

PROLOGUE

DON'T SKIP THIS PART.

C'est important. (That's French for exactly what you think.)

In this world, some of us love and some of us write about it.

And the best loves to write about, in my not-inexperienced opinion, are the doomed ones.

Two feuding families: the Montagues and Capulets. Two teens in love: Romeo and Juliet. Yes, one a Montague, one a Capulet. Call them star-crossed if you want. Sounds like just the kind of pretty thing you want to read in your horoscope, but, alas, it's just poet-speak for *doomed*.

So doomed, in fact, you have to wonder if the young beauties can even survive to the end.

We're in Paris, that picture-perfect paradise of everlasting passion. But if you think the City of Love is only for couples who wear their hearts on their sleeves for the world to see, *vous pensez mal*. Paris and its hidden spots are made for forbidden pairs rendezvousing in secret rooms for stolen moments.

And that's exactly what Romeo and Juliet are wont to do. Yes, two rich kids who can buy anything, stealing moments.

Why should two such pretty youths have so much trouble but for a kiss? Oh, for more than that, yes, but still . . . such sneaking shouldn't be necessary. But it goes deep between two families, fueled by hate that's brewed for years.

Two families of fashion, Paris's oldest profession (after the really old one, anyway).

Designs and shipments stolen, reputations dirtied, heirs dethroned, demolished. Even rumors of murder most foul.

And, perhaps, the secrets kept by two old companies dressing up struggles they're hiding from everyone. Both putting on an act, both thinking the other is stronger. They could be in the same support group, but a habit of mutual hatred never goes out of style.

Without a care for old grudges, Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet are in love.

Star-crossed? Maybe. Doomed? Well, I told you I like that word.

On the verge of meeting a fateful third party even the stars never imagined?

Read on.

CHAPTER 1

JULIET

JULIET RACED ALONG the right bank of the Seine. Tourists walked in slow-moving romantic pairs, shoulders and hips together, each set like a locked gateway blocking her path.

"Excuse me, excusez-moi, s'il vous plait . . . pardonnez-moi. . ."

She slipped between the couples, glad she'd worn fairy-light flats that made her steps soft and fast. Anything heavier, louder, and someone would have stopped to ask her where she'd found that shoulder-skimming button-down (old shirt of her brother's), or who made the black-and-brown leather belt softened with age that cinched her waist (really two old belts she'd found at flea markets and twisted together; her way of wearing them suggested a designer who'd worked hard to engineer them that way).

Every second she lost now was a second lost with him, and those seconds were already so fleeting and infrequent her heart could barely stand it.

She turned onto the Pont des Arts, the metal footbridge that spanned the Seine. She started reading names.

Chantal et Louis

José y Sabrina

Alex and Elizabeth

Jean et Pierre

Guillaume et Penelope

The locks never stopped, and they were all wrong.

Juliet tried not to interrupt moments between lovers as she ducked between them, hoping for a closer look at the locks fastened to the Love-Lock Bridge.

To any tourist on the Seine, Juliet was just another lovelorn girl mooning over each padlocked promise, hoping that one day she'd have someone to vow forever with. After all, there was something far more romantic about this bridge of promises than even the top of the Eiffel Tower at dusk. Lovers would come here with their padlocks or buy a lock from the vendors lining the bridge. They'd write their names and a note on the lock—*Eternité* was a popular phrase—and secure it to the bridge's side. Then, together, they'd hurl the key to the lock into the river, a promise to be fused together ever after.

Most of these pairs knew nothing of what real love was. Juliet was probably being unfair, but to her, the obstacles she and her love faced made their bond more real. So many of these couples,

she thought, were tourists in Paris and mere visitors on the course of true love. The real thing never did run smooth.

Yes, the tourists may have seen a forlorn girl, longing for love. But the truth was, she wasn't studying the locks, wishing for one of her own, but was searching for the one that was hers, the one that would lead her to the one who had put it there. *Her* one.

She sidestepped a pair of lovers locked in an embrace, oblivious to everyone, and she felt a tremor of jealousy. She and her love should have been one of those couples, lost in each other, and instead here she was, wasting valuable time trying to find the message that would lead her to him. She reminded herself again that the difficulties she and her lover endured to see each other just meant their love was that much stronger.

Juliet paced the side of the bridge facing Notre-Dame Cathedral. The church was another symbol for them. If their love couldn't be consecrated on earth, it was surely a gift from the heavens.

The locks here were packed tight, and blurred together whenever she stared too long. How would she find theirs?

She took a deep breath, imagining his face, his smile when she arrived. There, in the soft breeze, a red ribbon edged with gold piping fluttered. "Heartstring," they called it. "It's what ties us," he'd said.

Juliet got down onto her knees and took the lock in her hands as tenderly as if it had been his face. Romeo had been here to clasp the lock to the bridge, and, somehow, she could feel him there, that past version of him. She wondered if he'd been able to sense her, this future version of her, finding the lock.

The lock was small but the words written in red marker were clear: *Hotel Lemieux, room 328*.

Juliet's heart pounded so hard she had to run to give it the room it needed in her chest. She hailed a cab as quickly as she could and slipped inside.

"Hotel Lemieux, *s'il vous plait*," she said.

"Pardon?"

The cab driver turned in his seat and looked at her. Juliet trembled with nerves and bent her head, letting her dark hair fall in waves over her cheeks. The less he saw of her, the better. She wasn't famous, *per se*, but she was a public figure.

Juliet murmured the address. Most people with money to spend on cabs weren't headed to the Hotel Lemieux. Its name translated to "the best," but in truth the place was a mere step above a youth hostel. The décor and supposed amenities—just a lounge off the lobby housing dusty imitation Louis XIV furniture and a sputtering vending machine—were at least twice Juliet's age. Most of the clientele were young, like Juliet, but not native Parisians. The youthful travelers mostly had nothing but overstuffed backpacks and dreams of seeing the world.

Juliet loved it there. It may have been close to her and Romeo's homes, but it was so far removed from their worlds that it seemed like anything could happen there. She loved it for the same reasons she loved digging up finds at flea markets and rummage sales: She liked things that belonged to the real world, and not the one her family had created.

Getting there, however, wasn't always easy. Her taxi plodded

through Paris traffic, giving her time to think about the latest message that had arrived from Romeo. It was from an account they shared—where they saved emails as drafts for the other to see. Both families had private security details that scanned all incoming and outgoing email. With the shared account, Romeo and Juliet skirted the threat of discovery. The message, without subject, contained just three letters: *A.V.O.* It was her clue to find their lock on the bridge.

Amor Vincit Omnia. Love Conquers All.

It was a phrase she'd discovered while doing research for her father, of all things. It had been three years since she'd found it. Even then, at thirteen, she was already a vaunted figure at the House of Capulet thanks to her innate sense of style. Family legend said that even as a baby, she'd cry if outfitted in the usual princess-pink baby clothes, and looked her most comfortable in more sophisticated ensembles. (She'd had a black velvet party dress as a toddler that was copied a million times over after a photo of her wearing it accompanied a profile of the Capulets that appeared in *Paris Match*.) Juliet just *knew*. Not only with fashion, but with the business. She knew when a brand name would catch such fire it would become part of everyday vernacular, or when a model's unique look would start a major trend.

