The Sonnet Lover

Carol Goodman

Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER ONE

The most thankless job on the planet may well be teaching Renaissance love poetry to a group of hormone-dazed adolescents on a beautiful spring day. I had saved up against just such a day, through the deep snows of February, the sleets of March, and April's endless deluge, one of the most popular and accessible of Shakespeare's sonnets, but I might as well have been reciting the Dow Jones Industrial Average for all the impact the Bard's words were having on the class. Even Robin Weiss, my best student, was more interested in the sunbathers and frisbee players cavorting five stories below us in Washington Square Park than in answering my last question.

"I'm sorry," he says, his eyes still on the sun-splashed scene outside the window. "Could you repeat the question?"

"I asked what you thought of Shakespeare's promise to his beloved to immortalize him through art."

"Hmph." Robin begins by ejecting a disdainful breath of air. "I think of it the way I think of most lovers' promises, that he 'speaks an infinite deal of nothing.' "

A chorus of sighs from the girls in the back row greets Robin's pronouncement. Had they all had their hearts broken recently? I wonder. Perhaps by Robin himself? Weren't they a little young to be giving up on love? But then I remember that this is exactly the age that feels love's disappointment the most keenly, the age when one might forswear love, never guessing there might come a day when one is forsworn by love.

"So you don't think that art provides immortality?" I ask, unwilling to let Robin hide behind the world-weary pose he's worn, along with a vintage Versace tweed jacket lined in yellow silk, since returning from his junior year abroad in Florence last semester. I still remembered the fervor he'd had in Freshman Comp. He was going to be a playwright because, he said, to have your words spoken on the stage after your death meant you'd never truly be dead. I knew he'd switched his ambition to filmmaker since then and had spent his year in Italy making a film that the whole campus was talking about. In fact, tonight it was to be shown at the Hudson College Invitational Film Show, where it was expected to win first prize. Was Robin already jaded by success?

Turning from the sun toward me, though, his face looks not so much jaded as *bruised.* His pale blue eyes are dilated and bloodshot, his full lips are chapped and swollen, and his delicate skin is chafed and raw. His sandy brown hair looks as wild as the signature Medusa heads on the buttons of his jacket. I'm used to my students looking haggard around finals time, but Robin looks as if he'd spent the last week weeping. I would happily let him off the hook—especially since I can tell by the shuffling of books and shouldering of backpacks and by my watch, which lies on the desk in front of me, that the class's hour is drawing to an end—but Robin chooses to answer my question with a question. Or rather, two questions.

"If you lost someone you loved, would reading something about him—or by him—lessen the loss one iota? Wouldn't you trade all the poems and all the plays in all the world for just five minutes with him again?"

"Well," I begin, intending to deal with Robin's question as I usually deal with difficult—or in this case, unanswerable—questions in class: by turning it back to the student. Maybe even assigning it as an essay topic. But Robin is looking at me as though he really expects an answer. As if he'd been offered this Faustian bargain last night at the Cedar Tavern and there's a sinister-looking man in a dark overcoat waiting in the hall for his answer. All of literature for five minutes with your lost beloved? Even the class's incipient rustling, which should have swept us all out of here like a late November rainstorm cleaning out the dead leaves, has been stilled by Robin's urgency.

"Five minutes?" I ask. As if I could bargain. Get in on the deal.

Robin nods, the ghost of a smile curving his chapped lips, reminding me of someone else whose lips used to curve in that same Cupid's bow.

"Sure," I say, blushing at the memory of that other mouth, "who wouldn't?"

