

With You



a novel by
ZARIN MADIYHA

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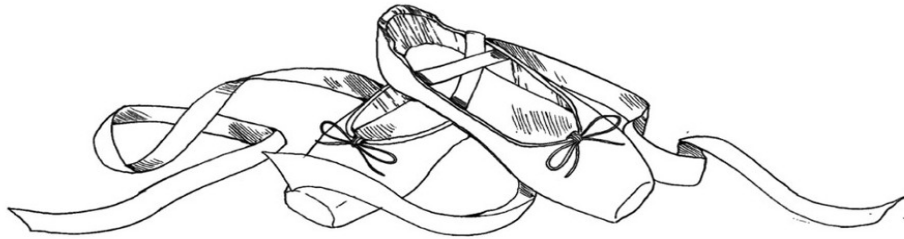
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With You



Institut d'Étoiles

book 1

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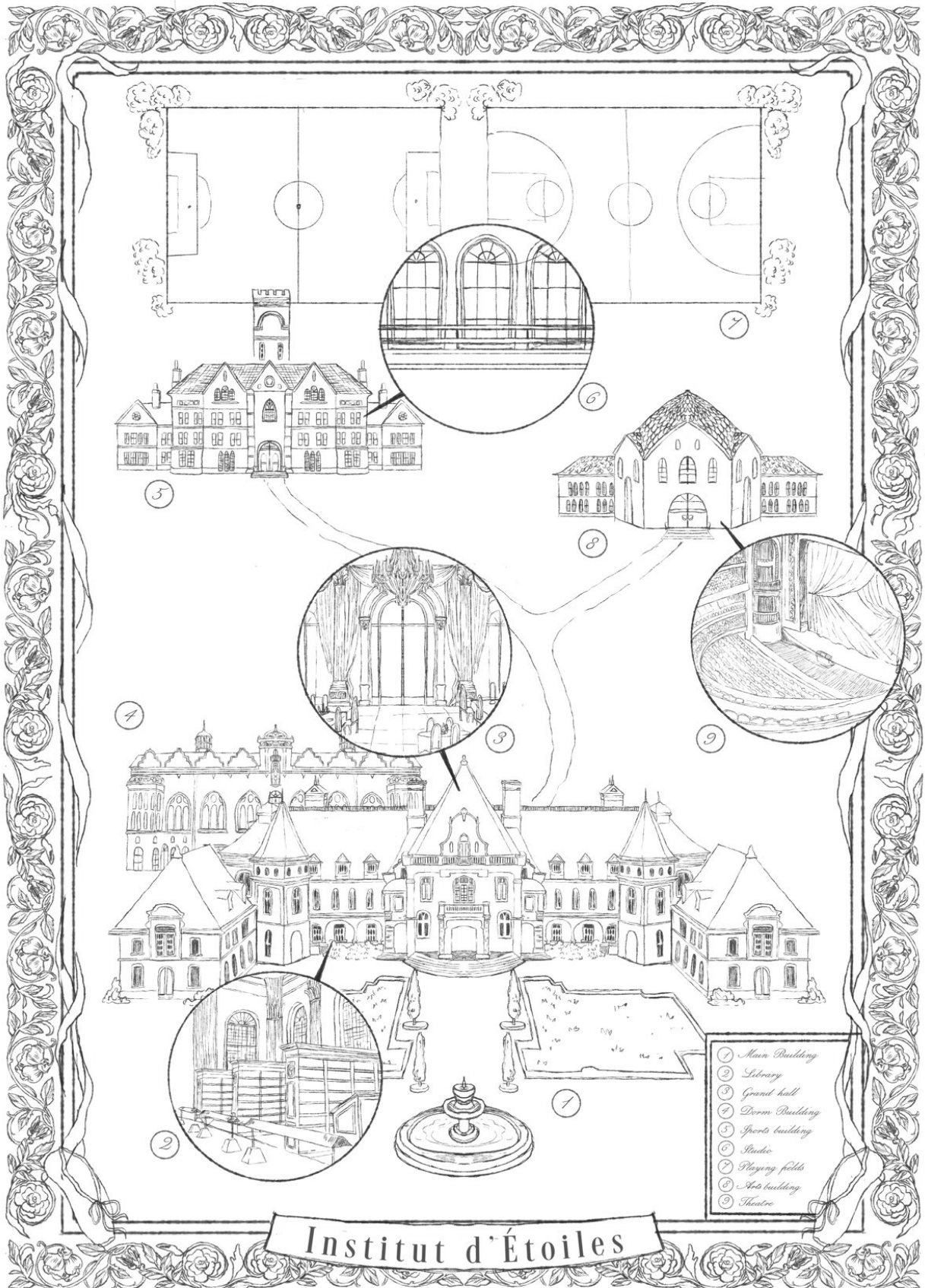
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To being stubborn, ambitious, and always fighting for what you deserve.

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Chapter 1

Amelie



MY GAZE STAYS PINNED TO THE SMALL DARK SMUDGE ON THE MIRROR EVEN as I spin around.

Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine.

I falter on the thirtieth fouetté, my left leg failing to rise en pointe as exhaustion hits and my muscles tighten. My right foot drops along with it, and I let the rest of my body follow as I lean back on the cool floor of the studio.

It's always the thirtieth.

I've only managed the full thirty-two fouettés this sequence requires once during my time practicing it. If I want to stand any chance of getting a solo in this year's showcase—and catching the eye of agency scouts—I'll need to perfect it.

My ankle twinges as I sit up, a short, sharp pain from an old injury that flares up at the worst times. It's the reason I failed at getting a solo last year, and I'll be damned if I let it happen again.

After catching my breath and waiting for the pain to subside, I stand up to gather my discarded things in front of the mirror that stretches across the entire wall. I plant myself on the ground again to change out of my pointe shoes, flexing my feet to get rid of the tingling sensation that comes with standing on the tip of my toes for so long.

I tuck the shoes into my bag before drinking down the half bottle of water I have left, throwing that in with them, too. My face gets bigger on my phone screen as I scoot closer, grab it, and stop the recording I set up so

I can play it back later. I record every practice, studying them every time I make a mistake so I can learn from it.

Standing again, the slowly fading sunlight streams through the large windows, reflecting off the mirrors, and illuminating my face as I look at myself. I slick my hands across my dark hair in an attempt to flatten the few curls that have escaped the bun I forced them into earlier. My face is still warm from dancing intensely, so I press the back of my hand to my cheeks in an attempt to cool them down before I leave the studio.

Making my way to the door, I take one last sweeping glance at the studio that's almost my second home before I switch off the light and leave. I always reserve the same studio, a smaller room toward the end of the block. It's the best one for avoiding people, as the other dancers don't get that far in when looking for a room to practice in.

The hallway leading out of the sports building is dark as usual, everyone else already long gone back to the dorms. I seem to be the only one who ever stays this late, but I prefer the quietness at this time. The muffled sounds of people dancing in other studios can get distracting sometimes, and as good as I am at performing on a stage, it's only because of the effort I put in behind the scenes.

I scroll through my phone as I walk back to the dorms, checking in on the slew of notifications from the group chat with my friends.

ZENA

Is there an event this weekend? Layth mentioned something about it

I've only been friends with Zena for a year, but she joined our group easily. We met last year when we moved in and discovered our rooms were across the hall from each other. I'd heard about her way before, though. Heiress to a crown she'll never wear, she's royalty. Even though it's a small country that's barely visible on the map, I remember the buzz of rumours floating around the summer before we started university.

I never imagined I'd be in such close proximity to her, and although I was a little wary at first due to how closed off she seemed, it quickly became clear that she wanted to make friends.

Over the first few months of getting to know each other, Zena slowly lowered her guard, allowing us to learn more about the real her, rather than the world's assumptions.

She's told us about her sheltered upbringing, her only friend being the boy she grew up with, who now seems inseparable from her. After hearing that, it was impossible not to befriend her.

EVIE

I think he means the welcome dinner

On the other hand, Evie—Evangeline to most—and I have been friends since we were children, our families connected before we were even born through working in similar industries. What exactly that industry is, I can't say. From overhearing random phone calls on the rare occasions my parents were at home, it's something to do with private equity, whatever that means.

As much as I appreciate the lifestyle I've been brought up in, I've never paid attention to what my parents actually do. Neither of them had much of a hand in raising me, both busy with whatever business they were conducting that kept them away from home most of the time. Evie's parents were the same, and we met because our parents hired the same nanny to look after both of us together. I wouldn't change a thing about it for the world.

ZENA

Ohhh right

We've already been here for a month, why are they doing it now?

AMELIE

Do you think I can get out of it?

EVIE

She's alive! Get here quickly, we're ordering ice cream

AMELIE

Are you in the common room?

ZENA

We're in my room

AMELIE

Can you get strawberry for me? I'll be there soon

ZENA

Got it

When I reach my room, I dump my bag on my desk, throw my phone down next to it, then strip off my clothes and take a quick shower. After changing into something more comfortable, I grab my phone and head across to Zena's room.

I let myself in; Evie and Zena both sat on her bed with their backs against the wall. I shuffle up to join them, resting my head on one of Zena's pillows as I throw my legs over their laps.

"Good practice?" Evie asks as she presses her palm to my ankle, soothing the ever-present underlying pain without me even having to mention it.

"Only made it to thirty before I lost my balance."

Evie smooths her hand across my shin, Zena's hand joining hers as she gives it a gentle pat.

"Thirty is still great!" Zena says enthusiastically.

I appreciate her support, but I can't agree.

"I need to be safely hitting thirty-five if I want to guarantee I can perform it perfectly every time," I tell them, shutting my eyes as I sink further into the pillow.

"Auditions are in two weeks, right?" Evie asks, and I nod in response, opening my eyes to stare at the fairy lights draped across Zena's ceiling. "There's still plenty of time. You'll get the solo, Amelie. You're the best dancer in this place."

Although Evie's trying her best to reassure me, it's much easier for her to say it than it is for me to believe it. I know I'm a good dancer; I know I'm better than everyone else in our class. That doesn't come from a place of arrogance, but from the years I've put in, the early mornings and late nights in the studio that no one even sees. But as much as I know these things, I can't seem to convince the people whose opinions seem to matter the most.

"Did you order yet?" I ask, changing the subject before I can spiral any further.

"On its way. Layth went to grab it," Zena says as she checks her phone.

I lift my head slightly to the right as Evie looks at me, and we share a knowing glance, stifling giggles as Zena huffs in annoyance.

"I'm too lazy to get it myself," she says, giving an excuse that neither of us asked for.

“Sure, that’s the reason why.” Evie grins, knocking her shoulder against Zena, which leads to her dramatically falling on her side, burying her face in the comforter.

Evie pulls me to sit up, and we both crowd on top of Zena, pressing her further into the bed as she protests.

“You can get your own ice cream next time.” Her muffled voice is full of feigned annoyance.

“Where’s the fun in that?” I push her hair off her face, exposing the slight blush on her olive skin.

“I hate you guys,” she says.

“We love you, too,” Evie tells her right as there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Zena calls out as we untangle ourselves to sit up properly.

Layth slips into the room, closing the door behind him as he approaches the three of us, with his usual stoic demeanour and sharp features that give nothing away. He’s dressed in what might as well be his uniform, a plain white shirt covered with a black suit jacket, and black trousers with the sharpest crease I’ve ever seen down the front of them to cover his long legs. He towers over the whole group, even with the other guys all being over six foot tall. While I’m not exactly short at five foot seven, being around this group makes me feel it some days.

His gaze stays fixed on Zena as he reaches the bed and hands the bag of ice cream to her. Evie and I might as well not exist.

“There’s spoons in the bag,” is all he says before he flashes her the softest of smiles, barely visible if you’re not paying attention, before he turns and leaves the room.

“I want to wrap him in a blanket and look after him forever,” Evie remarks as she takes the bag out of Zena’s hand and passes the tubs out to us.

“Isn’t he trained in like fifty different martial arts? He could probably kill someone,” I say.

“The only way he’s killing them is with kindness,” Evie replies, getting a soft laugh out of Zena.

“Anyway, what have you two been up to?” I ask, hoping they won’t ask me any more questions about the auditions.

“Trying to figure out what to wear for this dinner,” Zena says, popping a scoop of ice cream into her mouth.

“There’s a few ateliers in the 8th that I’ve been wanting to visit,” Evie adds. “I’m not having a repeat of last year.”

I think back to our first welcome dinner, and how none of us were prepared for it. We thought it would just be a small event held within the university, but it turned out to be far bigger. Photographers were stationed around the room, hired by the university to show off its students. Our lack of knowledge meant that when Evie and Damien started arguing over sharing a chocolate cake at the end of the evening, said dessert ended up on Evie’s white dress, resulting in a very unflattering photo of her yelling at Damien while covered in chocolate.

“I am not letting that happen to you again, even if it means I have to take Damien down myself,” I tell her, earning a sputtering laugh as she chokes on her ice cream.

“That, I would love to see. I think you could easily take him in a fight.”

“I think anyone could,” Zena adds unexpectedly, sending the three of us into fits of laughter.

“He can’t even win a game of chess,” Evie sighs, shaking her head.

“What was the score last time you checked?” Zena asks.

“He’s won two matches.”

“That’s great!” I say.

“Out of thirty.”

“Oh.”

“I should go and rescue him, shouldn’t I?” Evie says, already finishing off her ice cream and scooting off the bed to get to her feet.

Zena and I don’t need any prompting to join her, and we leave the room together. When we reach the common room, the four boys are in their usual spot, crowded around a small table with a chess set between River and Grayson, Damien and Layth watching from the sidelines. It might as well be a gathering of models with how they all look and hold themselves. I suppose growing up with an immense amount of money and privilege really does wonders for appearances.

They’re all wearing clothes similar to Layth’s: suit jackets, white shirts, and dress pants. The university has no official dress code, but most male students opt for more formal clothes. Their personalities still show through the clothes, though.

Grayson has the top two buttons of his shirt undone, a small silver chain dangling around his neck. He lifts a finger to tug on it, the matching silver

rings on his slender olive-toned fingers glowing in the firelight.

Damien's white shirt is untucked from his pants, the creases showing even more as he lifts his arms above his head to stretch, revealing a sliver of tan skin just above his waistband.

Layth's clothes are as pristine as if they've just been freshly laundered rather than worn for a full day of classes. On very rare occasions, he might relax a bit, rolling up his sleeves to reveal light brown arms corded with veins.

River looks like a mess, the worst out of all of them. His top button is undone, ghostly pale collarbones on show, and one side of his shirt is untucked messily. It's obvious he's putting too much effort into the casual look he's trying and failing to pull off.

"Who do you think is winning?" I ask, right as a piece goes flying toward River's head.

I have to cover my mouth with my hand as I let out a sputtering laugh. Although I can't hear what Grayson is saying to him—most likely a string of profanities—the smug expression on River's face doesn't budge.

River Campbell has been a thorn in my side for as long as I've known him. When he joined the dance school I attended as a child, I was intrigued. He was the first boy and I admired that he was doing a sport that's typically reserved for girls. But as we've gotten older, that initial reaction has been replaced by an ever-growing resentment for him. Our teachers constantly applauded him, even when he made mistakes, and he's had no trouble getting the solo roles he wants. Meanwhile, I've had to fight tooth and nail to make myself stand out amongst the other ballerinas, and not just for my skin colour. Being the only Black girl in a class full of White people doing a historically White art was no effortless feat, as much as I made it look like that to everyone around me.

Being a male ballerina has always seemed like an easier role to me. There's a scarcity to them that makes the good dancers seem even more impressive. It's not River's fault that he gets praised for every little step. But it is his fault that he's a raging narcissist who thinks he's god's gift to ballet.

I learned early in our acquaintance that his arrogance extended to every aspect of his life. It's a wonder he's managed to maintain any kind of friendships. At this point, I think the others keep him around out of pity more than anything else. I'd be more than happy to exclude him from our

group—a point I’ve mentioned to the girls multiple times—but they always say I’m being too harsh.

“I don’t know why Grayson even bothers,” Zena says, shaking her head.

“They’re both as annoying as each other,” I say, unable to hide my disdain for River any longer.

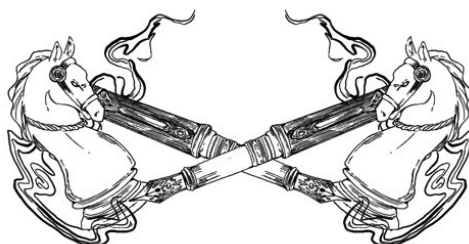
“They’re just having fun,” Evie defends them.

I roll my eyes at her, making my way over to a nearby couch to finish off my ice cream as we turn our attention back to the new game being set up.

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Chapter 2

River



“CHECKMATE.”

“We just started,” Grayson exclaims, staring at the board between us as if it’ll change the outcome.

“Rookie error. You moved your g and f pawns,” I explain, pointing out his mistake. “So it was easy for me to take the queen. Don’t worry, we’ll keep practicing until—”

I don’t get to finish my sentence before said queen is being thrown at my head, along with some very strong language.

“I’m not playing anymore.”

“Fine,” I tell him, resetting the board and moving the pieces back to their starting positions.

I take his not-so-subtle cue as a sign to call it a night. We’ve been playing for a while now, but winning every game is starting to get boring. I need a real competitor. I look around at the men that have somehow become my friends. Grayson has already proven he’s not a good sport, Layth has no interest in, well, anything, and I know Damien well enough to predict his every move.

“Are we expected to attend this dinner next week?” Grayson says, scrolling through his phone until he flashes us the email we all received earlier. “What kind of university has a dress code for a welcome dinner?”

I bite my tongue, well aware that all of this is still fairly new to him. Grayson has made no attempt to hide the fact that his family’s wealth is newly acquired. His mother founded a tech start-up that miraculously didn’t

go under in a year, and now he's enjoying his newfound riches in a way that the rest of us never have.

Damien and I both come from a line of generational wealth, his family dealing with trade investments on a global scale. My family has only recently gotten into that side of business, after my parents wanted ways to diversify their income streams. Though it's not like we've ever been lacking.

My grandparents on both sides were old Hollywood household names, spending most of their lives in the spotlight. It was only natural for my parents to follow the same path, firmly planting themselves in the public eye. Both grew up as models, met as teenagers on one fateful night at Paris Fashion Week, and have been inseparable ever since. As they got older, they pivoted to acting, taking lead roles in blockbuster films, partly from the help of their parents' name, and partly for their talent.

Over the past few years, my father has taken a step back, pursuing investments alongside Damien's father. The two probably met in the exact room I'm sitting in right now and have been friends ever since. It's why my father thought it was important I come to Institut d'Étoiles before joining him in his new business venture. My parents have done their best to keep me out of the spotlight of their lingering fame, and I appreciate being able to live a somewhat lowkey life.

Institut d'Étoiles is a small private university for only the wealthiest in the world. It's filled with the children of CEOs, royalty, diplomats, celebrities—if you can afford the annual six-figure tuition fees, you've got a chance of attending. But it also has a rigorous entry examination process, and it requires references from alumni. Every member of my family has passed through here, so attending once I was of age was never anything but a certainty.

"We have to go," I tell Grayson.

When Grayson joined a few weeks into the first semester last year, Damien and I befriended him out of necessity rather than choice. He kept slipping up, making mistakes that demonstrated just how new our world was to him. It was slightly embarrassing to watch, so we had no option but to step in.

"They say it's to welcome the freshman, but it's more about the image of the school. Where else will they be able to gather the future leaders of the world all in one place?"

I push the chessboard to one side, lifting my feet onto the table in front of me. Damien promptly knocks them off.

“Manners, River,” he prompts before turning his attention to Layth, who silently rejoined us after running his errand. “What did they get this time?”

“Ice cream,” he says, straightforwardly.

“And they couldn’t get it themselves because...” I ask, but Layth just shrugs.

“Because he can’t let his precious Zena lift a finger,” Damien answers for him, a smirk on his face.

“It’s not like that,” Layth replies quickly before he seems to remember himself and sinks back into the couch.

Layth is also a curious case. His family doesn’t come from money as far as I can tell, but he’s been surrounded by it his whole life, so he understands it well enough. That, and the fact that he’s best friends—perhaps more—with real-life royalty.

“Whatever. What did Evie get? I don’t want to waste the journey over there,” Damien asks, as if the journey isn’t a mere twenty feet to the couch they’re relaxing on.

“Cookies and cream.”

“God, she has terrible taste.” He scowls. “What about the others?”

“Zena got cookie dough, and Amelie got strawberry.”

Of course she got my favourite flavour, and now it’s ruined for me.

Amelie Devereaux has been a thorn in my side for as long as I’ve known her. She thinks the world of herself, and as much as I can admit she’s an extremely talented ballerina, my compliments toward her stop there. She’s one of the most stuck-up people I’ve ever met, which is quite a task when you’re constantly surrounded by rich kids who think the world owes them everything.

