.'

Hal hesitates, wondering if there is any use in arguing with the man. After all, if he is confident that he knows Federico by sight . . . But it is worth a try. '*Ma, ho un invito . . .*' He fishes the card from his pocket.

The man is already shaking his head. Hal takes a step back. Only now that he is about to be turned away does he realize how much he has been looking forward to the evening. Not merely as a means to making new contacts, but as a taste of another side of life in the city – the sort glimpsed occasionally through the windows of cars, and the better sort of restaurant. It would have been an experience. The thought of his apartment, cold and dark, depresses him. The long walk back, through the wet streets. He should have known that Fede's scheme would be useless.

He tells himself that really, he wouldn't have wanted to go anyway. He doesn't need to experience that life: it isn't the one he has sought in coming to Rome. And yet there has always been a part of him – a part he isn't necessarily proud of – that has always been drawn towards the idea of a party. Perhaps it is because of his memories of the ones his mother

used to throw in Sussex: the lawns thronged with guests and lights reflected in the dark waters of the harbour beyond. To be in the midst of this, with a glass of some watered-down punch in his hand, was to feel he had stepped into another, adult world. Funny, how one spent one's childhood half-longing to be out of it.

'What is the problem here?'

Hal glances up to see that a woman has appeared in the doorway alongside the man. She wears an emerald green gown, almost medieval in style, a silver stole about her neck. She is quite elderly, in her mid-seventies, perhaps, her face incredibly lined. But she has the bearing of a queen. Her hair is very dark, and if artifice is involved in keeping it this way it is well concealed.

The doorman turns to her, triumphant but obsequious. 'This man, my Contessa, he is not who he says he is.'

Hal feels her gaze on him. Her eyes are amazing, he realizes, like liquid bronze. She studies him for a time without speaking.

'Someone once told me,' she says then, 'that a party is only an event if there is at least one interesting gatecrasher in attendance.' She raises her eyebrows, continuing to study him. '*Are* you a gatecrasher?'

He hesitates, deciding what to say. Is it a trick? Should he persist with the lie, or admit the truth? He wavers.

'Well,' she says, suddenly, 'you certainly look interesting, all the same. Come, let us find you a drink.' She turns, and he sees now that the fur stole falls all the way to the ground behind.

He follows her up the curved staircase, illuminated by further lighted sconces. They pass numerous closed doors, as might confront the hero in the world of a fairytale. The

gown, the centuries-old bricks, the flames of the torches: modern Rome suddenly feels a long way away. From above them come the sounds of a party, voices and music, but distorted as though heard through water.

She calls back to him. 'You are not Italian, are you?'

'No,' he says, 'I'm not.' Half-Italian – but he won't say that. The less you say, the fewer questions you invite. It is something to live by.

'Even more interesting. Do you know how I guessed? It is not because of your Italian, I should add – it is almost perfect.'

'No.'

'Because of your suit, of course. I never make mistakes about tailoring. It is English-made, I think?'

'Yes, it is.' His father had it made up for him by his tailor.

'Excellent. I like to be right. Now, tell me why you are here.'

'My friend had an invitation. He thought I might want to come instead of him.'

'No, *Caro*. I mean to ask why you are in Rome.'

'Oh. For work.'

'People do not come to Rome for work. There is always something more that drives them: love, escape, the hope of a new life. Which is it?'

Hal meets her eyes for as long as he is able, and then he has to look away. He felt for a second that she was seeing right into him, and that he was exposed. He understands, suddenly, that he won't be able to get in without answering her question. He is reminded of the myth of the Sphinx at Thebes, asking her riddles, devouring those who answer wrongly.

'Escape,' he says. And it is true, he realizes. He had told himself Rome would be a new start, but it had been more

about leaving the old behind. England had been too full of ghosts. The man he had been before the war was one of them; the spectre of his former happiness. And of all those who hadn't come home – his friend, Morris, among them. Rome is full of ghosts, too – centuries of them. There is perhaps a stronger concentration of souls here than in any other place in the world: it is not the Eternal City for nothing. But the important thing is that they aren't *his* ghosts.

She nods, slowly. And he wonders if he has made the exchange, given the thing demanded in return for entry. But no, her questions haven't ended yet.

'And what do you do here?'

'I'm a journalist.' As soon as he says it he decides he should have lied. People in her sort of position can be obsessive about privacy. She doesn't seem disturbed by it, though.

'What's your name?'

'Hal Jacobs. I doubt that you will have—'

But she is squinting at him, as though trying to work something out. Finally, she seems to have it. 'Reviews,' she says, triumphantly, 'reviews of films.'

But no one read that column – that was the problem, as his editor at *The Tiber* had said.

'Well, yes, I did write them. A couple of years ago now.'

'They were brilliant,' she says. '*Molto molto acuto*.'

'Thank you,' he says, surprised.

'There was one you wrote of Giacomo Gaspari's film, *La Elegia*. And I thought to myself, there are all these Italian critics failing to see its purpose, asking why anyone would want to look back to the war, that time of shame. And then there was an Englishman – you – who understood it absolutely. You wrote with such power.'

Elegy. Hal remembers the film viscerally, as though it is in some way seared into him.

'After I read that,' she says, 'I thought: I must read everything this man has to write on film. You saw what others didn't. But you stopped!'