And at thirteen, she'd been tasked to find a name for a new clothing line for young women approaching adulthood, and "A.V.O." had been her answer. What woman didn't want to believe that true love was the be-all-end-all force to vanquish any threat to happiness?

When she'd found the phrase, she believed it as a young teen who knew nothing of real love. Now, she felt it to her core.

His email had arrived yesterday. Juliet's comings and goings were so tightly monitored that she'd had to wait for an opportunity to sneak across the city, and on Saturdays the house teemed with too much help to slip away. Today, though, her mother had succeeded in dragging her father to church, certainly to be followed by a lavish lunch and shopping excursion. Juliet had left a note that she'd needed to go to the library, for school, and to get some air.

Romeo, well, sometimes he felt like her air.

So, what if he wasn't there anymore? If she arrived at Hotel Lemieux to find he'd gone? She checked her secret email account constantly, obsessively, but that didn't mean she could exit her life at a moment's notice to meet him. He understood and knew the pressures, but thanks to his past, his own family *expected* him to disappear sometimes. He was a young man—a wealthy, dashing one—and sowing his wild oats, as it were, was practically a birthright. It was a birthright he'd easily given up for Juliet, but no one knew that. Not even Juliet. Not yet.

The taxi turned onto the narrow street where the hotel was. A delivery truck blocked the road as workers at a grocer's shop unloaded boxes of produce. Impatience rattled her body.

"This is good," she told the cab driver. "I'll get out now." The hotel was only a few blocks away. She thrust some euros into his palm and leaped out of the cab, running to the hotel and up

the stairs as fast as she could until she reached room 328. She knocked.

Please be here. . . . Please be here. . . .

The door clicked open almost instantly. He smiled down at her and her breath stopped. She'd been around the most coveted male models and movie stars in the world, but he was the only one who could render her breathless. Just him.

"I've missed you," Romeo said. He curled his fingers beneath her belt and pulled her to him.

Juliet wrapped her arms around his neck, and as their lips met, the world around them retracted until they were all that was left.

"I thought I'd be too late," Juliet murmured later. Her hair spilled over Romeo's arm. She lay in the crook of his elbow, memorizing the way his bare skin felt beneath her cheek. Tracing the contours of his chest with her fingertips, she felt so at peace at that moment that it could have been seconds or years from the time he'd greeted her at the door. The covers—clean sheets but worn thin after years of service—lay in a tangled heap at their feet. The sheer drapes on the window floated over them as a light breeze pushed through the cracked window. Juliet, who normally slept beneath a goose-down duvet because she was so cold at night, was warm to the touch. His touch.

"You could never be too late. How do you not know by now that I'd wait a lifetime if I had to?"

"Or until your father called. *Romeo, it's an emergency. . . .*" She

imitated the voice of Jean Montague, which she'd heard at many fashion industry fetes.

"Juliet . . ."

He scolded her, but gently. From the very beginning, they'd promised each other they wouldn't mar their rare moments together with petulance, frustration, or jealousy. True love came at a price, or theirs did, and they'd vowed to pay it without complaint. But Juliet sometimes had trouble.

"That was mean. I'm sorry," she said, pressing her lips to his chest.

"And it's not just *my* father," Romeo added.

"You're right," Juliet agreed, thinking of how often she was summoned to Capulet duties, even if some of the duties were just to be the pretty apple of her father's eye. She felt so good when she was with Romeo, felt such a sense of possibility, that it almost killed her that who they were mattered so much. Together, they should have been unstoppable, not living in secret.

In a single motion, she quickly rolled over and straddled him. She grinned down at him, a mussed tress of her hair falling against his nose. "Let's do it."

Romeo laughed. "Um, I think we just did. Give me a minute."

Juliet bounced on him, swatting his upper arm playfully. "Not that *it*. The real *it*. We leave. Run away. We'll find somewhere no one's ever been. We'd be following our stars."

Romeo's eyes crinkled with his smile. "So, the uncharted island? Romantic. And how are we going to find it?"

"We'll steal one of our fathers' yachts, of course. You know how to sail."

"And they wouldn't geo-track us instantly?"

"Fine, we'll buy a yacht with unmarked bills. Then we'll get out to sea and sail away until we find the spot. The perfect spot . . ."

"The perfect spot *if* we don't get lost at sea and starve to death."

"We'll be like Adam and Eve, living in beautiful innocence."

"We're not exactly innocent," Romeo quipped, aiming for a kiss.

Juliet pulled away, still smiling. "Don't shoot me down. I'm serious."

"I just don't see how we'd survive. No electricity, no shelter, no soap . . . and we haven't exactly been raised with amazing survival skills." Romeo arched an eyebrow at her.

She loved the crackle behind his eyes but hated that its purpose now was to reject her idea. Juliet sighed and rolled off Romeo onto the mattress next to him. "Fine. We don't need an island. We'll go to America. A small town, where no one would know us or ever think to look. We'll change our names, find a tiny apartment. . ."

"And pay rent with money we won't have, because we'll be cut off from our fortunes."

"With money we'll grab in cash and bring with us so we'll have it after we're cut off. . ."

"And when it runs out?"

"I'll design clothes, you'll market them."

"Yes, teen runaways always launch amazing start-ups."

"Well, it doesn't have to be clothes. I'd wait tables or work a cash register somewhere if it meant being with you. . . ." Juliet trailed off. She scanned his face, fighting a tear. "You don't love me at all."

Every hint of play and daydream left Romeo's face. Juliet trembled at the intensity beneath his icy-blue eyes as he rolled to face her. "I don't love you?" he echoed fiercely. "I love you so much it eats me alive. Every moment of every day, I think about you and ache for you. And then we're together and I'm full and empty and sick because I know how awful it's going to be to let you go."

Juliet caressed his cheek. "Then don't. Don't let me go." She, too, knew the sick feeling, and was experiencing it now as she thought about their time together ending. "Let's run away."

Romeo smiled sadly and laced his fingers with hers. He squeezed her hand once, then twice, then three times, and in those small squeezes, she felt his love more acutely than even when they kissed, or when he told her in no uncertain terms. Touch was better than words. "There's no *away*," he whispered. "We're not people who can disappear. We're not children whose families wouldn't look for us. We're not people who can't be found. And if they learn we're together . . ."

"Let them," Juliet said. "What can they do once we're gone?"

She tried to sound defiant and strong, but she knew.

"They'll ruin us."

Their families were powerful, with resources others could

only dream of. If they wanted to, it would be easy for them to keep Romeo and Juliet apart forever. It would be easy to banish them to lives that were impoverished in ways beyond the financial. They could be separated, lost to each other and rendered almost identity-less. The families had the means to do so.

“Above all else, loyalty.” Juliet shuddered as she spoke her father’s mantra. Her brother had nearly been cast out of the family. Henri had been at his lowest when he sold prints of some Capulet designs to the House of Montague (which had turned them into—insult on injury—a low-priced line for Montague IV, a chain of stores in American malls). He had been near death, crippled by his addictions, but all that had seemed to matter to their father was Henri’s betrayal. The family had tossed Henri into a literal dungeon to detox—painfully—and now he was forced to play his part as if he’d never been anything other than the perfect son. Poor Henri’s birthright, the inheritance of the House of Capulet, was even threatened. Not that he seemed to care. But what they could do to her was much worse. She looked at Romeo, imagining a life completely devoid of him.