When I first started learning ballet, I thought we might become friends, considering we were both the best dancers in our class. However, I soon realised Amelie had no interest in speaking to anyone, and I wasn’t going to go out of my way to befriend someone who clearly was happy alone. We’ve never been able to avoid each other since then, though.

From attending the same dance school to now being at d’Étoiles together, she’s inescapable. It’s only made worse by the fact that *her* best friend is betrothed to *my* best friend, so there’s no way to avoid her. The

knowledge that once we graduate we'll rarely have to see each other apart from formal occasions is the only thing that brings me some peace.

"Perfect, at least someone has taste," Damien says, leaning back on the couch before he pushes himself off it to stand. Grayson promptly drags him back down.

"Back to the topic at hand," he interrupts, still tapping on his phone. "I need to buy a new suit then. If this dinner's so important, I can't make a bad impression."

"Not a single person will be paying attention to what you're wearing," Damien tells him. They most definitely will, but it's easier to lie to him.

"I'll use any excuse to go shopping." Grayson shrugs. "Care to join me?"

"I'll come with you," I tell him.

First semester has only started, and now that we're already in our second year, I need to focus more on my studies. But strolling around the streets of Paris is a lot more fun than any of that. As if my father can hear my wayward thoughts, my phone buzzes with a text from him, asking to meet this weekend as he'll be in the city. I fire off a quick reply, knowing that he'll want to check on how the start of the semester is progressing.

"Well, if you're going, I suppose I will, too," Damien adds, changing his tune from just a few moments ago. "Layth?"

"I'll have to see what Zena is doing first."

We all let out a groan. While we get that his relationship with her is tied in ways we'll never understand, I don't know how he can live with constantly having to adapt his plans to fit hers.

"I'll go ask them," Damien says, standing up again. "I know Evie won't turn down a shopping trip, especially when it's on my card."

He says the last part as if he's ever let her pay for anything in their lives when they go out together. As much as my family values connections, I'm glad they never resorted to forcing me into an arranged marriage just to strengthen business relations.

Damien and Evie never complain about it, but I can't imagine what it must be like to grow up knowing you have no choice in who you'll marry. I've never given it much thought myself, but there's still a freedom in knowing that if I ever did want to get married to someone, it would be my own decision.

The three of us watch as Damien walks toward the girls, all of them smiling as he approaches. The hum of the dozens of people in the room speaking makes it impossible to hear what they're saying, but then Amelie lifts her spoon up, feeding Damien some of her ice cream. The gesture inexplicably and involuntarily makes my face contort into what must be a concerning expression, as it leads to Grayson offering to buy me my own tub of strawberry ice cream.

Damien tips his head at the girls before coming back at us, and I have an overwhelming urge to ask him why on earth he was getting fed by a demon, but I restrain myself.

"They're all down for it."

All meaning she'll be joining, too. I suppress my frustration that this trip turned from a boys' outing into the whole group being involved.

"Great, we can go after classes finish tomorrow," Grayson says, finally putting his phone away. I have no idea what he's always doing on there.

"I'm going to bed," I tell the group, pushing off the couch to stand.

I know it's irrational to feel so much irritation at a girl I dislike feeding ice cream to my best friend, but everything she does gets under my skin in ways I can't explain.

I walk through the common room, right past where the three girls are sitting. As impolite as it is, I don't spare a glance in their direction as I leave and head to my room. I go straight for my bathroom so I can shower and hopefully wash away this strange feeling that overcomes me whenever I'm anywhere near Amelie Devereaux.

Chapter 3

Amelie



“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS ONE?” GRAYSON SLIPS HIS ARMS THROUGH the sleeves of a navy suit jacket before turning to face us.

The whole store has been closed off for the seven of us, so we’re scattered on various couches and chairs as Grayson tries on every suit that catches his eye.

“I think it looks exactly the same as the other five you’ve tried on,” Damien tells him, unable to hide the boredom in his voice.

“Ignore him,” Evie says, gently shoving Damien’s shoulder and pushing him back into the loveseat they’re sharing. “I preferred the other one, with the peak lapel.”

“Thank you, Evangeline,” Grayson says. He always calls her by her full name, even though no one else does.

“Oh, yes, I liked that one, too. Layth has something similar, I’m sure,” Zena adds.

It’s near impossible for her to add anything to a conversation that doesn’t mention him in some way. Almost as impossible as it is for her to exist more than five feet away from him when they’re in the same room, which is always. The two of them are sat on the largest couch here, yet there’s barely an inch of space between them.

“Aren’t you going to buy them all anyway?” River drawls with a yawn.

I’ve tried to ignore his presence the whole time we’ve been here, but his voice grates on me every time he speaks. He’s sprawled out on a chair, legs hooked over the armrest as if he owns the place.

“Well, yes. But where’s the fun if I don’t try them on?” Grayson smiles as the rest of us groan.

He’s only been part of the group for less than a year, but we already know his habits well. Our opinions on his purchases don’t really matter to him, and he asks merely for the fun of it. Grayson spends his money differently from the rest of us, too. We’re not frugal by any means, but Grayson acts like his card will freeze if he goes a single day without tapping it.

“Is it our turn now?” Evie asks. “There’s a beautiful atelier around the corner that caught my eye on the way here.”

“I’m heading back,” River says, running his fingers through his dark brown hair.

He swings his legs over the armrest until his feet are firmly back on the ground, and he makes it look graceful the way only a dancer can. He stands upright, adjusting his dark pants, perfectly tailored to his irritatingly long legs.

“No, you’re not,” Evie tells him, and he stops midway through stretching his arms above his head. “We had to put up with watching you all try on suits; you can do the same for us.”

“I didn’t try anything on,” he points out. “I didn’t even want to come in the first place.”

“Well, thank you so much for gracing us with your presence,” I murmur under my breath.

“What was that?” He turns his attention in my direction, steel-grey eyes observing me.

“Nothing.” I stare him down.

“Could have sworn it was something,” he counters.

“Not everything is about you,” I remind his ego.

River lets out an exaggerated gasp. “I had no idea. How ever will I live?”

I push up off my chair and make my way toward the exit. I’ve behaved well enough the whole time we’ve been here, but he always brings out the worst in me.

“I’ll meet you there,” I tell the girls as I open the door.

“Why do you do that every time?” Damien chides him, but I don’t look back or linger long enough to hear whatever response River might give.

The streets of the 8th arrondissement are quieter than usual, a combination of fewer tourists at this time of year and the fact that most of these stores are closed now. We called ahead to make sure we had enough time for them all to try on a few suits for dinner, and to let the staff know they'd be well compensated for working late. It'll be sheer luck if the atelier that Evie wants to visit is still open with how much time we've already wasted.

"Amelie!"

I turn around to see Zena and Layth a few feet behind me. A cool breeze floats through the air, and in the space of the ten-second walk between the exit to the store and where I'm standing, Layth manages to take his jacket off and drape it over Zena's shoulders.

"Is it still open?" she asks, reaching up to pull the jacket tighter over her.

"I'm not sure; I was about to check," I reply as she links her arm through mine, and we continue walking. "Have they finished up in there?"

"Grayson's paying now," she says, and I glance back to see the others standing outside of the store.

We round the corner to approach the atelier that caught Evie's attention, and of course, it's closed. It's to be expected at almost nine in the evening on a weekday, but it's still annoying that we'll have to go back tomorrow.

Although our university is technically classed as being in Paris, it's on the outskirts on account of its sprawling campus and the security needed to protect its students. The journey into the centre of the city is time that could be better spent practicing.

"It's closed?" Evie says from behind us, and I'm not even sure when they caught up.

"Unfortunately," I tell her.

She joins us, crossing her arm through Zena's so the three of us are linked. The boys reach us, forming a small circle outside the atelier. River, however, doesn't. Instead, he stands off to the side a few feet away, and lifts his phone to his ear.

"This is all your fault," Evie says, jabbing a finger into Grayson's chest.

"I'll bring you back tomorrow," he tells her. "I'll buy whatever dress you want to make it up to you."

"Let's not take it too far," Damien interrupts, his hand coming up to grip Grayson's shoulder.

I guess it's only a natural response to another man offering to buy your betrothed a dress, but it's funny whenever he acts like this. Grayson has no idea that their relationship is something arranged, and that there's no romantic feelings between the two. It's not that we don't trust him, but to everyone but us and their families, Evie and Damien's relationship is entirely their own.

"The owner will be here in ten minutes," River says, lifting Damien's hand off Grayson's shoulder as he steps between them.

"Really? You know the owner?" Evie asks, a smile returning to her face.

"Turns out they're an acquaintance of my mother. They owed her a favour," he replies with a wink that makes me almost throw up my dinner.

"Amazing!" Evie throws her arms around him to hug him.

I try to hide my disgust, but I must do a bad job of it because Zena pokes me in the side with her elbow.

"Come on, you have to admit that was nice of him," she whispers.

"I wouldn't admit that even if I saw him rescue a cat from a burning building."

Zena rolls her eyes at me as I hear a sharp huff of laughter coming from the other side of her. I peek my head forward to find Layth has come to stand next to her, filling the empty space that Evie left.

We chat idly about the upcoming dinner, and what kind of dresses we should look at while we wait for the owner to arrive. Once they do, we're let into the atelier, soft lights flickering on to illuminate the room in a golden glow. Mannequins are artfully placed around the small area, displaying dresses for any occasion.

"Please let me know whatever you'd like to look at or try on," the owner says.

She's tall and blonde, with a glowy tan to her skin, and it's clear she's had a history of modelling, which explains her connection to River's mother. We all thank her for taking the time out of her evening to accommodate us, before the three of us start looking at dresses.

"Good god, we're going to be here forever," River murmurs, and I seem to be the only one who catches it.

"No one's forcing you to be here," I tell him, ignoring the fact that we're only in the store because of his mother.

"And who's forcing you? If I were in your position, I'd look a little happier at getting exclusive access to one of the best designers in Paris."

I fix my scowl into a patronising smile, widening my eyes and bringing my hands together underneath my chin.

“Oh, River, whatever would we do without you!” I say in the most sickly sweet voice I can muster.

His mouth curls into a sneer and he storms past me as my face drops. He throws himself down onto a chair, running his hands through dark brown strands. Every time I catch him doing it, I imagine it’s my hands in his hair as I yank it right out of his arrogant head.

Zena calls me over to where she and Evie have already picked out a few dresses. We decide to wear the same colour so we can match each other, a light shade of pink that will complement all of us well. We go for different styles, though; Evie opts for shorter ones that skim the bottom of her shins, while Zena focuses on longer gowns. I’ve guessed over the past year that there’s certain protocols she has to stick to when dressing for events, and I’ve only seen her in long dresses that brush across the floor as she walks. I simply pick out whatever catches my eye.

We point out the dresses we’d like to try on to the owner, and she asks us to wait for a moment as she makes a call. A few minutes later, another staff member appears through the front door, getting straight to work in pulling dresses for us. Between them, they set the three of us up in different fitting rooms so we can try on our selections.

I undress and pull on the first one, a floor-length silk piece that shimmers in the light. It drapes off my shoulders, the bias cut dipping in the centre of my chest. When I take a look at myself in the mirror, the way the pink dress shines against my deep brown skin, how it clings to my body, I can’t help but admire myself.

I’ve never really been insecure about my looks, but there’s still the odd occasion where I’ll worry that certain parts of me might be strange for others to look at. My calves are defined in a way only a dancer can be, and I try to cover them up most of the time, hence my preference for longer dresses when I have to attend more formal events. But in this dress, I just feel beautiful.

I reach around to try and pull the invisible zipper up on the back, but only make it halfway before it becomes impossible. I call out to the staff member for help but get no response.

“Are you decent?”

God, why is he still here?

“Go away, River.”

“There’s no one else here to help you. The owner and Layth are with Zena,” he says, voice slightly muffled through the curtain. “Damien’s helping the staff pick out something else for Evie, and I don’t think you want Grayson’s help, do you?”

Annoyingly, he’s right. Although we’re friends, I haven’t known Grayson long enough to be that comfortable with him.

“Just get in here, and zip this up,” I relent, hating that he’s the only option I have.

I turn to face the mirror, giving my back to River as he opens the curtain just enough so that he can slip into the enclosed space with me. His expression flashes from annoyance to something else I can’t quite decipher as he steps closer to me.

My eyes track him in the mirror as he leans back slightly to get a better view of the zipper, and then cool fingertips brush against my spine, the featherlight touch tracing down until I feel the gentle tug of the zipper as he takes hold of it.

River and I have never been this close before. I avoid him at all costs, and he does the same. But it’s hard to stop the physical reaction my body is having to the way his knuckles are pressed into my back as he gathers the fabric closer together, his fingers grazing across my exposed skin for just a few seconds as he lifts the zipper to close it fully.

He snaps the hook at the top closed with a delicate touch before he steps back. I keep my eyes trained on him in the mirror as he lifts his gaze to meet mine. Either the lighting in here has adopted a pinkish hue from reflecting off my dress and onto his face, or the impossible is happening.

River Campbell is blushing.

My mouth drops open slightly, a small sound escaping me before I can stop it, and River’s eyes dart to my mouth before he clears his throat, his expression switching in an instant. Of course, I was wrong. He’s not blushing, he’s pissed off. His lips press into a flat line as a crease forms between his eyebrows, and he looks like he’d rather be anywhere else in the world than here.

“You can leave now,” I tell him, saving us both from any further embarrassment that might occur from prolonging this interaction.

“You’re welcome,” he says sarcastically before he nudges the curtain to the side again and leaves.

My hands clench into fists at my sides, anger running through me at the way I let him get so under my skin whenever I'm trying to enjoy something. I take a few calming breaths before I push through the curtain and step out into the room. Zena and Evie are already out, complimenting each other on their choices. The two of them look stunning.

The pink gown she's wearing perfectly complements Zena's light brown skin, accentuating her hips, and somehow making her look five inches taller than her actual height of five foot four. She'll more than likely wear a short pair of heels to the dinner, and I can already imagine how pretty she'll look on the day. I glance over to Layth, and he practically has hearts in his eyes as he looks at her. I don't think he'd even realise if Evie and I disappeared right in front of him.

Evie's dress hugs her torso before flowing out at the waist, the long sleeves an unusual choice for most, but she somehow manages to pull it off. Evie has a knack for making any outfit look like she's just pulled it off a runway, and if she had any interest in it, I'm sure she could become a model. Her fair skin, light brown hair, green eyes, and the genetics of two people who could easily have worked as models but instead chose a quieter life make Evie one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen in my life.

I shift my gaze toward Damien, who smiles appreciatively at Evie, shooting her a thumbs up as she grins at him. My eyes drift to Grayson, who's standing right next to him, and there's an expression on his face that I can't quite read as his gaze shifts from Evie to Zena. River is staring down at his phone, and I don't know why I even bothered to look at him.

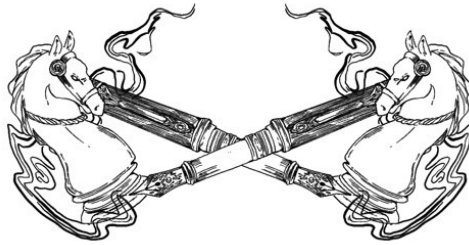
I compliment both of my friends, already thinking about what jewellery I can pull from my collection that will elevate our looks.

"I'm leaving," River says abruptly, tucking his phone into his pocket as he stands. "My mother will settle the bill, so pick whatever you want and let the owner know."

River casts one last glance at me, clenching his jaw in a way that makes its outline even sharper than usual. He turns on his heel and leaves without another word. Evie and Zena both call out thanks as he steps onto the street, the door closing behind him. I'll give River one thing. He's extremely talented at making the nicest of gestures seem like a curse.

Chapter 4

River



I CANNOT GET THE IMAGE OF AMELIE IN THAT DRESS OUT OF MY HEAD.

I stare at the ceiling as I twirl the queen chess piece that my grandmother gave me when I was younger between my fingers. She's the one who taught me to play chess, and it's become a habit to fiddle with it whenever I'm overthinking something. I run my finger over the edges, wondering why I even bothered to go to Amelie in the first place.

She could have waited until someone else was free, but my mother raised me better than that. I've spent so much time backstage with her during fashion shows that it's an almost natural response to help someone with their outfit when needed. I also had to pay for that damn dress because the idea of Damien—or heaven forbid, Grayson—buying it infuriated me for reasons I can't explain.

A huff of annoyance escapes me as I toss and turn in my bed, sleep evading me no matter how hard I try. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is her staring into my soul through the mirror, deep brown eyes piercing into mine.

Amelie Devereaux, the permanent thorn in my side, has grown another one to prick me with.



It takes me a few hours to drift off, and my alarm is extremely unwelcome in the morning. I must have been in some kind of delusional haze to think booking a studio at seven am was a good idea. At the time, it made sense to get practice for class out of the way early enough to relax in the evening. And while that's still my plan, I had no idea my night would be derailed by her.

I get out of bed before I'm plagued by any further thoughts of her, forcing myself to get ready so I can leave early enough to avoid seeing anyone on the way to the studio. I pull on shorts that cling to my thighs, then cover them with sweatpants and an oversized hoodie. Those studios get unreasonably warm, so I'll take the outer layers off as soon as I get there. I pack my bag with a water bottle, my ballet flats, and a small towel before I leave my room.

As I walk through the old halls of the dorm building, early morning sunlight slowly creeps through the windows, creating boxes of light outlined by shadows on the floor. No one else is around, but I can hear shuffling behind doors as people start to rise and get ready for the day. The dance studios are located in the sports facility, about a five-minute walk from the dorms.

The campus of d'Étoiles spans across acres of land. The main building houses the classrooms, along with the grand hall where the dinner will be held this weekend. It's a historical building, and I've heard rumours that it was akin to a castle in a past life, housing an aristocratic family line that lived here for centuries but fled France during the First World War. It was soon taken over and turned into what we know it as today.

The sports facilities are housed in a separate building at the back, the outside still maintaining its traditional facade, while the inside has been completely renovated with state-of-the-art studios, equipment, and everything athletes may need. Playing fields stretch out behind, the turf meticulously cared for by the grounds staff, who are always hard at work.

The curriculum at d'Étoiles is different to most universities. Every student is encouraged to pursue an art or sport, as well as a language, alongside the standard classes that we all take regarding more financial, business, and political matters.

You'd expect that from a university catered specifically to the wealthy, but that doesn't mean those classes aren't boring as hell. Most students here

don't actually need the education that d'Étoiles provides, but they enjoy the experience of pretending they live normal young adult lives.

I've never been under those pretences. I've known since I was old enough to understand my position in the world that I would end up working alongside my father. During my childhood, he let me learn ballet and whatever other sport or hobby I was interested in, on the condition that it would never become a career. Once I graduate from d'Étoiles in three short years, I'll be working at his company.

When I reach the sports building and pass through the hallway that leads off to the studios, there's already a light on in one of them. Someone else must hate themselves as much as I do to be here so early. My room is next to theirs, so as I walk past, I take a peek inside.

Of course, it's her.

Amelie's eyes are closed as she sits on the floor, her legs stretched out in front with both hands resting on her thighs. She's wearing a light pink outfit, the same shade as the dress she wore yesterday, and as soon as that image pops into my head, I stop looking at her. I need to visit my doctor and check if I've suddenly developed some kind of heart arrhythmia or claustrophobia. That's the only logical reason for why my heart started beating erratically yesterday in that fitting room. I shake my head and walk away from her door to my own studio. I can never escape her.

I flick on the lights as I enter, pull my things out of my bag, and drop them in front of the mirror. I strip off my sweatpants and hoodie, the sun already heating the room. My phone connects to the speaker in the room as I scroll through to start my workout playlist. The stretches I use to warm up are second nature now, and I don't have to think as I loosen my limbs and get them ready to dance.

Auditions for the summer showcase are coming up soon, but I'm still undecided about whether I want to try out. I switch the music to what I've been practicing, a scene from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. It's usually performed as a *pas de trois* with Romeo, Mercutio, and Benvolio, but I've changed it to a solo variation instead. I thought it would be the perfect challenge to get me excited about ballet again, but it hasn't. Going through the motions is boring, and when I manage to pull off the routine pretty much perfectly on the first attempt, I start to think this boredom might run deeper.

My first experience with ballet came when I attended a performance of Swan Lake at nine years old. My parents took me along, and something about the way the dancers moved across the stage fascinated me. They were in control of every part of their body, every step deliberate and poised. At one point, it even felt like all of their breathing was in sync with how well they moved with each other. After that, I asked my mother if it was possible for me to learn how to do that, to have that kind of control over myself, and she enrolled me in class the very same week.

While I was watching the performance, it never occurred to me that ballet was more of a feminine sport. After realising I was the only boy in my class amongst fourteen girls, I figured that maybe it was more to do with my age, or some other factor I couldn't think of. It never bothered me, though. I enjoyed learning how to control my body, and as I grew older, I enjoyed the quiet strength and power I gained from it, too.