There's another class in the same room after ours, so there's no lingering. In the hall I answer a few of my students' questions about the final and the term paper and explain, riding the elevator down to the lobby, that my regular office hours are suspended today because of the film show and reception tonight. When the elevator reaches the ground floor the students quickly disperse, and I'm surprised to see Robin, who had bolted out of the class after I answered his question, still in the lobby. It's been a while since he's waited for me after class. I'm even more surprised to see him in conversation with a young man who might have sprung from my Faustian fantasy of ten minutes ago—right down to the black sheepherding overcoat and sinister expression. The boy turns his face to the light and I'm startled both by how handsome he is—his finely modeled features like a white marble bust of a Greek god framed by blue-black ringlets—and by something *familiar* about him. No doubt he's a drama major whom I've seen in a student play. He certainly seems to have a flair for the dramatic as he replies angrily to something Robin says, shakes his fine head of hair, and then sweeps out of the lobby, the tails of his coat floating behind him.

For a moment Robin looks as if he were considering following him, but then he sees me. "I know you don't have office hours, Dr. Asher," he says, "but could I walk with you a minute?"

"As long as you don't ask any more soul-searching questions," I say, preceding Robin through the revolving doors. Although it's late in the afternoon, the light is so bright that I have to fish in my bag for sunglasses. When I've gotten them on, I see by Robin's downcast expression that he's taken my remark seriously.

"Oh, no, you *do* have another soul-searching question. Well, ask away, but try to remember that I'm old, Robin, and such urgent questions of love are a little less urgent these days."

"You're hardly old—" he begins, but I wave my hands in the air to stop him. God, had I been fishing for a compliment? Had I—even worse—been flirting?

"Actually, that's what I wanted to ask you ab-bout," Robin says, stuttering a little on the last word. I haven't heard Robin stutter since first semester freshman year, when he started taking voice and acting classes. It must be the film show tonight that has him so nervous. "You're . . . what . . . in your mid-thirties?"

"Thereabouts," I say, thinking, *Close enough.* No need to tell him that at thirty-nine I'm at the bitter end of my thirties. "Why?"

"Because you were at La Civetta when you were in college and I wondered if some of the same teachers were there. I'm going back there this summer and I'm trying to decide what classes to take."

We've reached Graham Hall, the nineteenth-century brownstone that houses the comp lit department and my office. The building is named for Hudson College's most famous alumnus, Cyril Graham, who donated his New York townhouse to the college, along with the use of his villa in Tuscany, La Civetta, four decades ago. There's a plaque with Cyril's profile etched in bronze beside the front door, and as I turn to answer Robin's question (making it clear, I hope, that he shouldn't follow me up to my office), I can almost feel the old man's hawklike eyes boring into my back.

"Well, let's see," I say, pretending that the year I spent at La Civetta

twenty years ago is such a distant and minor episode that I have to ransack my memory in order to recall its dramatis personae. "The old man himself was there, of course," I say, cocking a thumb over my shoulder at the plaque, "teaching that class . . . what did he call it?"

"The Aesthetics of Place," Robin says, smiling.

"My God, is he still at it? Does he still go on about the Mitford sisters and the Duchess of Windsor?"

Robin smiles and looks a little more relaxed. "He manages to imply he went to Oxford with both Oscar Wilde *and* Evelyn Waugh—a chronological impossibility—and was simultaneously lunching with Fellini on the Via Veneto while making silk screens with Warhol at the Factory—a geographical impossibility."

I laugh, relieved to see that Robin's stutter has disappeared again. The remarks about Cyril Graham sound like a set speech. Even his pose—one hand grasping the lapel of his vintage jacket so that the sun glances off its gold Medusa-head buttons—looks rehearsed. I suspect that Robin, like many a stutterer before him, has learned that his delivery is improved by rehearsal. "I have to admit that I enjoyed that class. It was such shameless gossip and a rest after declining Latin nouns with Harriet Milhouse and memorizing Renaissance architectural terms with Professore DelVecchio."

"I think they've retired," Robin says, "but I would have thought the class you'd mention first would have been the one on the sonnet—"

"Oh, but the professor who taught that class was a graduate student," I say, perhaps a little too quickly—as if I'd had my excuse for not mentioning him ready. "He went back to Rome the next year to finish his degree."