“Don’t think on it.” Romeo wrapped his arms around her and kissed her like he was breathing life back into her body. Taking her face in his hands, he stared into her eyes, pulling her back into the moment with his gaze. “I won’t let that happen. Not to either of us. But you see why we have to stay strong.”

“You shouldn’t have been born a Montague,” Juliet said. “Or I shouldn’t have been born a Capulet. What I’d give to just be some Girl Nobody for you to discover and love. . . .”

"You're so wrong," Romeo said, his lips curved in the half smile she loved. "I wouldn't change a thing. The stars crossed to unite us. Our curses are our blessings, too. You don't mess with that kind of gift."

"Patience, then," Juliet said. They'd been through this before; her lines were clear. But every time they were together, she imagined things could go differently.

Romeo kissed her, a kiss that unfolded slowly, opening her lips like petals, then pressing his mouth more urgently to hers. "Time is on our side."

"I hate being patient," Juliet said. "I love you. I want you."

She skimmed her leg over his body and raised herself above him. She kissed him back until her mind stopped working. She wanted him, and she had her wish. For those moments, she wasn't a Capulet; he wasn't a Montague. They were themselves, Romeo and Juliet, and they were one.

CHAPTER 2

ROMEO

HE HATED SAYING no to her. He didn't *want* to say no to her. She lay across his chest, dozing lightly while he twirled a piece of her hair around his finger and studied the way the light hit the chocolatey strands. He wished he wasn't a lousy poet and could say something about how he felt, but words fell short. So, instead, he gazed at her and thought to wake her, to say, *Let's go. Go . . .* wherever she wanted. Because she made him want to.

And these weren't the musings of some uninformed idiot who'd never been with a woman before. He'd been, and been, and been.

She was singular, uncommon, and perfect for him—of this there was no doubt.

He'd probably known from the start, a month and a half ago.

He'd been leaving the studio apartment of an artist he was seeing, a woman in her twenties who liked to paint in the nude. Her lithe back was itself a work of art, tattooed in a collage of Art Deco-era women, short-haired in feathered headbands, holding fans, peering out through painted eyes. The effect was mesmerizing. And the artist was a beautiful, slinky creation herself. But he knew he'd grow bored of her gallery eventually. . . .

Still, for two days he'd been ensconced with her, only coming up for a little air and coffee and cigarettes, when he'd been summoned back to his life by his father, who knew about and allowed Romeo's "hobbies." He'd kissed the artist good-bye and dashed out onto the street below her apartment in Montmartre. There'd been a street fair, which meant slow, strolling shoppers, and he was making his way through a cluster of women browsing a selection of old scarves when he saw Juliet.

He knew who she was, of course. Before he could even form memories, he'd no doubt been shown photos of her, likely labeled "Capulet: Mortal Enemy." But now, with the sunlight just hitting his eyes again (the artist kept heavy curtains drawn always), he blinked, not believing one of the heirs to his rival would be rummaging through secondhand goods.

They'd been going to the same school since Juliet had transferred there earlier in the year. She was no doubt attractive, even captivating, but he had always imagined her to be a princess and knew her to be a Capulet, so he'd never let himself pay her too much attention.

That day in Montmartre, an idea formed in Romeo's mind. Not an idea so much as a big *Why not?* It would be a little fun to see if he could render Juliet Capulet breathless. He wouldn't let it go too far, of course.

She was carrying two heavy-looking tote bags, one on each shoulder. Corners of old hardcovers poked out the tops. She looked unfazed by the weight as she picked up pieces of costume jewelry from a table and smiled and chatted with the old man on a stool behind the booth.

Romeo sauntered through the crowd toward her, his confidence in his game—and the fact that he had the added power of being forbidden fruit—making him feel like this was going to be too easy.

He came up next to her, and she turned and glanced at him. Her eyes were dark brown and flecked with gold. Intelligent eyes that locked with his for a split second before she turned back to looking at the merchandise.

Sucker-punched was the only word to describe what he felt then. His tongue went still in his mouth, his hands shook, and his chest hurt. He found himself scanning the same pieces of jewelry, their shoulders almost touching. And even though he'd never had problems coming up with things to say to a woman before, he'd only been able to stand next to her, listening with a dumb grin as she made sly jokes, to the shopkeep's delight, about whether the old man sourced the jewelry from former paramours.

Finally, she selected some jade earrings and paid, then turned

on her beat-up riding boots and struck his shoulder with one of the bags.

It jolted Romeo into the moment and he made a quick decision to act as if he didn't know who she was. "Ouch." He rubbed his shoulder in an overdramatic way. "Maybe you need help with your bags?"

She raised her left brow at him, and he knew that she knew who he was, too. But she didn't admit that. She grasped the game instantly. Juliet just said, her lip curling up on one side with amusement, "That's cute, but I bought the things. I think I can carry them." Her dark eyes twinkled as she spoke, but what he noticed were her hands—slim with long, tapered fingers, yet strong and capable, like she used them to make things.

"Stubborn," he teased. "I don't know about that."

"Keep an open mind. Being stubborn is important to me," she parried back, moving into the crowd. He fell into step next to her as she visited the next few stalls, asking questions about this scarf or that brooch as she held them up, seeming to have plans for each one.

"You like old things?" he said.

"Some old, some new." She smiled. "But mostly things that not everyone has, or not everyone knows they want."

Every word she spoke was confident but not condescending. He was bewitched by her easy take on things, and by how someone who could have been a princess seemed to prefer being just a member of the public, albeit a gimlet-eyed observer instead of a blind follower. (Romeo had romanced his fair share of the public

who hoped to be made princesses through his affections, and now he was trying to woo the one person who seemed uninterested in any such thing.)

The stars had aligned for them that day, and neither of them had thought for a second what a danger it would be to be seen together. It was March and the first nice day after a cold, gray winter, and everyone in Paris was unconcerned with anyone but themselves and their own sunlit comfort. They talked and walked until the shopkeepers began to put away their wares and fold up their tables.

Romeo remembered, only then, that he had to get back to his father, and the dangerous way he'd been consorting with—hell, *falling* for—the enemy hit him in the gut. “You know, we shouldn’t be doing this,” he said as the slanting afternoon sun seemed to draw away from them, leaving them standing in shadows.

“Doing what? Talking?” Juliet said, and peered at him with a little smile. “We don’t have to talk.” She still had the bags of books on her shoulders. He’d made several more offers and she’d refused his help, in the most guileless way imaginable.

She didn’t need him, at all, but he could tell she liked him. Maybe even liked him the way he did her.

And then she’d kissed him on the cheek and said, “You’re very sweet.” *Sweet*, a word no one ever called him. “We’ll see each other again.”

She’d left him in suspense for a week—he’d looked for her in the halls of their school but she seemed to have vanished. Then he’d found a note from her tucked, somehow, in his bag. *Samedi*,

12:30 *p.m.* and the name of a teahouse in Petite Asie, where no one ever went.