But somehow, over the last year or so, I've grown bored of dancing. The passion I had when I was younger has fizzled out, and I've tried so many ways to get it back. I've searched through variations, finding ones with more difficult techniques to test myself and maybe get that passion back by learning something new, but it hasn't worked. At this point, ballet is just something I do because I've always done it, a way for me to keep fit and focus on something else for a few hours.

I change the music, cycling through every routine and variation I'm familiar with, increasing the pace or throwing in different moves to push myself to the limit, but it feels like I surpass it every time. I know I'm a good dancer. I wouldn't keep trying if I wasn't, but I must be missing something. The only thing that's changed since I first started learning how to dance is my age. I attended the same dance academy up until last year, only leaving it because d'Étoiles has their own dedicated teachers for it.

Maybe that's made all the difference, though. Being at d'Étoiles just means I'm one step closer to leaving all of this behind. There won't be time for dancing when I'm working with my father. He's allowed my freedom up until now, but soon I'll be at his beck and call to ensure his business remains successful. My brain wants to cling to the one thing I have control over for as long as I can, but I can't bring myself to.

As my hour session draws to a close, I pull on my sweatpants and leave the hoodie off for now. It's too warm in this room, and dancing around for the past hour has not helped. It's still early enough that not many people

will be up, so I should be fine to walk back to my room like this. I take a swig of water and pack my bag, draping the hoodie over my shoulder as I switch off the lights and leave the studio.

I tell myself not to look into Amelie's studio as I walk past, but the universe seems to have other ideas as I hear the click of the door before something collides with my back. I turn around to face her, but all I see is the top of her head as she drops to the ground to pick up her phone that must have fallen out of her hand.

"Sorry, I didn't—" She cuts herself off as she lifts her head to look at me. "Ugh, it's you."

"Good morning to you, too," I say, as she scowls at me. I stop myself from making a remark about the wind changing and her face getting stuck like that. "Apology accepted."

"You should apologise to me," she sneers, her eyes darting down to my naked torso before back up to my face. "This can be classed as indecent exposure."

I pull my hoodie from my shoulder and dab at my neck as I lean closer to her.

"Ma chérie, you would know if I was being indecent," I say, voice low. I might not have been having fun while I was dancing, but I definitely am now.

Her face contorts, her nose wrinkling and eyebrows pinching together as she shoves at my chest.

"*Vas t'en*," she huffs, pushing past me to leave.

You would think after living in France for a while, I'd understand a lot more of the language. I have no idea what she just said, but it seemed too short to be something like 'wow River you're so handsome'. Either way, it's impossible to wipe the smirk off my face as I trail behind her, keeping enough distance not to bother her again. No matter how fun it is to rile her up, I've been doing it long enough that I know my limits with her.

She humours me every now and then, giving in to this fun game we play where we pretend to want to kill each other. Well, maybe it's only pretending on my part. As much as I dislike how stuck-up she is, and the general air of arrogance she walks around with, I don't actually hate her. After a few too many drinks and under great coercion, I may even go so far as to say I respect her. There's no denying her talent, and as we've grown

up, she's constantly excelled at dancing. Her passion for ballet is admirable, and I wish I had even an ounce of it.

I follow her until we reach the dorms, and we go in opposite directions: she heads to her room, and I go to the common room instead. Layth is already there at our usual table, fully dressed for the day even though there's still plenty of time before classes start. He's here most mornings, always reading by the fireplace, and I drop into the seat across from him. My chessboard sits on the table between us, along with three cups of tea.

Although he doesn't talk much, I quite admire that about him. He seems to speak only when it's completely necessary, and I hope Grayson can pick up some tips from him. I mentioned to the group yesterday that I was having an early practice, and Layth offered to make me a cup of tea for when I'd finished. I take a sip of the warm liquid, then nod at him in silent thanks.

"What are you reading?" I lean over to tip up the book in his hands to see the cover. I raise an eyebrow at the somewhat scandalous image of a shirtless man clinging to a woman. "A romance book? My, my, are we doing research?"

"Zena likes this book."

He keeps his sentences short, and ninety-nine percent of the time, her name is part of it. I don't pretend to understand their relationship, and neither of them offers any insight into it either, apart from being permanently attached to each other's sides.

It's almost like he possesses some kind of magical summoning power, because as soon as he finishes his sentence, she enters the room. His blank expression lifts, the tiniest quirk of his mouth as she approaches us. I take it as my cue to leave, drinking down the rest of my tea before I bid him goodbye and head back to my room.

"Good morning, Zena," I say as we cross paths. She looks at my naked torso before averting her eyes, a slight blush rising on her cheeks. Glad to know not every girl finds me repulsive like Amelie seems to.

"Are you allowed to walk around like that?" she says, reaching out a finger to point at me before retracting it quickly.

I shrug, and she lets out a soft laugh, shaking her head before she goes toward Layth. I glance back at the pair as she perches on the armrest of the chair he's in, draping her arm across his shoulder as he drops the book onto

the table. I've bet Damien they'll finally give in and confess to each other before the year is out.

When I get to my room, I shower and drop back onto my bed, scrolling through websites on my phone until I find what I'm looking for. A list of French words stares back at me, and I work through them, brushing up on slang terms and general phrases I should probably know if I'm going to spend the next three years of my life in Paris.

I search the list, trying to find the phrase that's been stuck in my head for the past hour. When I do, the corners of my lips turn up as I replay the word in her voice over and over.

Vas t'en: go away

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Chapter 5

Amelie



THE GRAND HALL IS, AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, RATHER LARGE AND extravagant, but it fits that name even more so today. A plethora of round tables draped in ivory cloths cover the floor, each decorated with floral centrepieces and matching tableware, the seats covered in that same material to create a seamless look. It flows through the entire space, continuing to the meticulously placed florals that creep up the walls to reach the high ceilings, swathed in translucent white fabric dotted with flowers. There's a soft glow to the room, no big glaring lights, but instead a collection of chandeliers dangle from the ceiling.

"How gaudy," Evie murmurs next to me as we make our way to our table.

Her arm is hooked through Damien's on her other side, and they're the picture of a perfect couple. His pocket square perfectly matches the shade of her dress, and the other boys have done the same to coordinate our group. Zena and Layth trail behind us, arms linked together as they whisper to each other. River and Grayson complete our group at the back, and when I glance back, Grayson's mouth hangs slightly open as he takes in the view. River promptly knocks the back of his hand under Grayson's chin to make him close his mouth.

The seven of us requested a table together, straying from the eight placements these events usually have, but the event staff easily accommodated us. We take our seats, and somehow I end up between River and Damien. I almost ask Damien if we can switch seats, but that would

take him away from Evie. Every public appearance is important to their relationship, and even though this is just a university event, it still counts. Articles will be written about this evening, and every potential relationship—business or romantic—will be speculated on. Our table will definitely feature in a lot of them. Where else would you see a princess having dinner with the grandson of Hollywood royalty, and the son of the newest tech company that’s taking the world by storm?

I lean over the table slightly so I can speak to Zena, seated between Layth and Grayson.

“Did you send them your menu?”

Zena has a few food allergies, and while the university has a range of chefs on hand to cater to everyone’s dietary needs, it can sometimes slip up during events like this.

“I did,” Layth responds for her. “Our food will come out before the rest of yours.”

I’m not entirely sure whether Layth has the same allergies as Zena, or if it’s a requirement of his role as her pseudo-bodyguard, but he always eats the same food as her.

“Good.” I give him a quick smile, then turn my attention to the waiter, who drops a basket of bread and butter onto our table. I thank him and wait for my friends to grab theirs before I reach for a roll, but my hand gets knocked away just as I grab it.

“Haven’t you heard of ladies first?”

“Evie and Zena already took theirs,” River replies deadpan as he places the roll on his plate.

I don’t dignify him with a response; I take the last piece from the basket and slice it open, lathering it with butter before I eat. My friends chatter around me, but it fades into the background as I go over the variation I’ll perform for the audition. I replay it in my head, going through every step as if I’m in the studio instead of at dinner. I’m temporarily dragged out of my thoughts by the General Director’s voice booming through the hall, but as he starts to speak, I tune it out.

My mind wanders from thinking about the variation to the incident with River the other day. I almost forgot myself for a second as I looked at the lines of taut muscle lining his exposed torso, a dancer’s body through and through. I wonder what the rest of him looks like, his calves, his thighs. I won’t lie and say I haven’t admired his physicality before. I’ve always

regarded the hushed strength that ballerinas carry, both male and female. But I would never give River the glory of letting him know that he has the best body I've ever seen. It's lean, but lined with muscles in all the right places, his abs carefully chiselled into his stomach, curved biceps that only appear when he flexes them, and the shift in his legs from when he prepares for a leap to when he lands it.

Even his face isn't too bad, I guess. I glance sideways at him, the lowlights of the room catching the angles of his face and making them look even more defined. It's as if he's been delicately carved from marble: his jaw sharp, the slope of his nose impossibly perfect. I imagine if he stayed quiet his entire life, everyone would have a much more pleasant experience being around him.

This is all far too complimentary for a wayward thought, and I hate myself for it. If he suddenly developed mind-reading powers, I'd have to transfer schools and move to a different continent. I do the only rational thing I can think of to rectify my terribly nice thoughts and fling my heeled foot into the space to the right of me, currently occupied by River's leg.

"Ow, what was that for?" he hisses under his breath.

"I know these speeches are boring, but surely you haven't taken to talking to yourself?"

"You kicked me."

"I did nothing of the sort."

And then I do it again.

"Amelie."

I don't enjoy the way he says my name. The combination of a British mother and American father, while living in various countries growing up, has meant that River's accent always has a tinge of something to it. Whenever he says my name, the slightest French accent slips out, like he's taking extra care to pronounce it properly. I don't like it.

"You should really be quiet during these things," I chide.

I turn my head slightly to the side to look at him, and he's staring at me with the most incredulous expression on his face. His grey eyes lock onto mine, and I see the tiniest curve at the corner of his lips before applause erupts around us. I lift my hands to join, tapping my fingers against my palm as River brings his hands together.

After a few seconds, the applause peters out, and the General Director takes his seat, cueing the waiters to bring out our food. As expected, Zena

and Layth get theirs first, but they both wait for us to get ours before they eat. The dinner is delicious, and the seven of us chat about our plans for the upcoming year. I try to avoid talking about the auditions, and thankfully no one brings them up. Grayson tells us about the many vacations he has planned, and Evie and Damien mention their formal engagement should take place this year.

I give Evie a reassuring smile, knowing that this was never the future she dreamed of. When we were younger, our heads were very much in the clouds. We decorated our rooms with posters of pop stars and actors, giggling at the thought of ever dating one of them and letting our imaginations run wild with scenarios where we'd bump into them and they would fall in love with us. One conversation with Evie's parents changed all of that for her. She's tried to have feelings for Damien, and although she doesn't, she's learned to make the best of a bad situation. At least Damien is her friend, and not someone completely unknown to her.

Talking to Evie about crushes on celebrities, or real people, was never the same after that. I never wanted to bring anything like that up around her, because it would feel like rubbing salt in the wound. It's not that I've had much interest in anyone, and I've always been far too busy with ballet to worry about getting into a relationship. I can't have any distractions, and that would be a huge one. I think that young girl still lives inside me somewhere, though, dreaming of love but scared to reach for it. Once I've achieved my dreams, maybe I can think of finding romance, but until then, it's not something I can afford to do.

The General Director speaks again, drawing all our attention as he closes the dinner now that all the food has been served and the speeches are done. We're free to either go back to our rooms, or stay to dance. A string quartet is set up in one corner of the hall, and they start playing as soon as the General Director finishes speaking. Couples slowly make their way onto the dance floor, moving to the lively classical music that fills the room.

Evie grabs Damien's arm as she stands, dragging him along to join the small crowd. He rolls his eyes but can't hide the smile on his face as her hand comes to rest upon his shoulder, his arm circling her waist. I watch them for a few minutes, their steps in sync, and the quiet laughs they share from whatever whispered conversation they're having.

I'm too used to dancing alone to ever do something like that, so I head back to my room instead of waiting for the event to finish.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I tell the others as I stand, smoothing out my dress.

“Stay a little longer,” Zena protests, leaning across the table to reach out for me.

“I’ve got an early practice tomorrow,” I explain, going around to her side of the table. “I’d rather go back and get some rest.”

I place my hand on her shoulder and lean down to kiss her cheek.

“Let’s go out for a real dinner this week,” I suggest to appease her. Zena raises her hand to rest on mine, patting it twice before nodding.

“Stay for a dance, Amelie,” Grayson says, flashing me a wink. I’m not sure who that works on, but it’s certainly not me.

“Unless it’s ballet, I’m not interested,” I tell him, stepping away from the table.

“Have some pity on a guy. I’ve never been to anything like this before. It looks fun.” He glances at the dancing couples and lets out a heavy sigh. “Guess I’ll have to try again next year.”

He shrugs, pressing his lips into a flat line, and for a split second I actually feel bad for him. He taps his fingers against the table, eyes dejected, and I know this is all an act, but he looks too pathetic to be left alone.

“One dance,” I tell him quickly, before I can regret saying it out loud.

Grayson springs up from his seat, his expression completely changing as he comes to stand by my side.

“This is why you’re my favourite,” he says as I let him lead me over to the dance floor.

“If you step on my feet, I will put you in the hospital,” I warn him.

“Understood.”

We take up our positions, Grayson’s hand hovering right over my hip as he uses his other hand to take mine. I use my free hand to press his against my waist, and the touch feels foreign. I’m not used to dancing with anyone, or being touched by anyone that isn’t Evie or Zena. I push the feeling down, knowing that it’s nothing against Grayson in particular, and I don’t want him to think it is either. The music shifts to a slower tempo, our steps becoming more relaxed, and making the whole thing feel easier.

“Thanks for doing this,” he says, a shy smile on his face that looks entirely at odds with the Grayson I know that’s usually full of confidence. “It really means a lot to me.”

“It’s just a dance,” I tell him.

“We both know it’s not,” he replies. “I’m not used to all this stuff, fancy dinners and events and wearing suits all the time. I was really worried before I came here, but I’m glad I met you guys. I don’t think I’ve ever said thanks to any of you for letting me into your world.”

There’s a pang in my chest at his admission, the vulnerability in what he’s saying. Being at d’Étoiles was never something I considered a huge deal; I was raised with the knowledge that I would attend this university as soon as I knew what university was. But Grayson never had that. He probably didn’t even know it existed until a few years ago.

“You don’t have to thank us for that,” I tell him, our steps still moving to the slow rhythm of the music.

Grayson smiles at me again as the music shifts once more, switching to a more upbeat song that has the couples around us moving quicker than before.

“You got two dances out of me there,” I tell him, and he lets out a soft chuckle.

“I’ll let you go now,” he says, stepping away from me, but keeping my hand in his as he walks us back to the table.

River looks extremely bored, as usual, and I wonder why he even bothered hanging around when Zena and Layth are perfectly fine by themselves. Zena smiles as we approach, and Grayson must catch something in her eye because then he’s offering to dance with her next. She flashes a quick look at Layth, but I can’t read his expression to figure out what he’s thinking. Zena always knows, though, and she takes Grayson’s hand from me so the two can go dance. Layth keeps his eyes fixed on her the whole time.

With four of my friends occupied, and only Layth and River left at the table, I say a quick goodbye to them before turning around.

“I’m leaving too,” River says, and I almost run back onto the dance floor in protest.

The sigh I let out is audible as I turn back to him, and River doesn’t pretend to ignore it. He rises from his seat, fastening the button on his jacket before adjusting the cuff links on his wrist.

“I’ll walk you back,” he adds, in what I guess is an attempt to be a gentleman. The gesture would have more impact if my room wasn’t a few hundred feet away.

“I can walk fine by myself,” I assure him.

“My god, why is everything an argument with you?”

“It wouldn’t be if you left me alone.”

“If only I could,” he mutters so quietly I barely catch it.

I don’t have a chance to register what he just said before he lifts my hand and tucks it into the curve of his elbow.

“Layth.” River nods at him goodbye as he starts to walk away from the table, taking me with him.

My legs move of their own volition as my mind overthinks the last thing he said to me. I know our bickering is more of a game than actual hatred, but I’m still confused by it.

River matches my pace as we walk back to the dorms, the sounds of students enjoying themselves slowly fading into the silence as we get further away. Our footsteps on the stone floor echo through the tall hallways as we walk in uncomfortable silence. In just a few days, I’ve found myself alone with River again. Before this, we’d never spent much time together with just the two of us. We’re always with our friends or classmates, and it’s strange to think that, in all our years of knowing each other, it’s only happening now.

The steady warmth radiating from him keeps me from shivering as a light breeze sifts through the open windows along the hallway. I curl my fingers around his bicep, solid and warm even through layers of clothing, and I can’t deny that even though this whole thing feels unfamiliar, it’s nice, too. This must be how Evie feels with Damien at times. Although their relationship is fake, I can’t help the strange feeling I get in my chest when I look at them sometimes. For just a second, I try to imagine I’m walking with someone else, some random celebrity crush, but River smells so much like himself, a citrusy floral scent with just a hint of woodiness to it, that it’s impossible.

We don’t share a single word as River guides us toward my room, going straight past the common room and the hallway leading to his own.

“Goodnight, Amelie,” he says, voice husky as he breaks the silence when we reach my door.

“Goodnight, River.” I extract myself from his side, half of my body suddenly almost freezing from the lack of him next to me.

He takes a step back, giving me space to let myself in before he turns to leave. I step into my room, but something pulls me to give one last look

back at River. When I do, he's walking away, rubbing at the spot on his arm my fingers were just wrapped around, with his other fist clenched.

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Chapter 6

Amelie



THE REST OF MY LIFE COMES DOWN TO TODAY'S AUDITION.

I've practiced my variation as much as I can, perfecting the thirty-two fouettés I need for the performance, and even stretching it to thirty-five on a good day. The other ballerinas are talented, of course, but I know I'm the only one who has managed it. The solo in the year-end showcase is mine as long as I don't fall at the final hurdle.

"We'll be waiting right outside," Zena says as she rubs my shoulders.

"The solo is yours, there's no doubt about it," Evie adds in, giving me the last boost of encouragement I need before I step through those doors and perform for the faculty.

"Thanks," I give them a tight-lipped smile, doing my best to hide my nerves as they both step away from me. I take a deep breath before opening the studio door, getting one final pat on the back from both of them.

Dancers are scattered around the edges of the room, stretching out their limbs along the barre. This round of auditions is only for female dancers, with a separate one tomorrow for male dancers and a few days later for couples. A girl I've spoken to only a few times in passing is about to begin her performance in the centre of the room, the four judging faculty members sat at a table facing her. Madame takes one of the middle seats, flanked by the General Director, Head of Arts, and Head of Sports.

For anything else, it would be one or the other, but ballet exists in a strange space within the university where it gains funding and leadership from both departments. Ballet started off as an art for me, something pretty

to watch and perform, but as I got older, my respect and understanding for the discipline needed for it deepened, and I see it as a sport now, too.

I find an empty barre spot to warm up, but as soon as the music clicks on and the girl begins to dance, I can't keep my eyes off Madame. I watch her reflection in the mirror, hyper-analysing every small movement of her face. She's an expert at schooling her expression, and that's why I'm never quite sure if I'm doing well enough by her standards. That's not to say she doesn't have a few tells.

For instance, if she thinks you haven't quite done a move in the way she expects, her blue eyes will narrow, a slight crease forming between her brows. If you've done well, that's a lot harder to figure out. She'll glance away from you, either to look down at whatever note she's written about you in her book, or at somewhere else in the room. If she looks away for two seconds at most, you've done well. But if those seconds tick by, and she still hasn't looked back, you might as well give up right then and there.

The girl finishes her performance with barely any reaction from Madame, which is never a good thing. A reaction, even a bad one, means she's set some kind of expectations for you. If there's nothing, neither acknowledgment nor disapproval, then it means she has no faith in your growth and talent as a dancer.

"Please remain in the studio for the final results," the General Director says.

She nods, panting heavily as she moves to the side before collapsing to the ground to catch her breath.

"Lillian, you're next," Madame announces.

It continues like that for the next thirty minutes. Our names are called randomly, only increasing the pressure and anxiety as we wait for our turn to perform. Throughout each audition, I only look at Madame, searching for any new hints as to what she might be feeling.

"Amelie."

I take slow and steady breaths as I make my way to the centre of the studio. It's gotten warmer as auditions have progressed, the floor getting more scuffed with each dancer, and a general uneasiness shrouding the studio. I ignore it all, and focus on the singular thing I can control—myself.