"Bruno Brunelli, right? He's back. His wife, Claudia, took over the job of hospitality coordinator from Bruno's mother, Benedetta, only in Claudia's case it's really a misnomer—"

"Oh, really? I didn't know." I hold up my wrist to check the time but my watch isn't there. "Damn," I say, "I must have left my watch in class." I always take my watch off in class and lay it on the desk so that I can keep track of where I am in my lecture without having to look at

my wrist. I've never left it behind, though. Had Robin's question rattled me that badly?

"I'll run back for it," Robin offers gallantly. "Will you be at the film show?"

"Of course, Robin, I wouldn't miss your opening night, but please don't bother—"

"Then I'll give it to you there," he says, brushing away my objections, "and we can talk some more? There's something really important I have to discuss with you."

"If I can get through your flock of admirers after your film is shown, I'll be happy to talk to you." The shadow that had been over him in class is back—or perhaps it's just that the spring light is fading from the sky, leaving us both in the shade of the brownstone.

"I might need rescuing from an angry mob instead. The film isn't going to be what everyone expects."

"That's just opening-night jitters, Robin. I'm sure it'll be great."

"But even so, will you?"

"Will I what? Rescue you?"

Robin lays his fingertips on my wrist—in just the place laid bare by my missing watch—and I shiver at his touch. The spring day's promise of summer has faded to chill evening. I start to laugh at the absurdity of Robin's request, but when I see the look in his eyes I don't.

"Of course," I tell him, "I'll do my best."

I carry the chill of Robin's touch up three sweeping flights of the main staircase and one back-stairs flight to the garret (formerly a maid's room) under the eaves that's been my office for the six years I've taught at Hudson College. Mark Abrams, the college president, has offered to relocate me to the new faculty building on Mercer, where I'd have elevator service, high-speed Internet access, and German coffee machines perking finely ground Colombian coffee all day long. But I prefer my little garret with its egg-and-dart moldings and nonworking fireplace. Besides, I have my coffee at Cafe Lucrezia on MacDougal, which has

two working fireplaces and makes the best cappuccino this side of the Atlantic.

I wish, though, as I open the door, that I'd run in for a cup on the way here, because the office, with its blinds closed all day against the spring sunshine, feels cold. An unaccountable sadness stirs in me—as if I'd missed something by closing out that light from my dusty bookshelves and faded green upholstered Morris chair—and pulls me across to the window to open the blinds before turning on the desk lamp.

The Graham brownstone is on the west side of the park and the sun has already passed over its roof, but I can still see the last of the light reflected on the old townhouses that line the north side of the park, turning the sooty New York bricks to a rich Florentine ochre. I close my eyes to preserve that Mediterranean color for one moment longer and feel, where I'd felt chill before, the warmth of an embrace spreading across my back.

"You've got to stop letting yourself in," I say, turning into Mark's arms. "I'm going to scream one of these days and the secretaries in comp lit will come running."

"We'd just have to explain that you were reacting to departmental budget cuts. You wouldn't be the only one screaming about that."

I'm about to register my concurrence with my colleagues but Mark kisses me, pressing the length of his body against mine so tightly that I feel the wide ledge of the window cutting into the small of my back. I ease myself onto the ledge, pulling away from his kiss.

"I wish all my faculty were so easily persuaded to see the necessity of cutting back," he says.

"I certainly hope you don't use the same persuasive techniques on them," I say, leaning lightly onto the cold windowpane behind me. I imagine that one day I'll lean back a little too hard and the two of us will crash through the glass and hurtle to the pavement below, where we will land, limbs entwined, below the amused bronze gaze of Cyril Graham. This is where we made love the first time, three years ago, after a faculty party, and even though I live only two blocks away and Mark's apartment is only a short subway ride uptown, we've made love here many

times since then. It's the risk, I think, of someone discovering us that still draws us here. Mark had thought then that we should keep our affair secret—at least until I made tenure. At first I'd been suspicious that he wanted to keep the relationship secret only because he didn't intend to stay in it, but he's been (as far as I can tell) a faithful lover for three years. Only lately, as my tenure review looms near, have I found myself wondering whether half the pleasure in our affair comes from that enforced secrecy, and half the pleasure in making love here from feeling that cold glass barrier, hard but fragile, always at my back.