They'd met and talked and talked about how they could talk more—she'd come up with the idea of the secret email account and sending nothing, just writing each other drafts. And it had been her idea to go somewhere more private, and she'd chosen the Hotel Lemieux. "Are you sure?" he'd said as she led him by the hand up the stairs. He'd almost been trembling when she closed the door. But then, in the privacy they'd afforded themselves, he'd needed to kiss her.

That first kiss was an affirmation of all they'd both suspected: There was nothing ordinary about them.

"We can wait," he'd said.

"You don't wait when it might be your only chance," she'd told him, as sure about that as she was about everything.

He just wished, now, that he could reward her certainty without certain destruction.

CHAPTER 3

JULIET

AN HOUR LATER, Juliet beamed as she and Romeo skimmed down the last flight of steps and into the lobby. Their hands locked together felt as decadent and effervescent as the bubbles surging in a glass of Dom Pérignon White Gold Jeroboam. The buzz was even more delicious.

“If I could put the feeling of holding your hand in broad daylight in capsule form, we’d make a fortune,” Juliet said as they stepped out onto the street, full of hustling backpackers and hardscrabble immigrants. Here, they were completely invisible. No one in this neighborhood cared about Capulets and Montagues. It was why she’d chosen it, last month, hoping that it could become

their place. It had, even if this was only the third time they'd gotten to be together there.

"That is extremely lovely," Romeo said, pulling Juliet into him. She leaned her head on his shoulder as they strolled into Paris's Chinatown, where the smells of dim sum and Peking duck spiced the air.

"Lovely but also lucrative," Juliet said. "Are you sure you don't want to trust my visions and set sail?" She lightened her tone so he'd know she was joking, but she did—either through naive optimism or shrewd awareness of how everyone in the world desired a romance like theirs—believe they'd make it, even as she knew Romeo was right about all the flaws in her plans.

They were on their way to their favorite restaurant, a ramshackle teahouse where neither the owners nor the rest of the clientele spoke any French, but that had the most delicious oolong tea Romeo and Juliet had ever tasted. Or, at least, they thought it did, since this was their place. They ducked inside and found their favorite seats, beneath a low-falling eave at a table that might have felt claustrophobic to anyone else but them. Once there, they turned their phones back on, as they did after each meeting.

They'd just had their first warming sips of oolong when the noise from the street outside rose several decibels. Monsieur Y, the teahouse owner, stood at the door, speaking to a man with a large camera hanging from his neck.

"I'm sorry to not have a permit, but we can give you cash to shoot here," the photographer was telling Monsieur Y. "Huge

campaign, so you'll be paid well. The only thing is, we need you to decide now."

Romeo looked across the table at Juliet, concern etched on his face. "This doesn't sound good," he said. "We can't be here if photographers come in." He opened his wallet and put more than the needed amount of euros on the table.

"Should we go out the back?" Juliet said, her heart racing. Much as she could talk the talk of a defiant woman in love, she knew what being photographed together would do to them.

Juliet's phone dinged. The screen read, *Gabrielle nearby!* A little dot on a map appeared, and Gabrielle, it turned out, was very nearby. Just-outside-the-door nearby.

"Oh my God," Juliet whispered.

Gabrielle's distinctive purr oozed through the door.

"Juliet Capulet . . . are you in there? *Why* are you in there?"

Monsieur Y was holding his ground at the door as he negotiated with the photographer, and Romeo and Juliet were well hidden at their table, but still, Gabrielle's voice was a reality check in the worst way.

"How does she know?" Romeo asked.

"We linked our phones so we could find one another when we went shopping last week," Juliet said. "I just didn't turn off the app."

How could she have forgotten? Gabrielle, one of the top models in Paris—nay, Europe—had gone on and on last week when they were out about how she would be doing a shoot in Petite Asie and how she'd have to be extra careful not to pick up

any germs from the backpackers. Juliet had felt so smug asking all kinds of questions about the neighborhood that she'd known the answers to. She'd let Gabrielle go on and on about how different it was from their world, and had feigned curiosity, as if she'd never been there.

Though she sometimes wished she could tell Gabrielle everything, Juliet had grown up so sheltered and protected that it was now her way to be wary of even people she called friends. It was part of what made being with Romeo feel so good: She finally felt like she was purely herself with someone, and that she could allow him to really know her.

"Out the back," Juliet said, imagining the way Gabrielle—and an army of fashion magazine people—would revel in this gossip. Heads would roll, just to find other heads to tell everything to.

Juliet and Romeo cut through the small kitchen area, ignoring the shocked faces of the teahouse staff. The alley behind the restaurant was blocked off on one side by the high walls of an apartment building. The open end led to the street, where the entire apparatus of Gabrielle's photo shoot was present. Workers were erecting scaffolding and lights; stylists were rolling racks of clothing along the uneven pavement. This was no small affair, and Romeo and Juliet would not have an easy time emerging from the alleyway undetected.

Juliet's phone buzzed. Gabrielle was calling her. She pressed the button to make it go to voice mail and then shut the phone down.

They were pressed to the back wall of the teahouse, next to a

Dumpster that smelled of rotting discarded food from the dim sum restaurant next door.

Juliet peeked around the corner. Gabrielle was pacing, huffing into her cell phone, probably still calling Juliet. An entourage followed her every step. Steps taken on six-inch heels, each sprouting a plume of peacock feathers that glowed electric blue against her dark-chocolate skin. Gabrielle wore a string bikini made of glittering crystals, red hair extensions blazed out of her head, and her eyes were painted in thick stripes of pink and blue. She was on fire with agitation.

“Why isn’t she picking up? My phone said she’s right here. Someone get me a cell-phone nerd to figure this out for me.”

Gabrielle glanced witheringly at a timid-looking assistant. “Are you sure you didn’t see Juliet in there? Dark hair, innocent little face? Like she needs to lose her virginity, stat?”

Despite herself, Juliet stifled a laugh at the fallacy of the comment. Romeo squeezed her hand tight.

Of course Gabrielle couldn’t let it rest. This was a part of town neither of them would be in, save for a major fashion magazine shoot or a very secret tryst. Juliet couldn’t exactly walk out and say, “*Quelle coincidence!*” like they’d just run into each other at Printemps department store.

Romeo and Juliet were trapped like the rats that haunted this very alley. People might see them, and if those people were Gabrielle and an entire fashion-knowledgeable camera crew, well, they could kiss their secret good-bye. The idea that the very photogenic heirs to the two biggest archrivals of the Paris

fashion world were here together, with no discernible reason for being in this part of town other than what they'd just been doing—well, it was the kind of scandal that would be everywhere.

A woman with black glasses and a clipboard approached Gabrielle. "We have to start. . . ."

Gabrielle's response echoed down the alley. "Look, I'm not going to be able to focus on this shoot unless I know why my phone was saying Juliet Capulet was here, and now it's not. That isn't black magic. This is technology! She was here and I want to know why. It will drive me crazy, and crazy doesn't look good on camera."

Juliet shuddered. Her friend was nothing if not determined.

"*Merde, merde, merde,*" Romeo muttered.