I take first position, readying myself before the music plays. It's muscle memory as soon as I hear the first note, my body moving of its own accord as I go through the variation I've practiced probably a million times. When

it reaches the most important part, I've got full faith in myself as I begin the fouettés. I keep my eyes focused on a dark spot on the wall, just like I practiced, not even daring to look at Madame as I spin and spin. On the thirty-second fouetté, I lower my leg gently, finishing the performance with one arm extended over my head and the other curved toward me before the music stops and I lower them both to my side. Pride almost overwhelms me, tears building in my eyes, but I keep my composure as they dismiss me.

I move back to my original spot and drop to the floor, chest heaving up and down as my heart pounds. Patting my face dry with a small towel, I reach for my water bottle, draining it as the auditions continue. I slip my phone out of my bag to text the girls.

AMELIE

Just did my performance, there's only a few people left

EVIE

How did it go?

I only have to think for a second about how to answer her.

AMELIE

Perfectly, I didn't make a single mistake

ZENA

We knew you wouldn't! We're still outside, can't wait to celebrate!

I tuck my phone away, trying to hide the smile on my face at my friends' confidence in me.

Once the final dancer has performed, the four faculty members whisper amongst themselves. They point at papers gathered on the table, silently communicating with nods and shakes of their heads as they decide our fates. Once again, I focus on Madame's face, but I can't read anything from it.

After what feels like a lifetime, but is actually only fifteen minutes, the General Director speaks.

"We've made our final decisions," he says, as they all stand.

They move to one side of the studio, and the rest of us gather opposite to face them. I hear the nervous gulp of whoever is standing next to me, but I keep my eyes trained on Madame.

The Head of Art starts listing off names, people who have successfully made it into the wider ensemble cast who will perform a piece of Madame's choice. It's not a bad spot to have—I was part of it last year—but it's impossible to stand out from the crowd. They finish listing them off, my name absent from the group, but I can't relax just yet. There are still smaller solos to announce, shorter performances for the showcase that are great for displaying a ballerina's skill, but not so much for their ability to hold a performance on their own. More names are called out, and every time I hear the first syllable of mine, my heart catches in my throat until I hear the rest and realise it's not me.

"Now, finally, our main solo," Madame says.

This is it.

"You've all performed well, but of course there's always one who stands out. Our final solo will be performed by Charlotte."

The room starts to spin. I stumble backward, my body hitting the wall behind me as everyone else carries on like nothing has happened. It doesn't make sense. My variation was perfect. I did all thirty-two fouettés perfectly, barely moving an inch across the floor as I rose and fell with more grace than Charlotte Spencer holds in her pinky finger. This can't be real.

"Congratulations, Charlotte," Madame continues, as if she hasn't shattered my whole world with one sentence. "Ensemble rehearsals will begin next week. The schedule will be posted online. Thank you all for your efforts."

Everyone hears the unspoken dismissal at the end, and while others start to shuffle around me, gathering their things and offering passing commiserations and congratulations before filing out of the room, I can't move.

I replay Charlotte's performance in my head, and there's no way she was better than me. Her routine was shoddy, her landings more like lead dropping to the ground than featherlight and floating, and her form was so atrocious she could barely hold fifth position as she finished. There has to be a mistake.

I glance over at Charlotte, a saccharine smile pasted to her face as the other dancers congratulate her. Once most people have left the room, she steps over to Madame, curling her fingers around her arm as that smile turns from overly sweet to devious in a split second. She's had a close relationship with Madame since we started here, and it only took me a few

months to realise there was a family connection there. This can't be anything but the result of that.

"Madame," I call out before I can think better of it.

"Amelie, decisions are final," she says in our mother tongue of French. Even though our school is in Paris, many students don't speak the language fluently, including Charlotte.

"My routine was perfect," I tell her, my initial disbelief turning into a burning frustration.

"So was hers. We had to choose," she shrugs as she starts to walk away from me. I don't let her.

"I thought you weren't allowed to let your personal relationships get involved in matters like this," I say, calling it out for exactly what it is.

"Does the General Director know that your families are connected?"

"Remember who you're talking to." Her tone turns dangerous, just like the glare in her eyes. I should stop before I anger her any further, but I can't help myself.

"I deserve the solo."

"No one deserves anything."

"I needed that. You know this is my only chance." My irritation turns to desperate pleading, my emotions getting the better of me as I try to process what's happening.

The showcase isn't just a chance for me to prove myself. A scout will be in attendance for a summer intensive program that I've dreamed of attending for years. I lost my chance last year when I got put in the ensemble, and that only motivated me to work harder so I could finally get it this time. It's the only way I'll be able to show that I have the skill and talent to earn my place, to finally prove that I have what it takes to be a principal ballerina.

I understand the world we come from; I know money and connections mean everything, but a delusional part of me thought d'Étoiles would be different. This university is full of the most privileged and connected people on the planet, but someone will always have the upper hand.

"There has to be something. Let us dance again, side by side, and you can judge then," I continue, my hope dwindling with every feeble attempt to convince her to change her mind.

"My decision is final," she says.

I feel like a petulant child as I think of more ways to appeal to her, more ways to prove myself.

“Please. I need this.”

There’s nothing else I can offer her but a final plea.

“We still have the partner auditions in a few days,” she says, shrugging. “If you really want it, that’s your best chance.”

It’s never crossed my mind to perform with someone else. I’ve never danced properly with another ballerina, only ever doing solo pieces. Any time I’ve been paired up in class, the other ballerina never matched my standards.

“And I’ll have to audition then?”

“Both of you will,” she says, confirming my worst nightmare.

I have to find a partner worthy of dancing with by the end of today if I’m going to get enough practice over the next two days to be ready. It’s an almost impossible task.

“I’ll do it,” I tell her, the words escaping before I can even register what I’m saying.

“We’ll see,” she says, ending the conversation before walking away.

I grab my things and leave the studio, bumping into Evie and Zena. I forgot they were waiting for me, and the smiles on their faces drop as soon as they see the lack of one on mine.

“I didn’t get it,” I tell them.

Saying the words out loud makes reality finally hit, and I have to fight back the sting in my nose, the burning at the back of my eyes as tears start to spring forward. I’m immediately enveloped in their arms, both of them saying soothing words to me as they hold me tightly. I let myself sink into it for a moment before I pull away.

“She said there’s still a chance if I do a pair piece,” I explain as we start walking back to the dorms. I want to be as far away from these studios as possible.

“Can you do that? I mean, you probably can, but we’ve never seen you dance with anyone.” Evie asks.

“Won’t it be hard to find someone?” Zena adds, the two talking over each other slightly as they rush through processing all the new information I’ve given them. They’re expressing all of my fears out loud, and it’s a testament to how well they know me.

“I’ll have to go through all the male ballerinas to figure out who’s best,” I say, a heavy sigh escaping me.

“What about River?” Zena says, and the suggestion stops me in my tracks.

“That’s a great idea. I’m sure he’ll do it,” Evie continues cheerily, dragging me along so I start walking again.

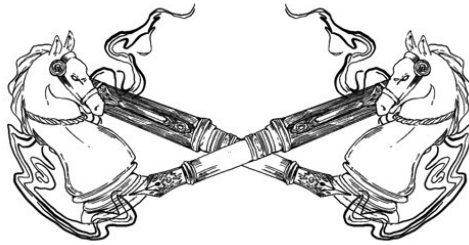
I cycle through every ballerina in my mind, and not a single one is at the level I need for a partner. Apart from him. As much as I loathe to admit it, River is one of the best dancers I’ve ever seen. He moves more elegantly than the other males in our class, every step calculated and deliberate yet executed with perfect precision and grace.

When we reach the dorms, Zena and Evie head to the common room to meet the others, but I excuse myself to be alone. There’s no time to waste as I consider my options again, writing down every name as soon as I get to my room. I pull out memories of them from classes and performances, singling out their strengths and weaknesses, in an attempt to find the best match. They’re not all bad, but none of them are him.

Twenty minutes later, my desk is littered with crumpled papers and my decision has been made for me. If I want any chance of performing at this showcase, he’s my only option. A groan of frustration escapes me as I drop my head into my hands and wonder how on earth I got to the point where I’ll have to ask River Campbell to dance with me.

Chapter 7

River



I’VE BEEN SECOND-GUESSING MY CHOICE NOT TO AUDITION FOR THE showcase, but seeing dancers panicking outside the studio, I know I made the right decision. I took part in it last year, hoping it would bring back some of the spark I’ve been missing, but even performing the final solo didn’t make a difference.

I walk past them all to the studio I’ve reserved. Even though I’m struggling to find that excitement again, I don’t want to give up. At one point, I loved ballet. I always looked forward to classes, and it was the highlight of my day. I desperately want that feeling back. I’ve tried so many other things throughout my life—painting, fencing, horse riding, all manner of arts and sports—but ballet is the only thing that’s ever made me feel true happiness, like I had control over my life. With everything else, you either have to rely on your teammates or equipment. With ballet, I only have myself.

I don’t like this numbness that seems to be slowly overtaking me. I can’t find it in me to care about anything. Even when I’m with my friends, I struggle to join their conversations or feel the same level of excitement they do about literally anything. I need to figure out how to get out of this rut before everyone grows as tired of me as I am of myself.

I go through my usual routine, connecting my phone to the speaker, and warming up before running through a few variations. It’s mindless, and I know I’m not putting everything I have into it, but I go through the motions

anyway. In the pauses between music, the faint sound of auditions taking place filters through the wall. I hope they all get more out of it than I did.

I'm halfway through my favourite variation from Swan Lake when I catch sight of the door creeping open in the corner of my eye. I plant both feet on the ground and step over to tell whoever it is to go away.

"This room is reserved for the next half hour," I announce.

The person ignores me, pushes the door open all the way, and I can't hide the surprise on my face.

"I know," Amelie says, closing the door behind her before she approaches me.

"For solo practice, I should clarify." It's snarkier than it needs to be, but I'm already frustrated enough.

"I know," she repeats.

"For someone who knows so much, you're acting like you don't."

"I..." She curls her fingers into her palm, clenching her fists at her sides. It's then I look at her properly. Her jaw is clamped tightly, her bottom lip pulled between her teeth. There's something missing from her eyes, the usual fire I see in them dimmed, barely any embers holding on to life, and I swear there's a glassiness to them.

"Is everything okay?" I take a tentative step closer. Amelie and I don't have this kind of friendship. Within our group, we only speak to each other to argue. But something's wrong, and for some odd reason, she's come to me. "Amelie, whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I didn't get the solo," she confesses quietly, averting her gaze as she dips her head.

"That's bullshit," it comes out before I can think of anything better to say. If anyone deserved it, it's her. "Who got it?"

"Charlotte," she huffs, shaking her head.

"Charlotte?" I question, making sure I heard her right. That girl dances as if she has two left feet. It's impossible that she performed better than Amelie, impossible that anyone did.

"Her family is related to Madame's. She all but admitted to me that was the reason," Amelie confesses, looking up at me, and of course it's that. "I need to perform this year. Scouts will be at the show, and this is my one chance to show them I have what it takes."

"Of course you do," I reassure her, but a slow anger is starting to build within me. I push it down for now, but this is something that we need to talk

about more later.

Amelie drops her gaze again, and I take a step closer without thinking, my hand reaching out to tip her chin up so she looks at me again. She does it before I touch her, and I pull my hand back before she can realise what I was about to do. Seeing this other side of Amelie is making me act strange, that's all. There's no number of platitudes I can give her that will fix this. If she wants comfort, I'm the wrong person to turn to.

"Will you dance with me?"

I must be hearing things.

"What?"

I glance down at what she's wearing, not her dancing attire, but a plain white T-shirt and dark jeans. It's the simplest outfit, but she makes it look like she just stepped off a runway. It's a purely objective thought, of course. My parents attended a lot of fashion shows, as both models and spectators, and I went along with them. I've known from a young age what it takes to be on a runway, and unfortunately, Amelie ticks all the boxes.

"Dance with you?" I ask her, because surely that's not the case, given what she's wearing.

"Yes. I need you to dance with me."

"You're not exactly dressed for it," I say, trying to make some sense of this situation.

"Auditions are in a few days for pair pieces. That's my only shot," she says, pausing for a moment as she wrestles with what to say next. "You're the only dancer that's good enough."

She bites out the words, as if it physically hurts her to say them out loud.

"How kind of you to think I'm good enough." My words drip with sarcasm. Even when she's asking for help, she still can't be all the way nice to me.

"I didn't mean it like that," she rolls her eyes. "Don't make me say it."

"Say what?" I can't hide the smirk on my face as I wait for her to actually compliment me.

"You're the best male dancer in our school, probably in the whole of Paris," she says, and it knocks me out of my senses for a split second. "And you're the only person I trust to do this with. I don't like you, River, and you don't like me, but we've never lacked respect for each other."

She's right. I've admitted to myself plenty of times that Amelie is the best dancer I've ever seen. She's on the level of principal ballerinas that I see performing on professional stages. And I know that, as much as she pretends to hate me, part of her must think the same of me, too. She just confirmed that. But I don't know if we can dance together. One of the main reasons I enjoyed ballet so much was because I was only responsible for myself. If I dance with Amelie, then I'll have to take her into consideration, too.

"How would this even work? You expect us to learn how to dance with each other in, what, two days?"

It's not completely impossible. If anyone's capable of it, it's us. But I'm still trying to process what exactly she's asking of me.

"I wouldn't ask you if I thought we couldn't do it."

"That almost sounded like another compliment," I tease, trying to lighten the mood. This conversation is more serious than I want it to be. Amelie's future rests on it.

She steps closer, glaring up at me as her finger prods into my chest.

"Keep talking like that, and I'll shove my next compliment right—"

"Okay, okay, I'll stop." I step back from her, holding both of my hands up in surrender.

She crosses her arms across her chest, a crease between her brows and her jaw clenched. Her fingertips dig into her biceps, and for the first time, I don't like how I've been talking to her.

I give some serious thought to what she's suggesting. Dancing with Amelie in front of an audience. Dancing with Amelie alone during practice. Dancing with Amelie.

"I'll do it," I tell her before I can think better of it. "I'll dance with you."

"You will?" she asks, her hands dropping to her side, and her whole body relaxing.

"I wouldn't ask again if you don't want me to change my mind."

"Thank you, River. This means a lot to me. I'll repay you however you want once we're done."

"I'd better get thinking then," I say with a wink. "The great Amelie Devereaux owes me a favour. What a world we live in."

"This is going to be hell," she mutters under her breath, loud enough for me to hear. "Meet me here at seven tonight. I've reserved the studio for the rest of the evening."

She doesn't wait for a response before she turns on her heel and leaves the studio. As soon as the door closes behind her, the weight of what I've just agreed to begins to sink in. I'm going to perform with Amelie, the girl who hates my existence just as much as I don't hate hers.



Time seems to pass quicker than it ever has before. I've spent the past few hours thinking of excuses and ways to tell Amelie that I've changed my mind. This is a terrible idea. We don't like each other enough to dance together. It's only going to make her hate me even more than she already does once she realises we're not compatible in that way—in any way. But for how long I spend thinking of reasons not to do it, they all pale in comparison to the one reason I should. This showcase means a lot to Amelie, and I can't let her down.

When I reach the studio, the lights are already on, and Amelie is in the middle of warming up.

"You're late," she says, lifting her leg up onto the barre before bending to touch her toes, her nose flat against her knee.

I check my phone; it's only two minutes past seven. I don't say anything but hold up the screen so she can see when she lifts her head.

"Surely you know how to tell the time by now, or did you miss that class in elementary school?"

"Ha ha."

I put my phone into my bag and throw it on the floor next to hers. I take my hoodie off, the thin white shirt I'm wearing clinging to me. Amelie still has her warm-up gear on, pale pink leg warmers over white tights, and a short pink cardigan covering her—you guessed it—pink leotard. It's a miracle I haven't grown a complete aversion to the colour yet.

I take a spot on the barre a few feet away so I can warm up, only finishing when she does. I should tell her that I'm having second thoughts before we get too far into this.

"I think—"

"River, please."

My words catch in my throat at the desperate plea in her voice. Amelie stares at the ground, her arms crossed around her stomach like she's holding herself together.

"I know you don't want to do this," she continues, "but please."

I swallow hard, a lump forming in my throat. I've never seen this side of Amelie before in our entire lives. She's never been the type to ask for anything, always working hard to get what she wants on her own. But she's asking *me*. I can't say no.

"I was just going to say I think we should figure out what piece to do," I lie.

I can't let her know I had any doubts, especially after the way she just said my name, like it was the solution to all her problems.

"There's one I think we should try," she says, putting her walls back up and easily transforming into the professional I know her as.

She grabs her phone from the floor and sits with her legs crossed. I settle down next to her, keeping as much distance as possible while still being able to see her screen.

"This is one of my favourites," she says, tapping on to a video.

From the costumes, I already know it's a pas de deux from Romeo and Juliet. It's a truly masterful ballet, and the pas de deux are famously romantic. Amelie shows me the balcony scene; the intensity and chemistry of the two dancers are visceral even through the small screen. It's a show I've seen many times before, and I know what's coming at the end. Romeo and Juliet's first kiss.

The video nears its finale: Romeo reaches out for Juliet after he chases her and takes her hand. The kiss happens right after he pulls her close, but I don't see it because Amelie stops the video.

"If we spend the next few hours here, I think we can perfect at least the beginning," she says, turning her head to look at me for confirmation.

I nod, all words escaping me as reality finally hits me that we're actually going to do this.

"Let's start then." Amelie stands, connecting her phone to the speaker before asking for mine. She leans the two up next to each other by the mirror, hers showing the video we just watched, and mine open to the camera, recording the two of us on the small screen.

Amelie moves to the centre of the room, holding herself in first position as she waits for me. I get up, loosening my limbs one last time before I

stand behind her. I lift my hands, hovering them at her sides, but don't put them on her just yet. She stares at me in the mirror, her eyes catching mine as she nods, giving me permission to touch her.

As soon as my hands find their place on her waist, it's like a match strikes within me, the spark I've lost flickering back to life.

Maybe this isn't such a bad idea.

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Chapter 8

Amelie



THIS IS A BAD IDEA.

River's fingers press into my waist, then loosen again, and I have to remind myself how to breathe properly. The video loops to the beginning again, and I copy the female ballerina's pose, rising en pointe as I extend one leg into the air beside me. I swing my leg down, planting my foot flat on the ground as I prepare to leap, hoping that River understands what he'll have to do in the next few seconds. He lifts me right as I jump, his hands secured around my body, but the feeling is so strange that I lose all focus and drop to the ground.

I step out of his grip, covering my face with my hands as I try to compose myself. It was going fine. He did the right thing, perfectly mirroring what the male ballerina on the screen did by bending his knees slightly and lifting me up. I should have extended my leg before landing, carried on into the next move, but I couldn't think about anything but his hands on me.

I love ballet because of how strong it makes me feel, and the discipline it's taught me. I've trained my body for years, so I'm able to carry myself on the tips of my toes, left my feet bruised and scarred, and danced through the pain that comes with every performance. None of that is ever a distraction. But River's hands are.

We were so close I could feel his muscles tense as he wrapped his arm around me to safely perform the lift, the press of his fingertips across my

torso as he held on so I wouldn't drop, the warmth of his front pressed against my back.

There's a reason I never dance with a partner. There's something so intimate about it, the touches and close contact needed to perform a routine. I've never enjoyed being that close to someone else, having to rely on them when I'm good enough to do it alone. It's always been my weakest spot, and as much as I hate having one, it's not something I cared to put too much time and effort into fixing. I've never needed a partner, but now my future rests on it.

I thought I'd be okay with River because we already know each other, but I think it's only making it worse. I know River is a good dancer, I know he puts effort into everything he does, and I know he's going to try his hardest for this. But being so aware of that is making too many conflicting thoughts run through my mind, trying to reconcile the River that always argues with me with the River that dropped everything just because I asked for a favour.

"You okay?" he asks gently, breaking me out of my spiral.

I nod, bringing my hands down to my hips, but keeping my eyes fixed on the ground. His gentle tone makes me worry about what I'll see if I look at him.

"Maybe we shouldn't jump right into it," he continues, still speaking softly, as if he'll spook me away. It's unnerving. "How about we break down the moves, practice it one step at a time?"

It's the smart thing to do. I was mistaken in thinking we could do the routine straight away. No matter how talented we both are, it's still a brand-new experience for us.

"Okay," I say, finally working up the nerve to look at him.

River's lips press into a thin line, a slight curve at the corners as he gives his best impression of an encouraging smile. He walks over to our phones, stops the recording on his, then takes mine and brings it over to me.

He sits on the floor, one knee propped up with his other leg crossed under it. I lower myself next to him but keep my distance as he holds the phone between us. We watch the video again, slowing it down so we can break down what we need to do.

"That first dip, my hand needs to go up a bit higher, I think. Is that okay?" He asks, noting the way the male dancer's hand slides across the front of the female's side to her torso.

“That’s fine,” I tell him.