Hal shrugs. 'My editor thought my style was . . . too academic, not right for our readership.' It had been replaced with an agony aunt column: '*Gina Risponde* . . .' Roman housewives writing in to ask how to get their whites whiter, lonely men asking how to conceal a balding pate, young women eager to work in the capital asking whether it was really the immoral, dangerous place their parents spoke of.

The Contessa is shaking her head, as though over some great wrong. 'But why would you work somewhere like . . .' she seems to be searching for the name.

'*The Tiber*?'

'Yes. You should be writing for a national magazine.'

It must be nice, Hal thinks, to live in a world in which things are so easy. As though one might merely walk into the office of one of the bigger magazines and demand a job. There had been interviews. But nothing had come of it. And his work for *The Tiber* has – just about – allowed him to pay his rent, to feed himself.

'I work there because they'll have me.'

'I wonder if they know how lucky they are.' She looks at him thoughtfully. 'Perhaps when my film is made you can write a review of that. Only a good one, naturally.'

He remembers, now, Fede saying something about a film. 'When will it be made?'

'When I can afford it. It is why I am throwing this party – to try and persuade others they want to see it made too.'

'Ah.'

'I need to use all my powers of charm.' She smiles, suddenly. 'Do you think I can do it?'

He says, honestly, 'Yes, I do.' Because she does have it, a charisma beside which the charms of youth or beauty are so much blown thistledown.

She laughs. 'I am suddenly delighted to have you at my party, Hal Jacobs.' And then she beckons, with one beringed hand. 'Please, follow me.'

Now they are reaching the top of the staircase where the final door stands open to reveal a seething crowd. As Hal steps into the room, his first thought is that he is surrounded by people of extraordinary beauty. But as the illusion thins, he realizes that this is not the case. There is ugliness here. But the gorgeous clothes and jewels and the very air itself – performed with scent and wine and expensive cigarettes – do a clever job of hiding the flaws.

As the Contessa steps toward the crowd, the energies of the room extend themselves toward her. Heads turn and several guests begin to make their way in her direction, as though drawn on invisible wires. She looks back at Hal.

'I'm afraid that I am about to be busy,' she says to him.

'Of course. Please, go to your real guests.'

She smiles. 'Hal Jacobs,' she says. 'I *will* remember.' And then, before he can ask exactly what she means by this, she winks. 'Enjoy my party.' Then she walks into the crowd and is enveloped by it, lost from view.

Hal wanders through the throng, picking up a flute of spumante from a waiter and sipping it as he goes. One of the things that strikes him is the number of different nationalities in attendance. A few years ago, he was in the minority as an Englishman. Holidaymakers were only allowed to take £35 out of the country with them. Most

stayed at home. Now, they are returning – and perhaps in greater numbers than before. He isn't sure how he feels about this.

The thing that unifies this crowd, across nationalities, is the same thing that gave that initial impression of beauty. They are all of a type.

He attempts to catch the eye of the guests that pass him, but every gaze slides over him and then on, in search of more important fare. Several times, he launches himself forward into a group, tries to enter the conversation. He just needs that one opening, then he feels certain he will be able to make things stick. And yet it does not come. Mostly he is ignored. It is something that happens in increments: a guest steps slightly in front of him, or a comment he attempts to make is ignored, or the circle simply disperses so that he is left standing on his own. At first Hal can't decide whether it is intentional or not. But on a couple of occasions he is quite actively frozen out. One man turns to give him a terrible stare, and Hal is so bemused by the impression of something like hatred, that he takes a step back. Apparently this set do not take well to newcomers. He is a cuckoo in the nest, and they know it. Usually, though it would be arrogance to admit it, Hal is used to being looked at by women. He has always been lucky in that respect. But here he is not given a second glance. Here something more than good looks is being searched out, something in which he is lacking. He is less than invisible.

Eventually, tired of the repeated humiliation and the noise and hot crush of bodies, he makes for the doors visible at the far end of the room, open onto a fire escape. He will finish his drink, he thinks, have a cigarette, and then go back in and make another attempt, buoyed by the alcohol. He

will not leave here empty-handed; he merely needs a little time to regroup.

Outside he discovers a flight of stairs leading up, not down, to the roof of the tower itself. Curious, he climbs them. He is astonished to discover himself in the midst of a roof garden. Rome, in all its lamplit, undulating glory, is spread beneath him on all sides. He can see the dark blank of the Roman Forum, a few of the ancient stones made dimly visible by reflected lamplight; the marble bombast of the Altare della Patria with its winged riders like cut-outs against the starlit sky. Then, a little further away, the graceful cupola of St Peter's, and further domes and spires unknown to him. A network of lamplit streets, some teeming with ant-like forms, others quiet, sleeping. He has never seen Rome like this.

For a vertiginous moment, he feels that he is floating above it all. Then the ground reforms itself beneath him; he begins to look around. There are palms and shrubs, the smell of the earth after the rain. He gropes for the word for it: petrichor.

He hears running water and discovers a fountain in which a stone caryatid, palely nude, pours water from her jug. Nearby, a bird caws, and with a great flustered commotion takes wing into the night. He peers after the black shape, surprisingly large. A parrot? An eagle? A *phoenix*? Any of these seem possible, here.

He appears to be quite alone. Clearly the opportunities presented by the crush inside are too good for the other guests to miss. He looks toward Trastevere. Somewhere down there he has gone to sleep every night since his arrival in the city, utterly ignorant of the fact that such wonders existed only a few miles away.