Next to the dim sum restaurant, an old man emerged from an open back door, tossing a trash bag into the Dumpster. Music and smoke poured out into the alley.

"Let's go in there—at least it's off the street," Juliet said, and they slid past the man and into a bar. It was small and narrow and utterly nondescript, perhaps why they'd never noticed it before. But it was still too bright inside and too close to the commotion outside. Through a graying window, the scurrying of various photo-shoot personnel was obvious. If Gabrielle was as resolute as she sounded, and if she got the rest of the shoot as riled up as she was about Juliet Capulet slumming it, they would be found within seconds.

At this time of day, there was no crowd to hide in. The only other person in the bar was a man in a vintage motorcycle jacket and black skinny jeans. He hovered over the jukebox, and Juliet couldn't tell if he was poring over the song list or getting ready to punch the machine.

"I can't believe this," Romeo said, with so much horror that Juliet's heart dropped. She knew she'd gotten under his skin talking about running away, but now he seemed almost angry. He clutched his forehead with his hand, pushing his longish hair from his eyes.

"I'm sorry—" Juliet started.

Romeo turned to her and grasped her shoulders. "I'm not mad at you. Never you," he said. "I'm just angry that this is so hard." He looked around. "What if we just hang out?"

"Did you not hear Gabrielle? She's going to turn the neighborhood upside down until she finds me."

"The tall Black girl, with the hair?" the guy at the jukebox asked them. "She was in here with crazy eyes, looking for a Juliet." He had an American accent. "That you?"

Juliet nodded.

"Yeah, don't doubt that she'll be back. I can get you out of here, though," he said.

"What? Why?" Romeo asked. His voice was edged with malice. He stepped forward to place himself between Juliet and the stranger.

"I don't know. Sounds fun. Nothing going on here, clearly."

His eyes glinted as he offered them a half smile. There was an assured carelessness to him that bothered Juliet, though not in an entirely bad way. He was about their age but lighter than them somehow. Unworried. It was a trait that came off a lot of Americans, an amused *joie de vivre* that eluded French natives.

Out the window, the spikes of Gabrielle's hair extensions crossed Juliet's line of vision.

"Which way?" Juliet said, coming to stand next to Romeo. She took his hand and squeezed, hoping to convey to him that she thought they should take the stranger up on his offer.

"I'm just going to check in here once more," she could hear Gabrielle saying. "I have to know if she's here."

Romeo's shoulders were tense, but he remained immobile despite the threat outside.

The American guy, who was still grinning at them like they were playing a game, looked from Romeo to Juliet with an expression that said, *This is your only option*. He started for the back of the bar. "Bike's this way."

He was so at ease and casual about the escape that Juliet wanted to shake him. After she shook Romeo, of course. She pulled her boyfriend toward the back of the bar and slid through the door just as Gabrielle's voice rang through the empty space, seeming to send dust motes flying with her volume.

"Juliet!" she yelled.

Juliet wondered if she'd been seen. She'd deal with it later. She, Romeo, and the stranger were back outside. And there, on the side of the Dumpster where they hadn't been hiding, was a

motorcycle. The stranger was already straddling the saddle, his arm outstretched with a helmet for her. His helmet.

“Tuck your hair under here, it’ll help disguise you,” he said to her. His fingers brushed hers, and they were rougher than Romeo’s, like he’d been working on his bike just before finding them. “Then get on behind me.” He smiled again, one corner of his mouth turned up higher than the other. His eyes were espresso-colored, with a golden twinkle in the corners. Gabrielle would have lapped him up, as she liked to say. Juliet suddenly understood the expression.

Looking at Romeo, he pointed to the sidecar. “You’ll ride there. Keep your head down.”

Juliet strapped on the helmet, smelling what had to be the stranger’s sweat on the padding lining the inside. It wasn’t unpleasant.

“Come on, already,” the stranger said, locking his dark eyes on Juliet’s. She shuddered, but not from fear.

“I don’t like this,” Romeo said, sinking down into the sidecar like it was a cold, uncomfortable bath. But still, he pulled his hood up over his light hair and hunched his shoulders.

“We don’t have a choice,” Juliet said. She tentatively reached her arms around the stranger’s taut waist. If her mother had had any idea that an hour ago she’d been in bed with Romeo and now she was entwined on a motorcycle with this gorgeous American, well, H  l  ne Capulet would die on the spot. But not without first shooting Juliet an icy look of disdain. Her mother hadn’t fought her way from the chaos of a well-off but dysfunctional family into

a wealthy, if staid, life just so her daughter could make the kind of mistakes that made a person wonder if vice was hereditary. Henri had already proven a challenge.

Taking her hands, the stranger made her grip him tighter. "Like this, unless you want to fall into the street."

"What's your name?" Juliet shouted over the noise of the bike starting up. She felt the need to talk casually, so she wouldn't dwell on how tightly she was holding on to this person. The muscles along his sides clenched as he revved the bike a few times.

"Jim," he said. "I'm Jim."

He kicked the bike up to speed and maneuvered past the fashion-shoot commotion on the street. Juliet kept her eyes closed, as if that would disguise her.

But no one even looked, since Gabrielle had everyone in a tizzy looking inside the bar. Jim leaned into the turn around the corner, and he, Romeo, and Juliet sped away, undetected.

WHENEVER TWO YOUNG lovers are forced to speed away from witnesses on the back of a stranger's motorbike, one must stop to ask: *Pourquoi?*

They're two rich, beautiful teens with everything. Shouldn't their families be thrilled they're together? They're a perfect match, an instant power couple—the tabloids would brand them Juleo, or Roliet!

Sadly, that's not at all the case, thanks to an ancient grudge. No one is quite sure exactly how it started, but it goes back to the days when the families lived in castles, and back when the French stopped wearing armor and started donning gowns and robes, cinching waists and peacocking about, fully plumed.

Yes, both the ancient families, Capulet and Montague, one day long ago decided to make fashion their business. (Other families, too, but they were the best at it, or at least the most well-known.)

Then someone stepped on someone's bustle and all hell broke loose. It might sound frivolous—an ancient feud over fashion?—but they take it very seriously. So seriously that the grudge has endured through the centuries—property destroyed, lives ruined . . . some lives lost (or taken). That neither family is sure why the grudge began is no matter, because keeping it alive is a matter of principle at this point.

So, yes, the rich, beautiful teens seem to have everything, but ages of cultivated hate and pride means they will always be denied what they want most: each other.

CHAPTER 4

ROMEO

WHAT IDIOT GOT in the sidecar of a motorcycle piloted by a son-of-a-bitch American?

What idiot did that, not knowing where they were going?

What idiot let his beautiful girlfriend clutch the son-of-a-bitch American like they were the couple, while he, the idiot, rode in the sidecar?

He didn't like this.

No, Romeo didn't like this at all, that he and Juliet had placed their lives in the hands of some buffed-out American with an action-hero complex.

And he really didn't like that Juliet was pressed up against the guy, spooning her body into his with her arms tight around his

waist. Meanwhile, Romeo was scrunched with his knees practically touching his chin, thanks to the case of beer on which he had to rest his feet.

“Where you wanna go?” Jim shouted over the noise of the bike when they reached a red light.