Logically, I know River will have to touch me in places no one else ever has before. Our bodies are all we have to rely on for this performance, and if I want to get this spot in the showcase, I have to be comfortable with it. I can’t quite focus on that, though, because my mind keeps fixating on the fact that I’m doing all of this with River Campbell. The boy I’ve despised for as long as I’ve known him, who gets everything in the world of ballet handed to him just because he’s a man.

But despite all of that, he’s the only boy I trust to do this with. Not to say I trust him entirely. The jury is still out there, and he might disappoint me in the end, but I can’t think about that now. We just have to get through this audition, and we can figure out the rest later.

We go through the video multiple times, discussing the different moves we’ll have to do together. It’s an intimate dance, the start of Romeo and Juliet’s love story. It’s one of my favourite pieces, and every time I’ve seen it performed, it’s hard to believe the dancers aren’t actually in love with each other. While we’ll of course have to execute the moves perfectly, we also need our currently non-existent chemistry to come through. Dancing isn’t just about executing moves correctly. It’s about feeling and understanding the music, making your body speak a language that doesn’t need any kind of translation. In a piece like this, that first spark of love, the excitement and newness of Romeo and Juliet’s relationship is vital to the performance.

And it all culminates in their first kiss at the end.

Neither of us mentions it.

It’s the sealing of Romeo and Juliet’s fate, and arguably the most anticipated part of the performance for spectators. It’s a fluid movement as the female ballerina rises en pointe, letting herself be lifted slightly by the male ballerina as he spins her slowly right before they kiss.

My cheeks burn every time it plays, and I can’t even bear to think about what River must be thinking. We may be able to avoid it for the audition, but if we perform this for the showcase, we’ll have to kiss. The video replays again, ending at that same moment, and I steal a glance at River in my peripheral. A tinge of red stains the tips of his ears, his jaw tight as he keeps his eyes on the screen.

“We can just do the first minute, right?” he asks, almost as if he’s been reading my mind this whole time.

As full as it is of close contact between the two dancers, it's also the safest part of the routine as it's only the start of Romeo and Juliet's relationship.

"Yeah, that's all," I confirm.

He nods slowly before he taps the screen to pause the video, freezing it on the frame just before their lips meet.

"Do you want to try doing a few lifts?" River suggests, locking my phone and handing it to me. "Maybe it's better if we go back to basics."

I stand in answer, flexing my feet as I stretch my limbs again. It's like my entire body was coiled tight while I sat next to River and now it's trying to find release the only way it knows how. I put my phone back down next to his, starting the video recording again. River stands in the centre of the room, hands on his hips as he waits for me to come back to him. He tenses his fingers slightly, almost as if he's testing how he'll hold me.

I take my place in front of him and watch in the mirror as he lifts his hands toward me.

"Can I put my hands on your waist?"

"Of course."

I'll need to get used to it if I want to stand any chance of passing this audition. I take a deep breath as River's hands fasten around me once again, but my entire body tenses as his fingers press into the thin fabric that separates our skin. River pulls away instantly, putting his hands behind his back.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asks, taking a small backward step away from me.

"No, it's not you," I tell him, clenching my teeth together as I try to force the words out. "I just..."

A frustrated groan escapes me as I cover my face with my hands. How can I explain that I don't know if I like being touched like that? That I've never had a boy's hands on me, never experienced any kind of intimate affection like that from someone? It's nothing I should be embarrassed about, and if this was anyone else, I wouldn't be as apprehensive about telling them. But showing that kind of vulnerability to River? I don't know if I can do that.

"I haven't danced with anyone in a very long time," I confess, dropping my hands to my side, and giving him a version of the truth that doesn't expose myself too much. "I'm not used to it."

“Me either,” River replies.

It’s only then I realise I can’t recall the last time I saw River dancing with someone. When we were much younger, he was forced to perform a few pas de deux during classes as he was the only male dancer. That stopped as we grew up and more boys joined, and he was able to refuse.

“Can I try something?” he asks.

River’s hands are behind his back, and the expression on his face is one I’ve never seen before. All his sharp edges look softer, his jaw not held as tightly as it usually is, and a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. I nod, moving closer to this new version of River who might actually help me solve my problems.

“I think we need to get used to touching each other first, before we try any big moves,” he says. “What do you think?”

“I agree,” I say, knowing that I was too optimistic in thinking this would be something we could perfect quickly.

“Okay. Touch me.”

I have to stop my eyes from popping out of my head at hearing those words. He says them so seriously, holding his arms out to the side, inviting me in closer to him. Although it’s what we’ve been trying to do for the past hour, hearing the words makes it feel all too real. I have to touch River. I have to dance with River. I have to kiss River.

I compose myself again, hoping he can’t read the panic and unease on my face. I need to stop thinking about it, so I take action instead, lifting my hand to touch his arm. It’s the safest spot I can think of, but the closer I get, I can’t stop my hand from curling into a fist. I dig my fingernails into my palm, steadying myself as I loosen my hand, fingers tentatively reaching out. My index finger trails from the top of his arm, solid and warm, down to the bend in his elbow, his forearm, his wrist, his hand. I trace my fingers over his knuckles, and his hand mimics mine from just a few moments ago, his fingers folding in.

I pull away, retracting my hand behind my back. I’ve made him uncomfortable somehow, touched him too slowly, too intimately, in all the wrong places.

“Sorry,” he says, his hand flattening out against his stomach. “Just wasn’t expecting you to do that.”

I wasn’t either.

There are more parts of River I'll have to touch. I'll have to get used to his arms around me, his hands holding me, his legs grazing against mine, his cheek close to my cheek, his lips on mine. And if we're ever going to reach a stage where that's possible, where I can safely perform this routine without freaking out, then I'll need to start somewhere.

"You can touch me, too," I tell him before I can overthink it.

"Are you sure?" he asks, concern undercurrent in his voice.

I'm not used to this River, one who is starting to make me think he might actually care about me in some way. I want to go back to our biting remarks, our disdain for each other that's still laced with a hint of respect.

"Scared of me, River?"

"Never that, *ma chérie*," he replies quickly, that annoying smirk finding its way on to his annoying face after being missing this whole time. Finally, we're getting back to normal.

He lifts his hand slowly, fingertips grazing mine as he works his way up my hand to my wrist, curling his fingers around it for just a second before continuing upward. Goosebumps erupt over my skin as he moves from my forearm, to the crease in my elbow, to the top of my arm, to my shoulder. I expect him to stop there, my entire body already feeling like it's on fire, but he keeps going as I hold my breath.

River's fingers drag leisurely against my shoulder, finding their way to the base of my neck. His index finger lifts up to graze against the bottom of my ear before it moves to my jaw, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from doing I'm not even sure what. My eyes close of their own accord, my breathing uneven and my heart beating rapidly as River continues to touch me in a way no one else ever has. He takes my chin between his fingers, tilting my face up to his, and for a split second it's as if I can feel his breath across my lips, as if he might be about to kiss me.

"Open your eyes," he says quietly, and I do.

Steel grey eyes catch on to mine so quickly I barely have time to realise how close his face is to mine. My brain is telling my body to move away, to put distance between us because this is far too close to River than I've ever been before and it's not right. But River's grasp on me is gentle yet firm, and even if I tried to force my body away from him, I don't think I could.

"Just give it a minute," he murmurs, not taking his eyes off mine for a second.

I blink rapidly, anything to avoid looking so closely at him but it's impossible when he's taking up my entire view. I start to find details on his face that I've never noticed before. Two small dents sit on either side of his nose, the exact place where his glasses rest on the few occasions I see him wearing. I glance back up to his eyes, the faint outline of clear contacts visible only because I'm looking for it. There's the smallest dusting of stubble across his jaw, barely there but it's clear now that he must shave every other day at least.

Finally, my eyes drop to his mouth, the lips I'll have to press mine against if we get this spot in the showcase. They look soft, his bottom lip slightly fuller than the top. I wonder how they'll feel against mine. As if he can hear my every thought, his tongue peeks out the slightest amount as he runs it across his bottom lip. I look away, my eyes moving back up to his, right as River lets go of me and takes a step back.

"See? A whole minute of me touching you, and nothing bad happened," he says, clearing his throat after the first word.

That minute felt like a lifetime.

"Am I supposed to thank you for that?" I say, trying to clear my head of whatever feeling has replaced my usual dislike for him.

He scoffs, his arrogance returning as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"You just hate that my idea worked."

"This whole thing was my idea," I tell him, trying to take back some control of this situation. His ego is already inflated enough. Any more and he'll start floating away into the sky, but maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing.

"Whatever you say." He drops his arms back to his side. "Shall we keep going?"

I shrug my shoulders in response, and River takes it as his sign to step closer to me.

"We'll move a little lower this time," he says, bending down on one knee.

I glance down at him but the sight feels so unnatural that I turn to look at the mirror instead. It only makes it worse. River curls his hand around my ankle, his fingertips playing with the ribbons of my pointe shoes before he smooths his hand up my calf, around to my knee, stopping right as he touches the base of my thigh. My heart feels like it's going to beat its way out of my chest and land on the floor next to him. I stare at the image of us

in the mirror, and it's an unbelievable sight. River Campbell on his knees for me.

"I'll have to hold you a little higher than here at some points," he says, his fingers pressing into the skin above my knee. He tilts his head up to look at me, but once he realises I'm looking in the mirror, he does the same. His eyes lock on to mine before he speaks again. "Is that okay?"

I nod, even though my heart feels like it's about to drop into my stomach. It's part of the routine. There are so many lifts involved that it's impossible to avoid his hand moving higher for some of them if we want to be stable. I run through every convincing argument in my mind for why all of this is fine, but it doesn't make me any less nervous at the thought of River's hands on my thighs.

He leans back on his heel as he removes his hand from my leg, and it feels as if the studio has transported itself to the surface of the sun. I step away from him to get some water and to clear my head. This was supposed to be simple. We were just meant to dance together so I could pass this audition, and get a spot in the showcase. It never crossed my mind how close we'd actually have to be, how much time his hands would be spent holding on to my body, and it's all throwing me off balance.

But I need this spot. If I want to prove to myself, and everyone else, that I've got what it takes to be a part of the summer intensive, to be a principal ballerina, then I have to be okay with dancing with him.

I steady myself, allowing my heart rate to lower back to normal before I approach him again.

"Let's try some of the moves," I tell him, putting on my most confident voice.

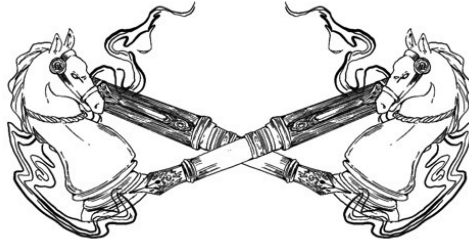
There's no point in delaying it any further. As much as this exercise has helped, it's only a poor example of what actually dancing together will be like.

"Ready?" he asks.

As I'll ever be.

Chapter 9

River



WE SPEND THE NEXT TWO DAYS IN THE STUDIO, SWEAT DRIPPING OFF OUR bodies, pushing through the exhaustion of dancing for so long with barely any breaks, until I finally collapse on the ground after what feels like our millionth run through.

I breathe in short, staccato huffs, desperately trying to flood my lungs with oxygen as I lean back against the hard floor. I've pushed myself to limits I didn't even know I had, the pain slowly setting into my body as I close my eyes and hope for it to pass quickly. Every muscle in my body is screaming for relief, but I can barely string a single thought together let alone work out how to give them that. My heartbeat pounds in my ears, so loudly I wonder if Amelie can feel it reverberating through the floor.

I open my eyes to look for her, to see if she's as worn out as I am, but she's just hunched over her phone as she squats on the floor rewatching the videos of us. I don't think she'd notice if I died right now.

"I'm fine, by the way," I call out to her, my voice shaky as my body begins to recover from what I've put it through since our first practice.

Amelie glances back at me for barely a second before she mutters something under her breath, and then goes right back to looking at her phone. I can only stare at her back, something ugly building inside me at her complete indifference. I force myself to sit up, my heartbeat finally evening out enough that I feel slightly normal again apart from the pain coursing through my body.

“I’m done,” I tell her, and those two words make Amelie give me her full attention.

She puts the phone down, gracefully extending to her full height before she comes to stand over me.

“We still need to practice more,” she says. There’s no question in it, no asking if I’m okay to continue, or if I need to take a break. No consideration for me at all.

“Not today. Right now, all I need is an ice bath and to lie down in a dark room for a few hours.”

“There’s no time for that,” she counters, folding her arms across her chest. “Get up, we’ll take it from the top.”

My jaw drops, mouth opening as I try to figure out what to say to her. I almost passed out and she wants me to keep dancing? I agreed to help her, but I didn’t know she was just trying to find a way to kill me.

“I’m not doing it,” I tell her firmly.

I push myself off the ground to stand, trying not to wince as the ache in my legs only amplifies. Even if I did want to keep dancing, I don’t know if it’s physically possible right now. I shuffle past her, but don’t get very far as her hand shoots out, wrapping around my arm and stopping me in my tracks.

“One more time,” she says, no emotion in her voice and without even looking at me. “Just once more.”

I try to think of words to respond with but all that escapes me is a short laugh that sounds more like an exasperated exhale. I use the last remaining slivers of energy I have to jerk out of her grasp, taking a few steps forward to put distance between us as I go to gather my things. I throw my clothes into my bag, not even bothering to cover myself up for the walk back to my room. I’m past the point of caring, and I haven’t checked the time in a while but it’s late enough that there’s barely any light coming in from outside so I doubt many people will be walking around. I attempt to drink some water, but my throat is so dry that it hurts, and I can only cap the bottle to take it back to my room.

“We’re not done yet, River.”

I don’t understand how she can keep going, how her body isn’t falling apart like mine is after the gruelling practice we’ve put in for the past few hours.

“Yes, we are,” I tell her. “We’ve done enough today, Amelie. It’ll be fine.”

“It has to be more than fine,” she snaps, startling me. “I know you’re used to getting everything handed to you, but that’s never worked for me. Some of us actually have to try harder than others to get what we deserve.”

She’s never looked at me like this, fire in her eyes blazing as if she wishes she could burn me alive with just one glance. No matter how many petty arguments we have, how much childish bickering we throw back and forth at each other, there’s never been any actual hatred in it. But now it’s there, and I feel sick.

A low anger rises within me at her unspoken accusation. Her implication that I don’t try as hard as everyone else. Her complete dismissal and disregard for me, even after all of this.

“Don’t pretend you know a thing about how hard I work,” I say as steady as I can, attempting to mask how I really feel, but it’s too much and every frustration I have spills out of me.

“I’ve derailed my life these past two days because of you. I’ve missed classes, ignored calls from my parents, haven’t even spoken to my best friend since we started this.” I stalk closer to her, that anger still building inside me until it feels like I’m going to burst.

“I’ve spent years being bullied for doing something that people think is only for girls, been ridiculed for choosing to do something so feminine instead of a regular sport. People have made assumptions about every aspect of my life, questioned my sexuality as if dancing has a single thing to do with how I might feel about a person.”

I keep going, years of pent-up feelings finally rushing out. I can barely focus on Amelie’s face, her wide eyes and slightly opened mouth, because my vision feels clouded.

“Of course it was easier for me to get parts when I was the only boy in our class, but that made it ten times harder, too. I had to prove that I had the talent to back it up, that I had earned my place instead of it being handed to me just because I’m a boy.”

Amelie stares up at me, and I’m not sure when we got so close to each other, so close that if I keep breathing as hard as I am, my torso will brush against her chest. Her jaw is clenched, hands curled into fists at her side, and I don’t look too closely at her eyes so I can avoid seeing how she really feels about me now that I’ve said too much.

“You don’t know a single thing about me, Amelie, so don’t pretend otherwise.”

I step back from her, stopping myself before I can give her any more ammunition to use against me, before I can expose anymore of myself so deeply to her in a way that I’ll never be able to take back. I grab my bag, keeping my eyes fixed downward so I don’t even catch a glimpse of her in the mirror. I don’t want to see the way she’s looking at me, can’t stand to even see her after realising what she truly thinks of me.

“Will you be there tomorrow?” she asks quietly. “At the audition?”

I should say no, should tell her that I don’t want to do this after all, that it was a mistake to think we could dance together. But as much as I dislike her right now, I can’t let her down when this means so much to her.

“I will.”

I don’t wait for her response before I leave and head back to my room, the adrenaline from my outburst subsiding and the exhaustion creeping back in again. When I unlock my door, all the strength drains from me, and I use my last ounce of it to crawl on top of my bed, passing out as soon as my head hits the pillow.



Amelie hasn’t stopped pacing since we got here. She was silent the whole walk from the dorms to the studios, and she still hasn’t said a single word to me. I’ve never seen her so nervous for a performance before. Any time we’ve taken classes together, she’s always been the first to volunteer to demonstrate different moves, perfecting them all on pretty much the first try after seeing it just once. After yesterday, it’s clear that she’s dedicated to ballet in a way that I can only dream of being to anything at all.

I don’t regret what I said. For years she’s had this misconception of me, hated me for reasons that seem completely unfounded, so I’m glad I put her straight. But I woke up this morning with a sinking feeling in my stomach, wondering if I made her perception of me even worse. I know she doesn’t expect a lot from me, that I was her last resort, and if she had any other choice, it would never be me. But there’s a strange part of me that wants her

to choose me. I want her to admire me in the same way I've admired her for years. She came to me for a reason, and I don't want to disappoint her.

"You're going to wear a path in the floor," I say, my back pressed to the wall as I watch Amelie.

It's the first thing I've said to her, something to try and break this horrible silence we're in. A glare is the only response I get as she hums the music to our piece under her breath. Her head bobs up and down slightly, her hands moving in front of her as she runs through the routine in her head. I tip my head back, leaning it against the wall as I stare at the ceiling, and go over each step of the routine in my mind.

"I shouldn't have said that to you yesterday."

I glance down at Amelie, now standing completely still a few feet away from me.

"I never knew you went through all of that," she admits quietly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I tell her, my shoulders dropping as some sort of relief sets in. "You couldn't have known. I never told anyone, not even Damien."

"Why not?" Amelie moves to stand next to me, leaning against the wall so neither of us can see each other properly, and maybe that's what makes it easier to talk about this.

"Didn't seem worth it. There's much worse things going on in the world, people that have it harder than me. Who cares about a few comments on being too girly or who I might like?"

"Still, it must have gotten to you," Amelie says, her shoulder brushing against my arm for the slightest moment. "I think I keep every comment people have said about me stored in some locked up part of my brain, too."

"All nice things, I'm sure."

"Not really," she says almost too quickly. "Back when we did classes together, a lot of the girls didn't like me because I was always chosen to demonstrate moves first, or picked for performances over them. They used to say I worked too hard, that I took ballet too seriously when it was just meant to be dancing."

"And that's why none of those girls hold a candle to you," I tell her.

It's strange to think of people saying anything to Amelie about her dancing that isn't a compliment. Every time I've watched her dance, those are the only thoughts that run through my mind.

“Thanks,” she says. “Some of the teachers didn’t like me either. I tried out a few times for different dance companies, but somehow there was always something that stopped them from accepting me. At the time, I’m not sure if I fully understood what was happening, but looking back now, there was a common denominator in all those companies.”

I turn my head to look at her, and she’s already staring at me.

“What was it?”

She doesn’t say anything, just brings a finger up to press against my arm, and it embarrassingly takes me a few seconds to realise what she’s saying, that she’s pointing out the difference in our skin colours. My eyes widen, and I open my mouth to try and say something, but there’s no comfort I can give her for that. No way for me to actually understand how that must have made her feel.

“It’s okay.” Amelie shrugs. “Well, it’s not, but there’s nothing I can do to change other people. I can only focus on myself and my talent, and try not to let that noise get to me.”

“That’s why we’re here now though isn’t it?” I ask her.

Amelie deserved that solo above every other dancer here, but especially over Charlotte. I thought it was just nepotism that allowed her to get the solo, but maybe there’s something worse behind it, too.

“Maybe, maybe not. I can’t change what’s happened in the past. All I can do is look forward, and try to make that better, more worthwhile.”

There’s something in her eyes as she speaks, a spark of something soft, but I don’t have a chance to figure it out as our names are called to enter the studio.

Amelie offers me a quick smile before she takes a deep breath and plasters a neutral expression on her face as she enters the room. I follow after her, trying to put our conversation behind me so I can focus on dancing. I’ll have time later to overthink everything she just said.

I find my place in the centre of the studio in front of the faculty members who are judging us, as Amelie hands her phone over to the student assisting by the speaker. She comes to stand in front of me so we can get into our starting position. My hands find her waist, like they have thousands of times in the past few days, and my mind clears of everything but this routine.

The music starts, and we get straight into the performance. Every lift and dip goes flawlessly, Amelie putting her complete trust in me even when

I have to angle her body down, and her face is close to the floor. One wrong move from either of us could injure her. There's a slight risk for me too, but it's lower since both my feet are flat on the floor for most of the routine. There are instances where Amelie has to lay across my back, and I brace my legs to keep as steady as possible so she's able to execute her parts perfectly.