Mark brushes the hem of my dress halfway up my thigh, but I catch his hand. "Don't you have a speech to give in, like . . . ten minutes?"

He makes a face but quickly smooths my dress back over my leg—a little too compliantly, I think.

"Is this what you're wearing to the reception?" he asks, taking a step back to observe my outfit—and also to give me room to get down from the window seat.

"That's the plan," I say, moving past him toward my desk. I slip out of the jacket I wore to class and slide the silk scarf from around my neck to reveal a sleeveless black cocktail dress that I found in a vintage clothing store on Horatio Street last week. Then I sit down at my desk and turn to the mirror I keep propped up on the bookcase between the collected *canzoniere* of Petrarch and Helen Vendler's book of Shakespeare's sonnets. Mark sits on the windowsill and lights a cigarette—another vice he saves for my company alone even though I've managed to quit—while I let my hair down and start to brush it.

"You should wear it down," he says when I start to coil it back into a twist. "The color is so pretty—like a Botticelli madonna." He smiles at his own compliment, proud, I think, that he's recalled my favorite painter.

"Why this sudden concern for my appearance?" I ask, leaning a little closer to the mirror to see whether he's right—whether the color is still more gold than silver. It is, but only just. I still look fairly young (*mid-thirties,* Robin had said) but for the tiny lines at the corners of my eyes and the light silvering around my temples. "It's just the student film show."

"Some of Cyril Graham's Hollywood cronies are coming and they're sure to report back to him. It wouldn't hurt to make a good impression."

"That will be good for Robin Weiss," I say, ignoring the idea that anyone from Hollywood would be interested for two seconds in a forty-ish English professor, "to have his film seen by people in the industry."

"I'm pretty sure that's why they're here. Graham told them the film was done on the grounds of the villa and he expected from what he saw of the filming that it would be quite interesting—and there's even talk of a major film being made at La Civetta based on a screenplay Robin's written."

I frown into the mirror—instantly aging my face several years—remembering what Robin had said. *The film isn't going to be what everyone expects.* "Well, I hope it's not too much pressure on Robin," I say. "He looked ragged in class today."

"Don't you think that you're perhaps too emotionally involved in your students?" Mark asks.

I angle my mirror so that I can see Mark's expression—or rather, more important, to see whether he's watching *my* expression. To see whether what he's really concerned about is my emotional involvement with *this* particular student. Three years ago, when Mark and I first found our way back to my office after that faculty party, Mark had expressed his professional concern that I'd become overly familiar with Robin Weiss. I'd been seen having coffee with him at Cafe Lucrezia and he spent a lot of time in my office.

"I wouldn't worry," Mark had said then as we climbed the back stairs to my office, "except that it would be natural for a boy to have a crush on such a beautiful woman."

The compliment had taken me by surprise. Not because I didn't think a man could find me beautiful, but because Mark Abrams had struck me as too serious a man to bother with compliments. I knew he was very ambitious for the college, that he planned to transform Hudson College into a premier liberal arts institution. Like a lot of my colleagues, I had not always been happy about how he was going about achieving that goal—deferring money from more traditional academic

departments to the more high-profile film department, for instance. I had become so used to thinking of him as an adversary in departmental meetings that I hadn't considered him as a prospective suitor.

When I had let myself into the office I crossed to the window ledge, where I sat down and lit a cigarette (I still smoked then). Instead of reminding me of the no-smoking rule, he crossed the room and, letting his hand rest on mine for a moment, took the cigarette out of my hand and raised it to his lips.

"Maybe," I said, watching him inhale. His lips were a trifle thin—no Cupid's bow—but he had a strong jaw and the kind of clean-cut features that aged well. An undeniably handsome man. "But would it be natural for a woman my age to be interested in a boy?"