“Here’s good,” Romeo said. He and Juliet would get off the bike and split up. No parting kiss for them, but they’d be safe. Too bad he was so low to the ground Jim couldn’t even hear him.

Juliet, though—Jim could hear her. How could he not? She could almost lick the guy’s earlobe. “Where would you go if you didn’t want to be seen?” she asked.

The melodic lilt to her voice almost killed Romeo, it was so pretty. Jim must have liked it, too, because he grinned and nodded, probably imagining where he’d take Juliet if they could ditch Romeo. Jerk. When the light changed, he swerved to the left and kicked up his speed.

Romeo had lived his whole life in Paris, as had generations of Montagues before him. He prided himself on knowing every intimate crevice of the city. He was a connoisseur of forbidden hideaways, places to take a lover where they’d never be seen or suspected.

That was all before Juliet, though. His pursuit of conquests had ceased when he met her. The change had almost killed his cousin and best friend, Benoit, who’d been particularly invested in hearing more about the Art Deco–tattooed woman. All the women, really. Once upon a time, Romeo and Benny would spend hours talking in detail about Romeo’s activities. Romeo would pull out the onyx

lockbox given to him by his grandfather when he was only six. He'd told him it was a "*coffre-fort de Rêves*," a dream safe, a place where he could store notes about his wildest hopes and fantasies.

Romeo used it for storing the souvenirs of hopes and fantasies that had come to pass. Inside were matchbooks from every low-rent gem in which he'd shared *moments amoureuses* with the finest women in Paris. He had been with wide-eyed girls his own age who dreamed of being together forever and well-preserved older damsels who'd left him panting for more. Romeo could pluck a matchbook from the box at random and call up sordid details to make Benny's jaw drop.

But the night after he'd met Juliet . . . That night, without a second thought, he'd padded down to the living room to start a fire and emptied the box's contents into the flames. He remembered how satisfying it had been to hear the pops and cracks of the matchbooks as they caught fire. He'd gladly tossed out his past, in anticipation of a future with her.

Benny had thrown a fit when he learned the matches were gone. He'd been furious when Romeo had refused to speak again of the old dalliances.

"Bro, those stories are my religion!" he'd wailed. "You're really going to take away a man's religion?"

Romeo wasn't sure Benny would understand even if he could explain, but of course he couldn't. True love was as simple and complex a reason as could exist. Over the last month, Benny had floated a million different theories as to why Romeo had changed, but none of them came close.

Much as Romeo liked to think he knew every last bit of Paris, he had no idea where they were right now. Jim had taken the bike past the hills and odd pastel houses of La Butte-aux-Cailles. Now the ill-maintained streets skirted buildings with chipped masonry and balconies that leaned dangerously off their moorings. The streets were vacant—no outdoor cafés, no shops, no kids playing outside. This wasn't hidden Paris, this was *dying* Paris.

Now that the threat of discovery was gone, a new kind of threat set off red flags in Romeo's head. Who was this American? He could be angling to rob them—or worse. Romeo had to plan his next move very carefully.

Jim turned the motorcycle onto the overgrown lawn of an old, crumbling stone church. He pulled around back, where ancient headstones sprouted from the ground at odd angles like stone weeds. Jim cut the bike's engine but remained still. Juliet's hands dropped to her sides as she pulled her body away from his.

Jim turned in his seat, looking at Romeo but speaking to Juliet. Romeo's body tensed as he prepared himself to spring from the sidecar. What he'd do next, he wasn't exactly sure.

"Frisk me," Jim said to Juliet.

"What?" she asked.

"Your boyfriend's looking at me like he wants to jump up and go all Napoléon on my ass," Jim said. "You've already had your hands on me. So frisk me and let him know I don't have a weapon."

Juliet looked at Romeo, a question in her eyes. Romeo really didn't want her to touch more of the guy than she already had,

but he knew it would answer his questions. He nodded his consent, and Juliet patted her hands over Jim's leather jacket, starting at the top and working her way to his waist.

"There is nothing," she said.

"Aw, come on," Jim said. "That's just insulting."

Juliet blushed.

"Enough," Romeo said, then told Jim, "Don't move."

Romeo leaped as nimbly as he could out of the sidecar and gestured for Jim to stand up. Romeo was taller, but lean, while Jim had a compact, muscular build. Romeo patted his jacket aggressively, trying to let Jim know he wasn't intimidated. He locked eyes with the American, daring him to make a move.

"Dude, I'm one of the good guys, I swear," Jim said. "You were the ones who needed a getaway car. I should be frisking *you*."

"Don't," Romeo warned.

Jim raised his hands in a *Who, me?* gesture. Romeo took Juliet by the hands to help her off the bike. He let his hands linger at Juliet's hip, as if to show Jim that she belonged to him.

"Where are we?" Juliet asked. She walked in a slow circle around a gravestone, then tilted her head skyward, looking like a misplaced angel.

"Seriously?" Jim replied. "The Ugly American knows more than the natives?"

"I never called you ugly," Juliet noted.

"Oh, well, thank you, then," Jim said, grinning. Romeo didn't like the easy way he made eye contact with Juliet, like they'd known each other for years.

Jim pulled three bottles of beer out of the case in the sidecar and handed one to each of them.

Juliet blushed as she took the bottle. Romeo draped a possessive arm around her shoulders and held out his beer. "Got an opener?"

"Of course," Jim said. He strode to the closest tombstone and used its edge to pry off the bottlecap. He handed the beer back to Romeo, who tried not to show his annoyance at being schooled in bottle opening by the self-assured American.

"As to where we are," Jim started, as he spread his arms wide and walked backward, gesturing to the entire cemetery. "We're nowhere. An abandoned church in an abandoned part of town." He sat down on the grass and leaned against one of the ancient headstones, popping the cap off his bottle, too. "An excellent place for a drink."

Then he took a long swig of his beer, before pointing his bottle at the stones opposite him, a gesture for Romeo and Juliet to sit. Romeo looked down at Juliet. He wondered if she'd be spooked by the whole scene, but she had a giddy glimmer in her eyes instead. She rose on her tiptoes to kiss him.

"*Liberté, mon amour,*" she whispered to him with her sly little grin.

Freedom. Yes. To be sure, even in this quiet graveyard they weren't really free, but at least, for a time, no one would find them. But it was dicey enough that the bars on Romeo's cell phone were spotty. He was almost a phantom here, same as this American.

"*Liberté,*" Romeo replied.

Juliet beamed, then pulled Romeo down to sit on the lawn, across from Jim. Romeo used a headstone to pop the cap off Juliet's beer, giving Jim a look that said, *I can be macho, too*. He sat against a tombstone with his feet planted on the ground and his knees bent, so Juliet could curl into the armchair made by his chest and parted legs. He raised an eyebrow at Jim and lifted his bottle in an unspoken toast. And, he hoped, an unspoken threat to never call Romeo "Napoléon" again. Jim mirrored the gesture and they both drank.

"So, now you must tell us about yourself," Juliet told Jim. "My boyfriend doesn't seem to trust you, and I trust his opinion on everything."

"Wow, good girlfriend," Jim said. "But there's not much to tell. Life's pretty simple."

"Yes, a simple life full of vintage Harleys with sidecars, all in mint condition?" Romeo gestured to the bike.