Romeo and Juliet's routine is usually full of excitement and passion, and while we may have the moves down, we didn't put much effort into the chemistry needed. When I glance at Madame, her expression gives away nothing. From a year of attending her classes, I know that's not a good thing.

Only fifteen seconds remain, and I can sense Amelie's panic without even looking at her face. She's starting to rush through the moves, her body tensing when it should be fluid, and although it's barely imperceptible to everyone else in the room, judging by their satisfied expressions, I can tell.

"*Doucement*, Amelie," I whisper into her ear when we're close enough.

She glances up at me, eyebrows furrowing for the slightest moment before she closes her eyes and opens them again, a fire reignited in them. We transition into the next move: a small lift as we travel together, then I slide my hands around her waist to help her spin. She turns delicately within my hold, leaning back into me before she moves away, and I follow. This routine is a game of cat and mouse between Romeo and Juliet, with that playful energy coming into our performance as we find our stride again and finish the routine perfectly.

Apart from Amelie's slight rush in the middle, it's one of the best run-throughs we've had considering it's the first time we've performed together in front of other people. I'm not sure what the other pairs have done, but I know for a fact none of them have the technical expertise that we do. This spot in the showcase is hers without a doubt.

"Thank you both. I'm afraid—" Madame starts to speak, but she's cut off by the General Director whispering in her ear, his hand coming up to cover his mouth.

Amelie and I stand side by side as the two talk quietly, chests heaving as we catch our breath. I steal a glance at her in my peripheral vision, only to see her staring at the floor, her hands folded together as if she's praying. I don't know what comes over me, but I reach for her, cover her hands with mine, and bring them up to press against my lips.

My mother did this a lot when I was younger, and it always helped convey whatever she wanted to tell me. Whether it was to congratulate me on doing well on a test or to console me when something didn't go the way I wanted, her hands would always find mine, enveloping them completely before she'd kiss them, giving me a soft smile reserved only for me. It's the only way I have to tell Amelie how I feel. I'm proud of her, our performance, and us.

Madame and the General Director stop talking, and I drop our joined hands from my lips, but still keep hold of them between us.

"Amelie, River, that was wonderful," he says, an encouraging smile on his face. "As you know, there are three spots for partner dances, and we'd like you to have one."

He barely finishes speaking before Amelie's arms are around my neck, her face buried in my shoulder. I hold on to her, clinging on as her body starts to tremble before it goes almost limp as she trusts me to keep her standing.

"Thank you," I tell them. "We won't let you down."

I lift Amelie slightly, keeping a tight grip on her as I walk us out of the studio, my shoulder starting to get damp from her tears. The relief I feel about us getting the spot is incomparable to how she must feel.

"You did it," I tell her quietly. "You got the spot."

We stand like that for a moment longer, Amelie not loosening her hold on me as I rub soothing circles on her back. Although we've made it through the audition, preparing for the performance will be even harder. The routine is almost five minutes long, and even though we have a lot more time in comparison to learn it, that also means we'll have to be practically inseparable outside of classes and sleep.

I'm not sure how many arguments we'll have along the way, or how many times we'll get on each other's nerves. But for now, I don't worry about any of that. I just let myself hold Amelie as she cries out everything that she's been holding in for what must be longer than the past few days.

Chapter 10

Amelie



THE FLOOR PULSES UNDER THE WEIGHT OF DOZENS OF PEOPLE JUMPING around to the music blaring from speakers in the ceiling. Flashing lights in the dark room make it just about possible to see my friends crowded around me, huge smiles on all of their faces.

“To the best dancer in the whole of Paris,” Grayson yells over the music, lifting his glass above the centre of the table we’re gathered around.

“In the whole world!” Evie corrects, grinning so widely I’m surprised her cheeks haven’t started hurting.

“To Amelie,” Damien adds, clinking his glass against hers and the rest of ours, before we all down our drinks.

I’m not a huge fan of going to clubs, but once I told the girls I’d secured a spot in the showcase, they insisted we go out to celebrate. Grayson managed to pull a few strings to get us a table at one of Paris’s most exclusive clubs. The guest list is invite-only, and it’s expected for people to spend at least ten thousand euros, especially if you’re taking a prime spot in the VIP section like we are. Grayson’s barely been in Paris a year, but he’s already got an in at places most people would kill to go.

“Who wants another round?” Grayson asks, his voice becoming hoarse from all the shouting he’s done tonight.

He remains the only person standing, the rest of us taking our seats again on the plush leather couches of the booth.

“I’m tapping out,” Damien says, curling his arm around Evie’s shoulder. “We’re both seeing our parents tomorrow.”

“Sounds like even more of a reason to drink,” Grayson jests, leaning over the rest of us so he can jab his finger into Damien’s shoulder.

“Peer pressure is very unbecoming,” Evie tells him, half-joking, and he stops instantly.

“My bad,” he says, straightening up as he holds both hands up. “Anyone else? River?”

He turns to the sullen boy next to him at the edge of the couch that’s probably got an imprint in the shape of him. River’s spent most of the night sulking in the corner, and I’m not sure why. The audition went well and our spot has been secured in the showcase. He should be celebrating, too.

“Sure, whatever,” he replies, tipping his glass to his lips to get the last few drops out.

“Amelie?”

“Just water for me,” I tell Grayson, flashing him an appreciative smile.

He winks in response, then turns to Zena and Layth.

“And for the princess?”

“We’re fine,” Layth answers for both of them.

They’re sat together between Evie and me, but there’s a slight distance between them that they reserve for when they’re in public. It’s something I picked up on once we all became friends last year. In private, anywhere on university grounds like our dorms or the common room, they stick close together, leaving barely any space. But there’s an unspoken need to keep up appearances in public, and while we’ve learned that Layth is responsible for looking after Zena while we’re at university, to the outside world he’s just a close childhood companion.

“I need to find new friends,” Grayson mutters under his breath, but loud enough for us all to hear it over the music, as he gestures to one of the waiters toward our table. He leans over to place his order before finally sitting back down.

“So, when’s the showcase?” he asks, hooking his arm around the back of the couch so it hangs just above my shoulders.

“April,” I tell him. “There’s no set date yet, but it’s usually around Easter.”

“Noted.” He pulls his phone out of his pocket and opens his calendar. “I’ve blocked the whole month out, but let me know when you find out the date.”

Grayson puts his phone back into his pocket before he smiles at me, white teeth on show and small dimples pulling at his cheeks. I don't think there's ever been a time when his smiles have felt fake, only genuine happiness whenever it happens. Although he's only been part of our group for a short time, he shows up for the rest of us. Whether it's attending performances or just lending a shoulder to cry on, he's always there.

I pat his knee, giving it a gentle squeeze before I hear a scoff from the other side of him. I'm surprised I can't see the back of my skull from how hard I rolled my eyes at River ruining the good mood I'm in, like he always does.

"Did you want to say something, River?" I ask, giving him the attention he so clearly desires.

I lean forward to see him properly, and he looks a mess. The top buttons of his shirt are undone, the band collar creating the slightest V shape at the base of his neck. He removed his jacket as soon as we entered the club, handing it off to the cloakroom staff once we were shown to our table. All of the boys are wearing some sort of formal shirt and jacket combination, the standard attire when attending a club of this calibre. The girls and I opted for black dresses, with Zena choosing a longer one while Evie and I went shorter.

"Nothing at all," he answers, raising an eyebrow.

"No one forced you to be here," I remind him. Clearly, he's not enjoying himself so I don't understand why he doesn't just leave.

"Considering I'm half the reason you even got the spot, I think I should be here," he says, leaning over Grayson.

"Oh, I get it now," I say, doing the same. "You're pouting because they're celebrating me instead of you. Once again, River, the world doesn't revolve around you."

"My bad, River. Next round is for you. But can you guys argue somewhere else?" Grayson interjects, and we both shush him as he dissolves back into the couch.

"They can celebrate you all they want. Only the two of us know what happened in that practice studio," he says, voice low as if he's implying something other than dancing occurred while we were alone. Well, maybe there were some other things, but no one needs to know how River and I touched each other, and how restless I was that night when I tried to sleep but couldn't.

“Okay, you can stay. I want to hear this. What happened in the studio?”

“Shut up, Grayson,” River and I say in unison, and he lowers in his seat, shuffling until he’s under the table. A few seconds later, he pops out the other side.

“I’m going to see where those drinks are,” Grayson says as he makes a hasty escape.

“I’ll join you,” River calls after him, standing to follow him through the crowd.

“What was that?” Zena asks from next to me.

“Nothing,” I tell her, unsure of how to even explain it.

After our conversation before the audition, I thought perhaps we might have found some common ground to stand on. Neither of us seems to have had an easy time with ballet, and it was eye-opening to hear what he’d experienced when he was younger. But all of that gets soured when he acts like this, and we go right back to square one.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” I tell her, wanting to get some space from him.

“Do you want me to come with you?” She shuffles closer, already making her way out of the booth.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She nods, giving my hand a quick squeeze as I stand up and leave the table. Although our section is separated from the main floor, I have to go through it to get to the bathrooms. It’s only a couple of feet away, but the swarm of people makes it take longer than it should.

When I finally reach it, I splash some water on my face to calm myself down. I hate that I let him get me worked up like this, to the point he ruins whatever fun I’m having. It was a great night before he spoke, the drinks were flowing, conversations were easy and all the stress I’d been feeling about the showcase disappeared. I even started talking about getting scouted, a reality now that my spot is secured.

Maybe I should have included him in the toast, but the others started it off, and none of them thought to add him. I’m sure they planned to do another one for him later on when we got another round, but he got ahead of himself and started pouting like a petulant child.

I reapply my lip balm, checking over my appearance before I leave the bathroom. I can see our table from here, and while Grayson is back with the

drinks, River isn't with him. I can only hope he's gone home so the rest of us can enjoy our night.

I head back into the fray, trying my best to avoid getting bumped by people who are trying to make the best of their time here, too. The music seems louder here, surrounded by so many people, and I can barely hear myself think as I push through the crowd. A cold sensation trails down my back, liquid pouring over me so quickly I stop in my tracks.

I whip around to see who's responsible for the drink I'm now wearing, half expecting River to be executing some petty revenge, but it's a stranger instead. He's shorter than River, floppy blonde hair with a pretty boy face.

"I'm sorry, that was my fault," he says in French, holding his hands and the empty cup up in the air.

"It's okay," I reply, before turning away from him. There's no point standing around while my dress keeps getting ruined. I think over my options, the bathroom seeing even further away than before, and decide going back there to dry myself off isn't the best choice. I take the heaving mob of a crowd blocking my path as a sign to just leave instead.

"Let me buy you a drink," the stranger says from behind me. I look over my shoulder to tell him it's not necessary, and somehow he's gotten closer to me. I take a step forward, putting some distance between us, but he steps closer again.

"I'm leaving now, anyway," I tell him, continuing to walk so I can get to my friends.

"Come on, just one drink. It's the least I can do," he insists.

"Really, it's fine," I deadpan, losing all politeness in my tone.

"You're too pretty to go home alone," he says, his hand closing around my upper arm as he spins me to face him. The way he's acting is disgusting, his clammy fingers press into my skin, foul breath ghosting across my face as he moves closer to me.

I jab my heel straight into his foot as I shove his chest as hard as I can. He jumps back, his grip loosening right as someone grabs the back of his shirt and yanks him away from me. The horrid man almost falls to the ground as he crashes into a group of people.

"Are you okay?" River asks, jaw clenched as he glances at the stranger before back to me.

His eyes dart across my face, checking me over for whatever injuries he thinks that man might have inflicted on me. Without thinking, I rub the spot

on my arm where his hand was, and River's gaze travels there before snapping back to my face, something in his expression I can't quite read.

"He spilled his drink on me, it's fine. I'm going home." I can't bring myself to say anything else, this entire night falling apart in the space of just a few minutes.

"I'll come with you," he says. "I was getting bored of this place anyway," he tacks on to the end of his sentence, as if he wants to give me a believable excuse for leaving.

It feels like the welcome dinner all over again. I don't have the energy to fight him this time though, the adrenaline from pushing that man slowly fading as the dampness on my back drags me into reality again.

"Okay," I say. "Let me go tell the girls."

"I'll text them when we're outside. Let's just get out of here."

I nod, turning toward the exit as River moves to stand slightly in front of me. He guides us through the crowd, avoiding any more incidents as we reach the exit. River takes his jacket from the cloakroom staff, asking them something as he does so. A few seconds later, napkins appear in his hand as he comes to stand next to me again.

I give him my back without a word, and his touch is gentle as he drags them across my skin to get rid of the remains of the drink.

"Can I?" he asks, his hand resting over the top of my dress.

I nod as his hand travels lower, dipping under the fabric to wipe away at those spots, too. I could probably reach it myself if he gave me the napkins, but it's almost as if it wasn't even a question for him to do it for me. Once he's finished as much as he can without getting too much under my dress, he throws the napkins away, and drapes his jacket over my shoulders.

I'm grateful for it as soon as we get outside, the cold night breeze hitting me instantly. River taps on his phone and a few seconds later a sleek black car pulls up in front of us. He opens the door and ushers me in, reaching across me to fasten my seatbelt, and his familiar citrusy floral scent hits me all over again. He closes my door and goes around to get in the other side. As soon as he's seated, the driver takes off without any hesitation.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asks again, fiddling with the console buttons until warmth floods the back of the car.

"I'm fine," I reassure him. "Probably need to get a new dress, but it's okay."

“I’ll find out who he is,” River says, voice low but steady. “He can repay you for it.”

It’s a silly thing to say considering I can easily buy a new and probably prettier one whenever I want, but I understand the sentiment behind it.

“There’s no need for that. It’s old season, anyway,” I say in an attempt to lighten the dark cloud that seems to be the third passenger with us.

“Alright,” he sinks back into his seat, some of the tension leaving him, “but let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will.” I take a few seconds to gather my next words. “Thank you, by the way. I don’t think I’ve said that yet.”

“You never have to,” he says quietly, turning his head to look out the window. He leans his elbow against the door, resting his closed fist under his sharp jaw.

“I do,” I measure my next words carefully, calculating what I can say that won’t seem like I’m pitying him or apologising just because he’s done something nice for me now. “And I’m sorry if you felt left out tonight. That wasn’t my intention.”

“That’s not what I was annoyed about,” he tells me.

A beat passes as I wait for him to explain more but he doesn’t. I don’t want any unresolved tension between us before we have to start practicing for the showcase. I twist my fingers together in my lap, his short responses giving nothing away as I try, for once, to have an actual conversation with him.

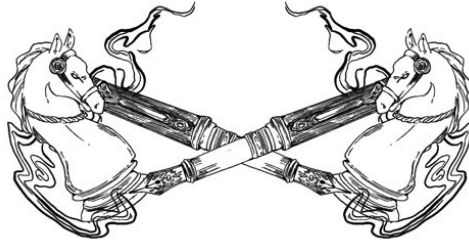
“I really do appreciate that you’re helping me with the showcase.”

That you’re helping me with anything at all after the way I’ve treated you, I want to say.

River only nods, not giving me anything else in response. It’s like I’m talking to a brick wall, and that’s not how I wanted this conversation to go. The rest of the journey back home passes in silence, and River doesn’t look at me for one second of it.

Chapter II

River



IT TOOK EVERYTHING IN ME NOT TO DO SOMETHING WORSE TO THE ABSOLUTE fool who spilled his drink over Amelie. It would have been so easy to send her back to our friends and deal with him myself, but I didn't want to leave her alone.

As soon as we got outside, I texted Damien to let him know what had happened, giving him the exact description of the guy. He wouldn't have been hard to find anyway; he was the only pathetic drunk in that club. During our drive back to the university, my phone rumbled in my pocket with an update that I only checked once I'd walked Amelie back to her room. I didn't ask for details, but between Damien, Grayson, and Layth, I doubt it was something the guy would ever forget.

Amelie was silent once we got back home, a stark contrast to how much she'd been trying to talk to me in the car. I probably should have responded more, but I couldn't think straight with so many different emotions swirling through my already tipsy head. Anger at the way a complete stranger felt entitled to touch her, pride that she handled him herself and didn't need mine or anyone else's assistance, and at the end, something else I don't want to put a name to at seeing my jacket around her shoulders.

Since returning to my room, I haven't been able to sleep. It was rude of me not to talk to her, and I guess I owe her an apology. We'd made some kind of progress before the audition, but I'm worried I completely erased that with my actions, or lack thereof.

I tried to stay in a good mood for the night, but a single phone call from my father ruined any chance of that. The date for the showcase hasn't been set yet, and even though I told him that I had to keep April free, he's already planned some meetings I have to attend with him. Once I graduate, I know I'll have to work with him, but for now I just want to pretend otherwise.

Admittedly, I had no interest in joining the showcase, but once Amelie came to me, it seemed like a fun idea, something to look forward to and distract me from my inevitable future. And maybe a childish part of me did want to be celebrated too. I worked just as hard as Amelie to secure our spot, but maybe our friends think the same as Amelie, that it's all easier for me for whatever reason.

I stare up at the ceiling, my head bursting with all the thoughts running through it. We've been back at university for barely a month, and I've already had so many sleepless nights because of Amelie. What's one more?



Much like everyone else, weekends are usually my favourite part of the week. No classes, combined with the freedom and ability to do whatever I want, usually means I'll spend most weekends off campus, sometimes venturing to different cities within France or its neighbouring countries.

But none of my friends are here this weekend, and I don't feel like going out alone, so I'm stuck with being bored at university instead. Damien and Evie had to meet with their parents to detail their plans for the year, as he's meant to formally propose to her. Though they've been betrothed since birth, and Evie already wears a small silver band on her fourth finger, they've never announced their engagement. To keep up appearances, they need some kind of public display. I feel sorry for both of them, but it's something that none of us can change.

Zena and Layth are out of the country, too, attending some ball where Zena is a guest of honour. I don't know how she balances her royal lifestyle while still maintaining her good grades, but it's commendable. Layth goes wherever she does, his entire life revolving around her schedule, and somehow he manages to keep on top of his studies, too. It must be

exhausting to live so much for someone else, but I've never heard him complain.

Grayson said he was going to be out all weekend for a date with a model he met during the summer. That explains why he's been inseparable from his phone lately, always tapping away even when we're talking. When he told me about his plans, I knew he wanted me to ask for details, but I couldn't care less about his dating life when mine is nonexistent.

It's not that I'm completely uninterested in dating. I tried a bit in high school, trying to fit in with classmates who always seemed to be in relationships. But I never felt anything. For every secret meeting in dark corridors with girls who fawned over me, there were just as many hidden rendezvous with boys I shared classes with.

No matter how many times I attempted to feel anything, I never had the butterflies swarming in my stomach or my heart racing out of my chest, like everyone said would happen.

When I got to university, I decided to not even bother. It's not as if I'm lonely—I have a good group of friends around me, and I don't lack love in my life from them. Well, apart from one person whom I still can't decide if she hates me for real or not. She's also the only other person in our group staying behind this weekend.

Amelie spends most of her free time in the studio, and weekends are no exception. Her dedication is admirable, of course, but I can't help wondering whether finding some balance would make her less intense about the whole thing. Even when I loved ballet, I never spent this much time on it, filling my spare hours with other hobbies like chess and reading.

Once I've dragged myself out of bed, my head pounding from lack of sleep, I spend the day in the library catching up on work. Because I missed classes to practice with Amelie, I'm behind on my notes. Since my friends abandoned me this weekend, it only makes sense to use this time wisely so I don't have to worry about it when they're all back.

The library is grandiose—tall ornate ceilings, walls lined with shelves of books, dozens of tables dotted between bookcases around the floor. Pretty much every book we'll ever need for our studies can be found here, with enough copies that no one ever has to worry about not finding one. The General Director houses his private collection here as well, a small room toward the back that's closed off for any students to access.

I find a table hidden in the back, away from anyone who might catch me on this rare occasion I'm alone and try to approach me. It's easier to avoid when I'm with my friends, but networking is something we've all been brought up to value immensely. As much as I understand its importance, and how it can help in the future to know as many people as possible, it's not something I'm interested in. I already have my friends, and there's no room in my life for anyone who wants to weasel their way into our group.

Sunlight leaks in through the windows, hitting my desk and perfectly illuminating my notebook as I flick to an empty page. I go through the textbook, comparing it with the recordings of the classes I missed. It's tedious work, studying company hierarchies and theories, all things I'm already aware of because of my father, but it's necessary. Although I'm guaranteed a position at his company, I still need to know enough to offset the nepotism reputation that will cling to me from my very first day.

When I get bored studying the class materials, I brush up on my French. It's the best I can do to learn as much as possible while I'm living here, and maybe it'll help me understand the snide remarks I get from a certain someone.