He didn't answer. I'm sure he thought it was a rhetorical question and that the way I pronounced *boy* was meant as a disparaging comparison with the charms of an older man. He tossed the cigarette out the window and kissed me, pushing me onto the window sill until I felt the cold glass at my back. He never asked me about Robin Weiss again, but I've often wondered whether it's ever occurred to him that I never answered *his* question, that I merely turned it back on him the way I did with my students.

He doesn't appear to be thinking about that now as he stands at the window, one hand in his trouser pocket rumpling the line of his good gray wool suit, one hand still holding the cigarette, which has nearly burned down to the filter. He's looking out over the park, toward the NYU buildings on the east side, their violet flags glowing in the late spring sunshine. He looks like a general surveying a neighboring kingdom and planning his attack. He doesn't appear to notice that I haven't answered his latest question, either. He flicks his cigarette out the window and comes up behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders. "You need a vacation," he says, massaging the tight muscles.

I glance at my own reflection in the mirror to gauge my expression. The last time Mark and I discussed the summer, we decided (or rather, Mark suggested and I agreed) that we should spend it apart. After all, my tenure review was coming up in September. Why risk anything now? Had he changed his mind? Did I want him to have changed his mind?

"I'm taking one," I tell him as I apply a coat of mascara to my eyelashes. "Six weeks at the cabin in Woodstock, where I plan to finish the sonnet book."

"That's not a vacation," he says, "that's hard labor."

"Surely you're not discouraging a faculty member from publication, President Abrams," I say teasingly.

But Mark doesn't laugh. "Actually, I have a better place for you to work, a place a little closer to the birthplace of the sonnet . . ."

"Sicily?" I ask. "If you mean the court where Giacomo da Lentini was employed—"

"I meant Italy in general," he says, sounding impatient, "and La Civetta in particular. Graham says he's got some very important sixteenth-century manuscripts—"

"Cyril Graham is a crank, Mark, you know that. He's spent the last twenty years dangling the promise of 'very important' manuscripts in front of half a dozen different academic institutions to raise interest in that moldering old villa of his so that he'd be sure to spend his twilight years surrounded by eager young scholars."

"That moldering old villa, as you call it, has been estimated to be worth nearly a billion dollars," Mark says, "and crank or not, Graham is on the verge of bequeathing it to Hudson College . . . unless he changes his mind and chooses another institution. There's a rumor he's been talking to one of the SUNYs—"

"Ah," I say, swiveling in my chair to face Mark. "Cyril's playing coy with his will again. I thought all the papers had been signed—"

"Some complications have come up and it looks like I'll have to spend the summer—along with one of our lawyers—at La Civetta."

"Poor baby," I say, pursing my lips. "Most of the professors are fighting tooth and nail to spend the summer there. I hear Frieda Mainbocher in women's studies had a fit when she learned Lydia Belquist in classics was going to teach the Women in Italian History class this summer."

"I solved that by making them co-teach the class," Mark says. "So that's who I'll have for company over there if you don't come: Lydia, Frieda, and the drama department. I thought that if you could work on

your book there we'd get to spend some time together, but if you'd rather be alone . . ." The look of hurt on Mark's face makes me instantly regret teasing him. Clearly he wants us to spend the summer together, and I would, too—just not at La Civetta.

"I don't think I'd be any help with Graham," I say. "He wasn't happy with me when I left."

"Really? He speaks quite fondly of you. He said he's been reading your sonnets in *The Lyric* and was quite impressed."

"Oh, please," I say swiveling back to the mirror to put on my lipstick—and to hide the blush of pleasure the compliment has caused. "Cyril hasn't read anything but *Debrett's Peerage* and *Town & Country* in decades."

"Then someone must have shown them to him," Mark says, rubbing my shoulders again. His right hand drifts from my shoulder down the front of my dress, but I'm finding it hard to focus because I'm replaying the professors Robin Weiss said were in residence at La Civetta. There's only one whom I can imagine subscribing to *The Lyric.*

"No," I say, laying my hand over his before it reaches my breast, "I'm afraid you'll just have to make do with Lydia and Frieda. I can't possibly go."