Now Jim smiled openly. It was the kind of machismo-laden grin that seemed mastered only by Americans. He could probably run fast, too. "You noticed that, huh?"

"My boyfriend has an unquenchable lust for fast, flashy things," Juliet said. "I'm very lucky that extends only to his vehicles."

"I prefer my women beautiful and mesmerizing," Romeo said.

"And I like mine gorgeous and crazy," Jim said. "At least according to my track record."

"Typical guy," Juliet snorted. "Things go wrong and you say the girl is crazy. Maybe the blame's on you? After all, is it not crazy to pick up strangers and hang out in abandoned cemeteries?"

"Point well taken," Jim agreed. "But either way, I think I've learned it's best for me to stay away from women. At least for now. Present company excluded, of course."

"Of course," Juliet said. "Though while I'm fairly sane, I've been quite rude. My name is Beatrix. This handsome backrest is Benedict." She squeezed Romeo's leg, alerting him to pay attention to her lie. He loved her even more for knowing to give fake names. So he pulled her in closer, relishing the gentle rise of her back against his chest as she breathed.

"Pleased to meet you," Jim said. "Even under the circumstances. You know, I'd really like to know what was going on back there. But I'm going to mind my own business."

"That's not very American of you," Romeo said.

"Nah, but you're not an entirely rude French person, so we're even." With his easy grin, he nodded toward his Harley and looked back at Romeo. "You have a bike of your own?"

"A couple," Romeo admitted. "I bought a Wattman for my birthday."

"Voxon?" Jim asked. "The electric? It's supposed to run like a beast."

"A gorgeous beast," Romeo said. "Looks like a scorpion."

"I'd love to take a spin on that sometime," Jim said. "Seriously."

"And I would love to change the subject to anything but motorcycles. Or cars," Juliet groaned. "I could start talking about fashion, but I don't think any of us want that."

Romeo laughed, but not for the reason he knew Jim thought. As heir apparent to the House of Montague, Paris's other oldest

and most respected fashion house, Romeo could just as happily carry on an intelligent conversation about trending necklines as he could the best places to trick out a Harley. So Juliet's comment was a ruse. She was playing a role: normal girl. Beatrix. The kind of girl who could just hang out, leaning against him, casually—almost wickedly—throwing the words *my boyfriend* into the conversation. Romeo could tell from her tone that she loved it.

He did, too. Dangerously so. If it kept up, he'd start talking like Juliet about running away. And he had to stay grounded. He knew Juliet hated when he pulled apart her daydreams, but he had to protect the two of them.

Still, couldn't he be grounded a little later? They were, somehow, safe and free. The conversation had been steered at Juliet's request away from motorized vehicles and onto skiing, which all of them loved. Jim swore Colorado was wildly overrated; he said Jackson Hole, Wyoming, was the only legit place to ski in the US. Juliet agreed but expounded on the virtues of Andermatt, Switzerland. Jim was saying Verbier was a superior spot in that country.

"Yeah, if you care about dance clubs more than actual snow," Romeo said.

"Okay, maybe I'll give you that," Jim said.

The guys cracked second beers. Juliet was still nursing her first. Romeo didn't even think of how much time had passed until he glanced up and saw how low the sun had sunk in the sky. The horizon beyond the cemetery was heavy with plump orange clouds. Alarm chilled his veins.

He pulled out his cell phone again, and this time noticed a trail of unanswered calls and messages from his parents and Benoit that he must have overlooked in the excitement.

"Merde," he said.

"What?" Juliet asked, placing her beer bottle in the grass.

"Palais Galliera," he said.

Juliet gasped, then scrambled for her own phone, which she'd never turned back on after shutting it off to avoid Gabrielle's tracking.

Palais Galliera was Paris's fashion museum, and tonight was the night of an inaugural costume ball, sponsored by *Maintenant*, one of the top fashion magazines in Europe. Representatives of both the House of Montague and the House of Capulet were expected to attend, and by this time in the evening, Romeo and Juliet would normally be at home, getting prepared.

Romeo read the text from Benny: *Dude, better have a detailed story and a new matchbook for me. Totally saved your ass telling your parents you were getting some last-minute alterations on a new tux.*

Thank God. He had a little time. "Things okay?"

"Messages from Maman and Lu Hai," Juliet said. "And a million from Gabrielle."

He wished Juliet would lose Gabrielle as a friend. He didn't have to know her in person to know that Gabrielle's thoughts revolved around how to create drama. All you had to do was glance at the tabloids and their stories about the many broken hearts Gabrielle left in her wake, even if Juliet claimed that the other broken hearts were just her friend's efforts to hide the fact

that Gabrielle's own heart belonged to Juliet's brother, Henri. Whatever the truth, with suspicions in her mind, Gabrielle would be all over Juliet, pumping her for details about today.

"It'll be fine," Juliet assured him. "I'll make something up. I really don't think she saw us."

Romeo nodded, still doubtful, but confident that Juliet's mental prowess exceeded Gabrielle's. He turned to Jim. "We need to go," he said. "Can you give us a ride?"

"Sure," Jim said, rising and dusting off the sleeves of his jacket. "Where you headed?"

"Will you take me to the Metro at Tolbiac, not far from where we met? And Ju—Beatrix—to Avenue Montaigne."

Juliet laughed out loud. "Oh, yes, have the mysterious American drop me off at my door. No, you take me to Monceau Metro station, please. You know where it is?"

Jim nodded with a grin. Romeo felt a frisson of envy at the way Juliet called him "the mysterious American," but reassured himself that it was nothing.

"So," Jim said, "are we going to hang out again, or was this a one-day stand?"

The question was directed more to Romeo than to Juliet. Romeo smiled. Jim knew not to mess with his girl.

"Give us your number," Romeo said. "We'll call you."

CHAPTER 5

JULIET

“UM, WHEN ARE you going to tell me what you were doing in Petite Asie?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Juliet said into her phone, putting as much puzzlement in her voice as she could. The Metro was loud around her and she hoped the background noise would help disguise the tremor she knew came into her voice when she lied.

“Oh, really?” Gabrielle said. “So why did you pop up on my phone? ‘Juliet nearby!’ It doesn’t say that if you’re not nearby. And why would I almost swear on my gorgeous but cruel mother’s grave that I saw that enviable hair of yours disappearing out the back door of a sleazy bar?”

"Maybe you needed to eat something," Juliet teased. "You know how light-headed you get when you're fasting."

"Fasting my ass," Gabrielle said. "I know you were there."

"Yes, I was hanging out in Petite Asie, just drinking during the day and befriending backpackers. That doesn't sound like anything I'd ever do."

"And that is exactly why it's so delicious. So, who was he?"

Juliet's heart caught. Had Gabrielle seen her with Romeo? Or even with Jim? All Gabrielle needed was a morsel to cling to and she'd never let go. Not always in the airheaded way Romeo imagined, either. Gabrielle had spent one day with Henri several years ago and still wasn't over him, even though she pretended otherwise.

"Now you've got me in Petite Asie with a man. Gabrielle, what would I be doing there with a . . . 'he'?" Juliet tried to sound as dumb to the ways of the world as she could, even as her mind replayed parts of her joyous encounter with Romeo.