Hours pass, and when I've finally finished the last class, I pack my things away. Luckily, no one disturbed me, and I hope I can make it back through the common room and dorms the same way. I pull my phone out of my pocket as I leave the library, catching up on what I missed.

DAMIEN

I'm proposing in a month

Would mean a lot if you were there

I sigh, rubbing my forehead. I know Damien and Evie love each other, and that their friendship is the silver lining that makes this easier for them, but it doesn't make it any less sad.

RIVER

Of course

DAMIEN

Thanks

We should be back later tonight so I'll let you know the plan then

RIVER

Sure, see you later

There's nothing from Grayson or Layth, as is to be expected. Layth hardly ever texts me, or anyone for that matter, and Grayson will probably post something on social media later for his hundreds and thousands of followers. I've never met someone who cares to flash his life around so shamelessly, but I suppose that's what happens when you aren't born into this world, and just happen to fall into it.

Right as I'm about to put my phone back into my pocket, a text from my father comes through.

FATHER

I'll be in Paris with your mom next week.

RIVER

What for?

FATHER

She wants to check in on some clothes we're getting made for a charity auction we have next month.

I want to ask if I'll be expected to attend that auction with them, too, but don't want to put any ideas in his head. I don't know what my plans are for next month, but I'm sure I'll spend all my free time practicing with Amelie.

FATHER

We have a ticket for you too

Maybe he's telepathic.

RIVER

Send over the details and I'll get back to you on that

He does as I ask, forwarding the invite to me so I can check the details. It's on a weekday evening, so there's nothing actually stopping me from going, but I'm still unsure. I attended countless events with my parents when I was younger, and while they can be fun, it's also exhausting to keep a smile plastered on my face for hours at a time.

I don't respond to him, knowing that he or my mother will ask me again in a few weeks. I put my phone away as I reach the common room, intending to pass right through it and go to my room, until I catch sight of

someone sitting at our table, fiddling with my chessboard. Dark brown hair cascades down her back, small braids threaded throughout. It's different from how her hair was last night, when it was just long and wavy.

She's in an all-pink outfit again: a pink cardigan over a pale pink shirt, paired with—of course—a pink skirt that barely covers the top of her thighs.

I can never escape her.

Amelie moves the pieces around the board as if she's playing against herself. I should keep walking and go back to my room, pretend I haven't seen her at all, but my legs move of their own accord, carrying me toward her. Now feels like the best time to apologise for my lack of communication with her in the car yesterday. It would have been the perfect opportunity with just the two of us alone to explain why I acted the way I did, but I couldn't think properly.

I stand next to the table, the fireplace warming my leg as soon as I do. The lights are low in the evening, the room only brightened by the lamps dotted around it. The slow-burning fire casts a soft glow and provides just the right amount of heat on these fall nights.

"What do you want?" she asks without even looking at me.

"Can we talk?"

"I think we've done more than enough of that," Amelie says, glancing up at me through her eyelashes before turning her attention back to the board again.

"I'd like to apologise for my behaviour recently," I say, and that gets her.

"Sit down, River."

I sit.

"Don't you ever wear anything else?" she says, remarking on my white shirt.

"You're one to talk," I nod toward her all-pink ensemble.

"I thought you were here to apologise, not comment on my outfit."

I can't stop the huff of air that escapes me. Even when we're trying to be nice to each other, we still have to go through this back-and-forth.

"I'm sorry for not responding to you in the car last night," I start. "And for blowing up at you when you wanted to practice more. I'm sorry if it affected your performance in any way."

“Don’t flatter yourself. You could never have an impact on my performance like that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely positive.”

“Okay, so there’s no reason at all why you slowed down as soon as I told you to. Got it.”

Her tongue pokes into the side of her cheek as she rolls her jaw. There it is. I’m under her skin as much as she is mine. We’re back to normal.

Amelie reaches under the table, her hand patting my knee sympathetically.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, mon cœur.”

I don’t like how much I enjoyed that.

I straighten in my chair, my hands drifting to the board as I reset the pieces from her solo game when a thought occurs to me.

“Let’s try something.”

“You and your wonderful ideas,” she says, sarcastically.

“We did fine during the audition, but we both know we’re capable of more than that.” Amelie nods in agreement as I continue. “Clearly we both have some misconceptions about each other.”

“That’s one way to put it,” she mutters, still wanting to fight back.

“I think a lot of our problems could be solved if we knew each other better. Get rid of all the assumptions we have about each other, and start from the beginning.”

“I know your name and birthday and unfortunately that’s already far more information than I need.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” I tell her. “I understand we do this thing where we pretend to hate each other, but deep down I know you don’t.”

“That’s a big claim to make.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

She lets out a heavy breath but says nothing.

“Exactly. And I don’t hate you, Amelie. I don’t think I ever have, really,” I admit. “So maybe we start there. Go back to basics like we did a few days ago.”

“I hardly think we need to be best friends just to dance together,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest. She’s so stubborn that she has to push back even when I’m suggesting something that will benefit her.

“Five minutes, that’s all I’m asking for.”

I don’t know why I’m so determined to make this work, but I am. If I’m going to perform, for what might be the last time ever if I don’t start enjoying ballet again, then I want to go out with a bang. This performance means more to Amelie than I can ever imagine, but that doesn’t mean I don’t care about it.

She fiddles with the pieces on the board, moving them around again even though I just put everything back where it belongs.

“Do you want to play?” I ask her, nodding down at the board.

“It was quite satisfying when Grayson threw a piece at your head. Maybe we can recreate that,” she says gleefully, and it’s the first time she’s smiled during this conversation.

“Is that what it’s going to take for you to talk to me?” She only shrugs in response. “Okay, let’s try this. Seeing as how you think you know everything about me already, for every fact you get right, you can throw a piece at me.”

“And what do you get if you guess right?” She asks, leaning forward in her seat.

“The satisfaction of confirming that I know you better than you think,” I tell her.

She leans back again, arms still crossed as she considers my proposition. Amelie looks me up and down, her gaze flitting across me as she takes me in.

“Okay. Five minutes, rapid-fire questions,” she concedes.

“Great, I’ll start. What’s my favourite colour?”

“Blue.”

“Wrong, it’s green.”

“Nothing about you says that you like the colour green,” she snaps back, the frown on her face creating small dimples on her forehead.

“We don’t all feel the need to make our favourite colour our entire personality,” I say, gesturing toward her outfit.

“Whatever.” She shakes her head, and picks up the white rook in front of her. “What’s my favourite performance?”

“The Black Swan pas de deux,” I say confidently.

For years now, I’ve seen her watch countless performances, studying them and practicing diligently so she can perfect the routine. She wouldn’t

have chosen it for her solo audition if it wasn't something she cared deeply about. And she performed it spectacularly.

I was on my way to my own studio to practice when auditions were taking place, and when I saw Evie and Zena waiting outside, I knew Amelie was in there. I wasn't in a hurry to start dancing, so I glanced in through the small window in the door. She was extraordinary. I almost didn't believe her when she told me she didn't get the solo, because it's impossible that anyone in that room—in any room—was better than her.

Amelie clenches her jaw before relenting and admitting that it is her favourite piece. She throws the rook at me, anyway.

“What was that for?”

“You had a lucky guess,” she says, picking up another piece.

“Your favourite piece is the Black Swan pas de deux, but your favourite ballet is Giselle because that's the first time you saw a woman who looked like you as a principal ballerina. You started classes when you were five, and you excelled far beyond our peers that even when I joined, I knew in an instant that you were dancing at a much higher level than the rest of us.”

Amelie narrows her eyes at me, leaning back in her seat, as if putting distance between us will stop me from seeing too deeply into her like I have so far. But it's too late. I already know everything about her.

“You don't like partner dances because you enjoy the control you get from dancing solo. But when push comes to shove, you're more than capable of dancing with someone else, and in a way that elevates them to your level, too. Your dream is to be a Danseur Étoile, and you already hold yourself with the confidence and talent of one. And no one deserves it more than you do.”

She throws the king in her hand at me, her chair legs scraping across the floor as she stands.

“That's enough,” she says, quiet but firm.

Something overtakes me and I circle my fingers around her wrist, just like I did the first time I touched her there a few days ago. She doesn't pull back, so I gently urge her to sit again.

“Be as annoyed as you want to be, Amelie. But I know you better than you think,” I confess.

It's impossible not to know her when our lives have been intertwined since our first ballet class together. There's never been a way to escape her,

and although it goes against my better judgement, at this point I don't want to.

I trail my fingers down to her hand, resting it next to the board as our fingertips touch for barely a second before I let go.

"You know me, too," I tell her. "That's why you asked me to dance with you."

Amelie doesn't say anything, sliding her hand closer as she rests her fingers on top of mine.

"I hate you," she says, a soft smile blooming as she shakes her head.

"Guess I hate you too, then," I reply, the corners of my mouth lifting, and my heart picking up speed.

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Chapter 12

Amelie



“TURN OUT.”

I angle my feet outward, positioning myself like the fitter has asked as I balance on the tips of my toes. He squeezes my heels, fingers pressing into the fabric of the shoes before he lets go.

“Sous-sus.”

I spend the next few minutes following his instructions, turning my feet the way he asks as he adjusts the fit of the shoes, until he decides I should try another pair. It's always a tedious process getting fitted for new pointe shoes, but it's vital to performing well. They're the only tool ballerinas have apart from our bodies to leverage how well we do. Wearing the wrong shoes can be detrimental, and I can't afford to let anything ruin this performance.

Sitting between Evie and Zena on the couch, I change my shoes, trying a pair with a shorter vamp and stiffer shank. Immediately, it feels better than the first, my foot arching into the shank with just enough resistance to allow me to go en pointe easily.

The fitter and I go through the same routine, trying different positions to make sure I get the best fit. Evie and Zena both watch the process intently, their jaws hinged slightly open in fascination. Most people don't realise how long these fittings take, or how often we have to do them, but when I informed them of that, neither of them minded. One of the other fitters in the store even humoured them by letting the two try on a pair each, leading Evie to believe that I've been torturing myself for my entire life.

“She’s amazing,” I hear Evie murmur under her breath to Zena as I rise en pointe again.

Evie is one of the few people who have been in my life since I started learning how to dance. She was there at my very first recital, clapping loudly and cheering enthusiastically in the crowd even when everyone around her was silent. She’s always been my biggest support, and I can never express to her just how grateful I am.

An hour passes as I try on more and more shoes, and eventually the others join us, our group pretty much taking over the whole store. It’s a small establishment, but its history is powerful. It’s provided shoes for the best ballerinas in the world, and every principal ballerina I admire has set foot in here. It’s also one of the very few stores in the world to offer shoes that match my skin.

When I was younger, before I truly fell in love with ballet and started learning how to dance, I assumed the shoes were pink because it was a typically feminine colour to match the feminine nature of the art. It was only when I started attending classes that I realised it was meant to look like an extension of the ballerina’s legs, creating a seamless line from the top of the leg to the tip of their toes, giving a more elegant appearance to each move.

Starting out, the only shoes available to me were pink. When I got older and questioned my teacher about it, she explained it was difficult to find a place that would offer them in different colours. It had become such a standard in the ballet world, one that’s historically been reserved for European aristocracy—White aristocracy. After that, any time I saw ballerinas who weren’t White, but seemed to have matching shoes, I looked a lot closer. Most of them had caked their shoes in foundation, with only a rare few having shoes actually designed for them.

Even now, ballet is seen as a privileged sport, and there’s proof in the expenses needed for it, from classes to shoes that can only be worn for barely any time before they need replacing again. Although time has progressed and more ballerinas from different backgrounds are getting major roles, it’s still a struggle to find shoes that match my skin. A big reason I chose to come to school in Paris was so I could easily access this store.

I still dance in pink shoes every now and then, but for performances I prefer having brown ones. Today’s goal is to find a shoe that fits perfectly

for the routine I'm performing with River.

He's strolling around the store, making all the other girls in here flustered with his apparent charm. I don't see it myself. Instead, I see a nuisance to the staff, who are just trying to do their jobs, and to the girls trying to get new shoes.

"Sous-sus," the fitter says, and I adjust my stance.

"How do these feel? I think they hold your shape well," he says, pressing his fingers to the sole as it bends to fit my arch.

I flex my feet, going flat before back en pointe to try and get a better feel for it.

"The box feels a little rough," I tell him. It's the slightest difference in pressure, but I can feel my toes pressed against it a little too uncomfortably.

"Okay, let me try something else," he says, standing to grab another pair as I sit down to take these ones off.

"Are you going to be much longer?" River asks, leaning over the back of the sofa as he towers over me.

"You can leave if you've got better things to do," I tell him, passing the shoes off to one of the attendants.

"Never said that," he replies, before coming around to sit next to me. "Was just curious."

"Try these," the fitter says, bringing me a new pair. I squeeze the block with my fingers, feeling the difference from the first, before I put them on.

I go back to standing, going through the same motions as the fitter pokes and prods at my feet again, but they still don't feel how I want them to. A sigh escapes me as I drop onto the sofa, leaning back and tipping my head to the ceiling.

"None of them feel right," I say.

"Why don't we try somewhere else?" Evie suggests.

I look at her on the other side of the room, where Zena's seat has been taken over by Damien.

"This is the only place in Paris that has brown shoes," I tell her, a frown crossing her face.

"That's ridiculous," she says. She almost looks ready to start a war on my behalf. "Surely there's other places?"

"Not here," I explain. "I'll try on a few more before I give up completely."

“There’s a store in Milan,” River announces, not looking up from his phone as he taps away on it. “We’ve got an appointment this weekend.”

“What?” I say, my head snapping to him as the others start babbling excitedly about the idea of going on a trip to Italy. “We’re not going to Milan, River.”

“You need shoes; Milan has shoes. Seems like a no-brainer to me.”

I can only stare at him, searching for any trace that he’s playing a joke on me. But there’s nothing like that. Just grey eyes looking into mine, and the hint of a smile on his face.

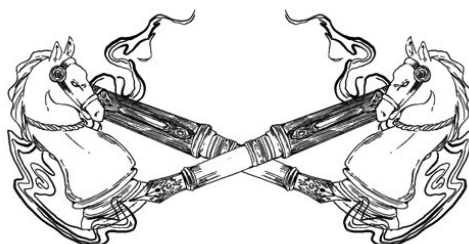
“Let’s go to Milan!” Grayson shouts before the store staff shush him.

We leave a few minutes later, and the journey back to the university is spent planning a weekend away. River stays by my side the whole time.

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Chapter 13

River



GRAYSON WASTED NO TIME IN SECURING A PRIVATE JET TO TAKE US TO Milan. He had a car service ready for us on the tarmac to take us directly to the hotel. We booked a few suites, everyone pairing up apart from Amelie, who got her own room. I can't say spending a night in a suite with Grayson is my idea of a good time, but it wouldn't make sense for either of us to share with her.

With the trip on such short notice, we haven't planned much apart from dinner tonight at a restaurant Evie has wanted to try for a while. Although our main reason for coming here is to get shoes for Amelie, she's told us we don't have to join her after already spending so much time in the store the other day.

The girls decided to explore a few boutiques instead, Damien and Layth joining them without a second thought. I expected Grayson to go with them, too, but for some reason he's chosen to accompany Amelie and me as we head to her appointment. From my research before booking, it's a much smaller store than the one in Paris, hence its appointment-only procedure for visiting. They're usually booked out months in advance, but I pulled a few strings to get us in as soon as possible.

I know all too well how important pointe shoes are for ballerinas, and there was no way I was going to let Amelie settle for pink ones when that's not what she wanted. It's an utter joke that there aren't more places in the world that cater to ballerinas from different backgrounds. It's already a sport designed for the upper class, without these barriers. Learning is

expensive, and so are the shoes needed for it. Never mind that they never last more than a couple of wears, or that you have to break them apart even after buying.

I'll admit it's easier for me. Ballet shoes are much easier to adjust, and there's no added pressure of finding a block of wood comfortable enough to balance my entire body weight on the tip of my toes. It's just another reason I admire Amelie. Her strength must have been forged through years of resilience and dedication.

It's much the same process when we get into the store. Grayson and I take a seat as Amelie is shown various different shoes, picking out the ones she likes before trying them on. I text my mother as we wait, updating her on our appointment, which I couldn't have secured without her help.

RIVER

She's trying on a few pairs now

MOTHER

Wonderful, hopefully she can find a good fit

Are you joining us at the auction?

She's been relentless in asking, and I should just tell her that I don't want to go. But I also know that it's not often my parents are in Paris. Most of their time is split between London and New York, and while neither of those cities is particularly far away, they're always busy so taking a trip out to see them is never worth it.

RIVER

Can I bring a friend?

If I can drag Damien along, at least I'll have someone to talk to while my parents spend the night networking.

MOTHER

Of course! We're so excited to see you my love

RIVER

Me too

I close out of our texts and scroll through e-mails from my father. He sends weekly updates on the business, details on his investments, and general updates from the other staff. I have no interest in any of it, but I'll

need to be aware of it once I graduate. Although he has a more relaxed approach now to my involvement in his business, I'm still meant to keep on top of things just in case anything happens. I avoid as many meetings as I can, though, always using university as an excuse for why I'm busy. It worked well in first year, but with only three years left, I worry when that excuse will stop sticking.

I put my phone away, rubbing my temples as a headache threatens to form from looking over all the numbers my father sent over. Grayson's head lolls against his shoulder, eyes closed as he takes a nap. He should have just stayed at the hotel if he was going to sleep, but I think he worries about missing out on things with us.

I glance over at Amelie, the reason we're even here, as she stands en pointe with her feet out turned, the assistant sat on the floor behind her.

I've never been jealous of anything or anyone in my entire life. I've never wanted for anything I can't have. But right now, watching this man trail his fingers down Amelie's calf as he squeezes her heel, maybe I am jealous.

It's completely irrational. I've touched her in places this man never will, and I will probably end up touching her like that soon, when we start rehearsing. But still, seeing his hands on her makes something in my head tick in all the wrong ways.

"I'm going outside," I announce, standing to leave the room. I need to get some air.

"I think this is the pair," Amelie says, dropping flat on her feet before she walks over to me. "Let me change and we can leave together."

"Whatever," I say, some emotion I can't name bubbling inside me. I turn my attention to one of the store assistants. "We'll take two dozen pairs. Please send them to d'Étoiles."

"I don't need that many," Amelie interrupts, placing her hand on my arm. I glance down at her, but have to look away just as quickly.

"It's fine. Better to have more than less."

I step away from Amelie, her hand dropping from my arm as I do, and it suddenly feels cold there. Taking my wallet out of my jacket pocket, I pass a card to the attendant.

"I can pay for them," Amelie says, going over to where Grayson is still sleeping to retrieve her bag.

“I know,” I tell Amelie, before smiling at the assistant and gesturing for her to continue the payment. “We’ll be back in a few months to get some more, so please make sure they’re in stock.”

The attendant nods, and a few seconds later I tap my card and am a few thousand euros poorer. It’s only a small amount to make sure Amelie is comfortable.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she says, as we make our way out of the store.

Grayson trails behind us, still wiping sleep from his eyes, and it’s impossible not to send him back to the hotel alone. But we have a dinner reservation Evie will kill us for missing.

“It’s the least I could do,” I tell her. “After all, I am your partner.”

“It sounds weird when you say it like that,” she remarks, pulling a face.

“What would you prefer I called myself then?”

“I don’t know, but not something that makes it sound like we’re on some kind of mission.”

I shake my head, fighting back the smile that wants to appear on my face. Although we’ve opened up a bit more with each other, Amelie is still as sharp as ever with me. There’s a lightness to it now, though, making it feel like harmless teasing rather than venomous like it was before.

When we get to the restaurant, the others are already there. I pull out Amelie’s chair for her to sit before taking the one next to her.

“Did you manage to find some?” Zena asks, taking a glass of water from Layth’s outstretched hand.

“Yes, finally,” Amelie says, then explains all the different pairs she went through. She misses out the part where I paid for them, but it’s not something I’ll bring up either.

Evie ordered before we arrived so the food and drinks flow steadily throughout the evening. These are my favourite type of nights, the simplicity of sharing good food with the people I care most about. I’m content to listen as everyone shares their finds from the day and we discuss what places we can visit next. We don’t take as many trips together as we should, but it’s definitely something I want to do more while we’re all still at university.

Once we graduate, I know nights like these will be much harder to have. We’ll all be working in different countries, with schedules that are way busier than they are now. There won’t be time for us to meet for the sole

reason of wanting to enjoy ourselves. Even Damien and I, though we'll be working together, it won't be the same as it is now. I need to enjoy this time with my friends as much as I can before it gets taken away from me.

"You okay?" Amelie's leg presses against mine underneath the table as she leans toward me slightly.

"Yeah, just thinking," I tell her, forcing myself back to the present instead of imagining the future arriving all too quickly.

"Don't hurt yourself, I know that's really hard for you," she says, and I let out of a huff of laughter.