"You know exactly what you'd be doing! The thing we've all done. Except you. Until now." Gabrielle laughed wickedly into the receiver. "Just tell me who the lucky recipient of your pristine flower was. You know you want to give me details."

"I don't want to, because there are no details. You act as though phones can't have glitches."

Gabrielle sighed. "Juliet, I know I saw that hair. . . . Those argan-oiled curls kind of stick out when everyone else is an unshowered backpacker."

"Fine. I was there by myself."

"You had a secret rendezvous with yourself? Oh, Juliet, you could do that in the comfort of your own bathtub. With the argan oil and everything."

Juliet laughed out loud, and felt relief. She could tell Gabrielle was starting to believe she hadn't been with anyone. "Shut up! I was at a *movie*."

"A regular movie?" Gabrielle asked. "By yourself?"

"Yes, why not?" Juliet said.

"For starters, your home theater is better than any screen in Paris."

"I know," Juliet said. "I just wanted to see something with a big crowd. Like normal people." At the mention of normal people, a few Metro riders flicked their eyes over her, as if wondering why she wasn't normal. Juliet quickly tried to remember the names of movies that were playing, but Gabrielle didn't ask.

"Ugh, you and your mad love of the proletariat," Gabrielle clucked instead. "Can't you at least *pretend* you were having a wild, passionate affair? You're so beautiful. You should be the subject of much better gossip."

Oh, I am, Juliet thought, turning her back on two twenty-something women who were glancing down at a fashion magazine and then looking at her like they knew her. "I'm sorry to have let you down again," Juliet said. "But I've got to go. If I don't let Maman know I'm on the Metro heading home, she'll send out hunting dogs."

"The Metro?" Gabrielle wailed. "You didn't even call a car?"

Juliet smiled to herself. The threat of Gabrielle gossiping

would be avoided now. Gabrielle lacked the imagination to believe Juliet would return from a tryst on the train. In the model's world, such encounters required cars and drivers afterward. "See you at the Palais Galliera ball?"

"I'll be dangling on the arm of today's photographer. It was the only way I could console him after delaying the shoot. Apparently, chasing after you cost him the five minutes of light that best accentuated my left breast."

"As an official representative of the House of Capulet, it's my professional opinion that your left breast looks lovely in any light."

"And this is why I love you, even if you are so well behaved it's sickening."

"Your right breast, however . . ."

"À bientôt, Juliet!"

Gabrielle clicked off and Juliet quickly dialed her mother, reinforcing the story that she had been at the movies alone and assuring H el ene she'd be home in mere moments.

"The movies? In a seat where millions have sat before you? You could have lice! Or worse . . ." The unspoken "worse" was a concoction of her mother's most haunting demons, all the things she'd pulled herself away from and covered beneath a veneer of wealth and breeding.

Juliet often, if not forgave her mother's snobbery, at least allowed for it because H el ene didn't actually enjoy it. Juliet wasn't sure her mother allowed herself to really enjoy *anything*, because she was so focused on the constant maintenance of outward

perfection. It ended up that even when annoyed or angry at her mother, Juliet's overwhelming emotion toward her was pity. How awful it had to be to constantly worry you were being judged, and to constantly be judging yourself. It didn't make connecting with H el ene easy. Her mother wouldn't even tell stories from when she was Juliet's age. Her mother's own family had been well-off, but troubled (lots of addictive personalities, it seemed, and H el ene's father had died with a number of gambling debts that Maurice had paid off), and she no longer had contact with them—or anyone from her past, for that matter.

"I don't have lice, Maman," Juliet said as the man standing next to her inched a few steps away. "Next stop is me. I'll be home in a minute."

She clicked off just as H el ene screamed to Lu Hai to prepare a bath, extra hot. Juliet had been taking showers for years, as Lu Hai knew, but H el ene liked to think of her as a little girl who still had her hair washed with pitchers of warm water poured over her head. As the train rattled on, Juliet let her thoughts veer back to the afternoon with Romeo . . . and Jim. It was so odd to think he'd made her blush and shiver when they'd first met—silly even, given how they felt like old friends by the day's end.

Maybe not silly. Jim had smoldering eyes, and he looked at you like he could see right into your mind and unlock your secrets. So intense, but funny, too. And reckless. She'd never let on to Romeo, but she could still feel the pressure of being huddled behind Jim on the bike, her body flush against the ripped muscles of his back. His helmet had been damp with his sweat,

and the dense scent of him—smoky and salty—still clung to her. She had to admit, she'd wondered what it would be like to be with him. Would his kisses be gentle or fierce? What would the contours of his chest feel like beneath her palms . . . or her lips?

Juliet laughed out loud, prompting more looks from her fellow passengers. That kind of wondering was harmless fantasy, like daydreaming about a movie star. Jim could run up to her right now, completely naked (which would probably confirm Juliet's mother's suspicions about the behavior of Metro riders), and offer himself to her, no strings attached, but Juliet would feel nothing but embarrassed for him. She'd found the man of her dreams in Romeo. A smile played on her lips as she remembered the feel of his body casually but protectively surrounding hers as they chatted with Jim. Even when they weren't physically together, she felt him there the same way.

She indulged in romantic reveries the entire way to her home. True, the giant columned, balconied, and filigreed facade looked more like a section of the Louvre than a private residence, but Juliet had never lived anyplace else. She trotted up the steps to the massive front door, pausing to pat one of the two stone lions that bared their teeth on either side. The one on the right was hers. The one on the left was Henri's.

She wished things were as simple for the two of them now as they had been when they were children. Here they were, Juliet hiding a love affair—even from Henri, her most trusted confidant. Meanwhile, her older brother had to always put on the show of being the perfect heir to the company. (That he'd almost

lost the reins for his treachery was not yet public knowledge as Juliet's father worked his machinations to determine if her brother could still be the next heir to the company.) At this point, Henri was just doing his best not to be entirely excommunicated. Juliet was the only one who knew about the demons Henri was still fighting to control, just to keep the peace.

"Juliet!" Hélène's voice rang out within seconds of Juliet setting foot in the freshly polished marble foyer. Stepping into the velvety sumptuousness of the Capulet home was like camping out in a jewelry box. And while plenty of people could only dream of it, to Juliet it sometimes felt like a satin prison. "In the parlor!"

The parlor was her mother's room, layered in shades of pink and splattered with lace. Juliet found Hélène on one of the pink chintz sofas. An outsider would probably believe Hélène was already dressed for the evening's party, but Juliet knew the black cocktail dress, diamond necklace, and flawless makeup were just Hélène's daytime look.

Her mother's personal cook, Carina, a young but plump and tired-looking woman (all her mother's help shared a similar aura of fatigue), set a small pot of tea next to Hélène and instantly brought Juliet a glass of Vichy water. She smiled at Juliet and Juliet gave her a smile of her own, but didn't feel honest doing so. Something about returning from the afternoon's adventures made her feel even more cloistered by the constant attention than usual.

Juliet was about to sit in one of the mauve Louis XIV chairs when her mother raised a hand to stop her. "Don't sit, you haven't bathed yet." She held her nose to emphasize her disgust.