"So, when are you going to start rehearsing?" Zena asks, and Amelie jumps back from me as if we were doing anything other than talking.

"Hmm?" she says, not having heard her.

"From next week," I respond in Amelie's stead. "We only learned a minute of the routine for the audition, but the full thing is about five minutes long."

"I don't know how you guys do it," Damien remarks. "I've got two left feet."

"Yes, I know all about that," Evie says, rolling her eyes.

There's been more than a few instances of Damien stepping on her feet whenever the two have to dance together at events. The two start bickering, but it's playful, just the gentle teasing that comes with years of being friends.

Once we've finished eating, all of us stuffed to the brim thanks to Evie ordering what felt like the entire menu for us, we head back to the hotel. Each suite is on its own floor, and we take the elevator up together, with Damien and Evie getting off first, followed by Layth and Zena, and then Amelie. Grayson and I are the last to reach our room for the night, and he runs into the bathroom before I even get a chance to speak.

I take off my jacket and sit on one of the sofas, undoing my top button as I scroll through my phone. I'm not much for social media, but Grayson has already posted plenty of photos from tonight. Somehow he's managed to capture a moment between Amelie and me. I can't remember what we were talking about but judging by the scowl on her face and the smile on mine, it must have been something good.

I realize then that this is one of the few photos of Amelie and me together. We have some from classes of course, and from other times we've gone out as a group, but this one is just focused on us. I try not to think too

much about why I'm doing it as I take a screenshot. As if she's caught me in the act, a text from her appears at the top of my screen.

AMELIE

Can you come to my room for a second?

My eyebrows furrow as I reread her message. Did I leave something with her, or accidentally take something of hers? I pat my pocket, and my wallet is still there. It's the only thing I took with me apart from my phone, and there's nothing else in my pockets. I can't imagine why she wants me to go to her room, but I do anyway. It only takes a few minutes for me to get there, and she opens the door on the first knock.

"Hey," she says, gesturing for me to enter.

I glance around as I do, noting how tidy everything still is. Grayson destroyed our room as soon as he entered, throwing his things everywhere as if we weren't just staying for one night. All of my things are still in my suitcase, as I don't see the need to bring a lot or unpack for such a short trip.

"Is everything okay?" I ask as she starts pacing around the room.

"I think we need to start practicing as soon as we get back," she says, hands on her hips as she continues to pace.

"Why? We have a lot more time until the showcase."

"We don't. This has to be perfect, River. I can't waste a single second. No performance has ever meant this much to me, and I can't mess it up, but it's not even just me I have to worry about this time--"

She starts rambling, her words picking up speed and switching to French halfway through as nerves take over.

"Amelie," I say quietly as I approach her. I keep my arms raised as I reach out to her until my hands meet her shoulders. "Je suis là, calmes toi, tout va bien."

She stares up at me, brown eyes wide, her chin trembling. *Please don't cry*, I think. Anything but that.

"We can start tomorrow," I tell her. "We'll go to the studio as soon as we get back, okay?"

She nods, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth, her eyes still on mine.

"It's all good. You're the best dancer I know. I'm pretty capable," I joke, and it gets a spluttered laugh out of her. "We'll be fine."

Amelie places her hands on my wrists, her thumbs running across them as she calms herself down. It makes my entire body shiver, every nerve within me coming alight.

“We’ll be fine,” she repeats, and I nod along.

“Sit down,” I say, guiding her toward the sofa.

We let go of each other and I go to grab some water, passing the glass to her before I sit on the edge of the coffee table and face her. She takes a few sips before passing it back to me, and I place it on the table before looking back at her.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” she says, trying to explain herself, but I don’t need to hear it.

Her emotions are completely valid considering this is something that’s so important to her. But I am curious about it. She can have anything she wants in the world. I don’t understand why this particular showcase is so important to her.

“Can I ask something?”

She nods in response.

“Why does this matter so much to you? I didn’t think you were the kind of person who needed validation from someone like Madame to know how good you are.”

“It’s not that,” she says, letting out a heavy sigh. “The scouts at the showcase will be in charge of deciding who gets into this summer intensive program. There’s no amount of money that can buy you into it; it’s based purely on skill. The showcase is my only chance to show them I deserve to be there.”

It’s surprising to hear something like that from her. With our wealth, getting what we want has never been a problem for any of us. I’m still not entirely sure what this summer intensive entails but if it means a lot to Amelie, that’s all I need to know.

“Of course you deserve to be there,” I say in the hopes of comforting her. “I won’t let you down, Amelie.”

It’s a promise made from deep inside my heart. As much as we’ve had our ups and downs—mainly downs—I can’t be the reason she doesn’t get this when it’s something she cares about so much.

“Thanks,” she says, a small smile on her face, as she leans over to place her hand on top of mine. She gives it a gentle squeeze before she lets go and for some strange reason it feels like a vice around my heart.

I stand, heading toward the door because the room suddenly feels like it's closing in on me. We've been spending too much time together, being nice to each other; that's why this all feels so strange. There can't be another reason.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I tell her as I open the door and leave before I get a response.

I make my way back to my room, and it's only when I'm right outside that I realise I left my key card behind. I knock on the door a few times, but Grayson must be fast asleep already, as I get no response. I think about texting Damien, but it feels strange to be the third wheel for him and Evie any more than I already do. Tipping my head back to face the ceiling, I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I realise I only have one option.

Amelie opens the door straightaway, and once I explain what's happened, she lets me in.

"I'll sleep on the sofa," I tell her.

"You can have the bed if you want," she says. "I wasn't planning on sleeping much."

I look at the table and see she's got a notebook on it; her phone paused on the performance of Romeo and Juliet we learned for the audition.

"Can I watch, too?" I ask, following Amelie further into the room.

She sits cross-legged on the floor in front of the table and pats the space next to her as an invitation. I drop down beside her, stretching my legs out in front of me as she presses play on the video. Amelie writes something down in her notebook, her handwriting fast but still pretty, each letter looped together. I've never seen this part of her process before. I assumed she learned just by watching as I do, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

The video plays over and over again, and I find my focus switching between watching it and then Amelie. She's entirely focused on it, and I could probably disappear from the room without her noticing. She zooms in to different parts, pausing and playing whenever she needs to as she observes in close detail every movement of the dancers.

"Do you do this for every performance?" I ask, breaking the silence between us.

"Most of the time," she replies. "I like breaking it all down, figuring out exactly what needs to happen during and between moves. It's easier to learn this way."

“That makes sense,” I nod, thinking back to every time I’ve seen her dance.

There’s always been a level of precise detail I could never quite figure out how she managed. Now I have my answer, and another reason to admire her.

I’m not sure how much time passes while we watch the video, but it’s been long enough that I think I could replay it with my eyes closed. Amelie leans back against the sofa, switches off her phone, and puts away her notebook before she closes her eyes. It’s not quite morning yet, moonlight peeking in through a small gap in the curtains, but there’s a faint glow to the sky as the sun gets ready to rise.

I let myself look at Amelie a little closer. She’s prettier like this, with her eyes closed instead of glaring at me, her lips pressed together instead of ready to spew some taunting remark. But I can’t deny that I like that side of her, too.

When her breathing evens out, I realise she’s fallen asleep, and not in the most comfortable of positions. I stand, curving one arm around her back, and the other underneath her legs so I can lift her. She makes a small noise but doesn’t wake, even when I carry her to her bed. The covers are already half pulled back so I place her down as gently as I can, careful not to jolt her awake. I cover her up, but when I pull back to retreat to the living room, her hand reaches out for mine.

Amelie’s fingers close around mine as she nuzzles into her pillow, and I don’t have the heart to try and take them away from her. I drop to the floor, resting my head on the side of the bed right before I fall asleep with my hand in hers.

Chapter 14

Amelie



STAYING TRUE TO HIS WORD, RIVER HAS A STUDIO RESERVED FOR US AS soon as we get back to university. After leaving our bags in our rooms and getting changed, we meet there to start practicing. It's the first time we're going to attempt more than just the first minute of the performance, and I spent the short plane ride back to Paris looking over my notes.

When I woke up this morning, River was slumped next to my bed, and it took me a few minutes to remember that he'd gotten locked out of his own room. Grayson apologised at breakfast, but from the way River kept twisting his neck on the flight back, it was obvious that sleeping on the floor hadn't been the most comfortable. I must have offered to let him sleep on the sofa, but after watching the performance for the millionth time, I can't recall much that happened after that. I don't even remember getting up and going to bed.

River's already at the studio when I get there, warming up at the barre, grey sweatpants hanging low on his hips, and a white T-shirt stretching across his torso. I take a spot a few feet away from him to start my own warm-up, loosening my muscles so I'm ready to dance.

Once I've gone through my usual routine, I check my notes again, figuring out the best way to approach this. I haven't performed many pas de deux before, and I hadn't realised just how intertwined each dancers' role is in them. There are so many parts that I can't perform alone, reliant on River carrying me in some way.

The first time we practiced, I could barely stand to have his hands on me. It didn't feel right to have someone touching me like that, especially someone who I hardly tolerate on a good day. The last time we practiced together ended in an argument, but I'm confident it won't happen this time. We seem to understand each other a lot more now, and with the air between us cleared, it can only mean we dance better as a pair.

"You ready?" River asks as he comes closer.

I show him my notebook, detailing what I want us to practice first. I expect River to say more or give some input, but he seems fine with going along with whatever I want to do. He sets up his phone to record us, and starts the music on mine before we move into the centre of the room, taking up our first position.

River's hands close around my waist as he stands behind me, but I don't feel any discomfort this time. The weight of them settles me, makes me feel like I have something tethering me close to him. We find our pace as the music loops, running through the first minute a few times as we get our bearings. Once we're comfortable with that, we move on to the next sequences, going slowly into each move as we try to learn it.

Our practice is less hurried this time. Without the added stress of having such a short timeframe to learn everything in, it's a lot easier to figure out what we have to do. That's not to say I'm not constantly overthinking every single move and how much time we have left. Even though we're both great dancers, we're so used to being alone that it's a learning curve.

There's times River gets ahead of himself, lifting me before I've even started to raise myself off the ground. Or sometimes I jump into a movement before River is ready, and his hands have to grab on to me quickly to stop me from falling. Although the actual moves aren't that difficult to learn, the hardest part is learning River.

I've seen him dance a lot during classes; his moves are always powerful yet elegant. But it's clear he enjoys dancing alone, keeping to himself at all times, even when a handful of ballerinas want to dance with him.

It's harder to read him when we're so close. From a distance, I can break apart his moves, figure out what he's about to do before he does it, and understand his dancing more. But being so close to him, having to be guided by him, it's a lot to get used to.

We spend the next few hours breaking down the routine, repeating moves we're struggling with as we try to transition seamlessly into the full

dance. The only breaks we take are for water or to catch our breath, both of us ignoring the outside world and acting as if we're the only two people in existence.

In all honesty, I didn't expect River to put so much effort into this. I figured he agreed to dance with me because he felt bad for me, but now I think he's enjoying it, too. Every time we mess up a move, he stops to figure out where it went wrong, encouraging me to try again with him so we can get it right. Whenever we perfect a move, he's overly enthusiastic, smiling brightly at me as if we've won a competition together.

At first, I couldn't imagine dancing with River, but now I can't imagine doing it with anyone but him. There's never been another dancer that I thought had the same determination as I do, the same raw talent and skill, but River has surprised me in more ways than one.

I don't want to think too deeply about everything that's been happening between us. I find myself being a lot nicer to him than I used to. Every time I want to say something sarcastic or dry to him, he looks at me and it gets completely lost. I think it's the same for him, too.

He's had multiple chances and reasons to back out of this—he never even had to agree to it in the first place. I can count on my fingers the amount of times I've been kind to him in the entire time we've known each other, only showing him the bare minimum of politeness when we're with our friends because I don't want them to feel uncomfortable. But River agreed without a second thought, and has been nothing but supportive the whole time.

It's disarming to go from thinking you hate someone to realising that was never the case. Looking back now, I think I just hated how good he was, that everything felt like it was handed to him. But now I can see he's worked just as hard as I have to get to where he is.

"Toward the end," River pants, water bottle in hand, as he takes a sip. "The kiss."

The kiss.

We've avoided mentioning it so far, but it's a pivotal part of the routine. The climax of Romeo and Juliet's balcony pas de deux that everyone looks forward to.

"The kiss," I echo back to him.

"I won't do anything you're not comfortable with," he says, breathing evening out, but his chest still rising and falling rapidly. There's a soft blush

on his cheeks, the tips of his ears tinged pink, and I don't know if it's from the heat of the room or the topic of conversation.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. I know it's something we'll have to do. We can't perform the routine without it, or I'll risk losing out because I can't commit to a performance properly. But the idea of kissing River—having my first kiss with him—it's too much to think about.

"We have to do it," I tell him, averting my gaze to the window so I don't have to look at him.

"Okay," he says quietly. "We don't have to do it today, though, if you don't want to."

"It's not a case of want, River," I snap, turning my gaze to him. His eyes widen but he schools his expression just as quickly.

I didn't want to do any of this. I didn't want to rely on someone else to get a spot I deserved anyway. I didn't want to ask him to dance with me. I didn't want to have so many confusing feelings toward River that are making this even harder.

"We have to kiss, whether I like it or not."

"You really know how to make a guy feel good about himself," he jokes, and I hate myself for almost laughing.

"Why don't we just get it over and done with?" I say, before I can think too much about it.

It's just a kiss, it's not a huge deal. It's not real anyway because we're just performing. I don't have to count this as my first kiss if I don't want to because it's for show.

"Are you sure?" River asks, stepping closer.

"It's just a kiss," I say, hoping that repeating it will make it stick more in my brain.

"Just a kiss," he repeats.

River stops right in front of me, grey eyes staring down at me as he tilts my chin up to him. His gaze moves over my face, and it feels like he's seeing more than what's on the surface, like he can see every thought in my mind as his face moves closer to mine.

I feel the warmth radiating from him, the gentle pressure of his fingertips under my chin as they graze across my jaw. I close my eyes, preparing myself for the moment his lips meet mine as my heart catches in my throat.

Instead, there's a soft pressure against my cheeks, the gentlest kiss before he pulls back and does it to the other side. I keep my eyes closed, my breath stuttering as he kisses the corner of my mouth again. I've always been proud of how strong my legs are but right now it feels like I'm going to collapse. I hold on to him, my hands gripping his arms as he kisses me again on the other side.

"Is this okay?" he asks, so close I can feel his breath on my skin.

I nod, every language I know leaving my mind completely. I'm unable to form a single thought that isn't *keep going*.

Although my eyes are still closed, I feel River pull back, the air changing as his face gets further from mine.

"I need to hear you say it, Amelie," he whispers, his thumb stroking across my cheek.

"It's okay," I tell him, opening my eyes so he can see I really mean it.

River looks over my face one last time before he presses his lips against mine. My fingernails dig into his arms as his body presses against mine, pulling him closer to me as he deepens the kiss. A tiny voice in the back of my mind screams that this is a terrible idea, but I ignore it.

Kissing River is better than I could ever have imagined.

His arm wraps around my back, holding me close as my hands move up to his neck. We should stop, I know we should stop, but it feels impossible when he's kissing me as if it's the last thing he'll ever do. River's hand travels down to the back of my leg, pulling it upward as I follow his lead and let him lift me. My legs cross around his waist as River holds me, still kissing me in a way that feels like he's been dying to.

This is more than just a kiss, and it's dangerous.

I pull back, even though it's the last thing I want to do. River chases me for another kiss, but stops when he realises the atmosphere has shifted. I tip my forehead against his, breathing heavily as I try to think of a good reason to keep going, but rationale floods my brain, and I have to let go of him.

I squeeze his arms, and River takes it as a sign to let go of me, gently placing me back down on the floor, but he still keeps his face pressed close to mine.

"We can't do that again," I tell him.

"It was just a kiss," he says, eyes searching mine.

I want to agree with him, to pretend that it was just practice for the performance, but we both know it was more than that. I don't know what

my feelings for River are, but I enjoyed that far more than I should have.

“This performance has to go well,” I tell him as I take a step backward. “Whatever this is,” I gesture between us. “I can’t do it right now.”

River nods, hands on his hips as he glances up at the ceiling before back at me again.

“Not right now doesn’t mean never,” he says, tilting his head.

I can’t stop the laugh that escapes me. Never in my nightmares would I have imagined River wanting more from our relationship, but the way he’s looking at me, the softness in his eyes laced with some indescribable feeling, it’s clear he does.

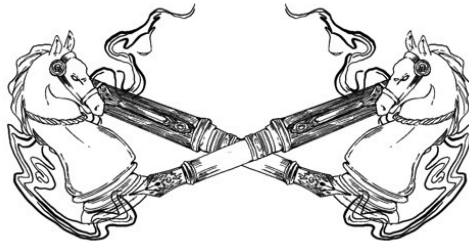
“It was just a kiss,” I repeat. “Don’t go falling in love with me after one kiss.”

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep,” he says, closing the distance between us.

River’s hand cradles my cheek as he kisses me again, and even though I know this will only make everything more complicated, I kiss him back.

Chapter 15

River



THE SECOND TIME WE HAVE TO KISS FOR THE PERFORMANCE, IT'S A BATTLE not to get carried away again. We keep it simple, a light press of our lips against each others before we finish the routine. I can't deny that I want more from her, though. That first kiss was better than I could have ever imagined. And it hurts my pride to admit I'd imagined it before, when we were younger.

I've always had confusing feelings toward Amelie. One moment I can't stop staring at her because of how talented she is, and the next I'm affronted by her disdain for me. I've tried to deny it for as long as we've known each other, but as we got older and she got better and better at her craft, it was hard to stop that admiration from growing. Dancing with her might be the best and worst thing that has ever happened to me, because I know I can't have her.

The third time we kiss, we do get carried away. The music looping over to the start again as I hold her in my arms.

"River," she says against my lips, and I can't help but smile. "We really have to stop."

"Where's the fun in that?" I ask, and Amelie shoves her fist against my chest as she pushes me away from her.

"This is a terrible idea." She covers her mouth with her hand, and if I were more insecure, I'd be offended.

But I know what she means, even without her saying it. All those years of our back and forth, her biting remarks, and sarcastic comments, taunting

me endlessly just to get here, at the worst possible time.

“You’re horrible,” she tells me, but the curve at the corner of her lips lets me believe she doesn’t mean it. “You’ve possessed me or something.”

I huff out a laugh as I move closer to her again, and she doesn’t back away. I place my hands on her waist, tilting my head to one side as I look down at her. She’s scowling, but there’s no ire in it.

“I’d like to do a lot more than possess you,” I tell her, and she punches my arm gently.

“We can’t do this in front of everyone,” she says.

“This?” I ask, tipping my head down to press a kiss against her neck.

She sighs for a moment before pushing me away again.

“Definitely not that,” she says. “I don’t know what this is, River, but no one can know.”

“You want me to be your little secret?”

“If you don’t shut up, the only secret will be where I’ve buried your body.”

I lean down to press my lips against hers, for the first time not while performing, but she gives me her cheek instead.

“Please, River,” she says, her voice dropping and losing all playfulness. “I just... I need us to focus on this performance. I can’t get distracted.”

I stop myself from making another joke. She’s right. We can’t let whatever might be building between us affect our performance in any way, not when it’s so important to her.

“We’re good,” I tell her. “We don’t have to tell anyone. And we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. We can skip the kiss during practice if you want.”

“I never said anything about that,” she mumbles under her breath.

I smile down at her, hoping to reassure her that our performance will be great no matter what we’re doing right now.

“We’re the two best dancers in this entire place,” I remind her. “Nothing is going to stop us.”

She nods, before wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head against my chest.

“Thank you,” she whispers, but it feels like I should be saying that to her instead.



“Could you type any louder?”

Amelie leans forward, glaring past Grayson as our lecturer keeps talking. She’s explaining something that I should be paying more attention to, but all I can focus on is riling Amelie up.

I tap each letter on my keyboard deliberately, making it as loud as possible as I type out nonsense. I’ll look over the notes and video later, because right now I just want to get under her skin the way she’s been under mine.

It’s been a few days since that first practice, and we’ve met every day since after classes to keep going. The routine is going well; we’re both picking up our parts expertly and working together in a way I never would have imagined before. It’s all too easy to give myself to Amelie, to trust in her ability to make the dance so much easier for me as she takes the lead, to take whatever parts of her I can get from our time together.

Once we enter the studio, it’s like we’re in our own world. Everything comes so naturally that I don’t have to overthink anything. I just flow with the music, holding her as she takes on the more difficult moves of the routine with my help. I’ve finally found a reason to keep dancing again, and I don’t want to lose it.

And although we only kiss for the sake of the routine, it’s sheer determination that keeps us from taking it any further. But Amelie said we need to stay focused, and that’s the easiest way to lose it.

When we’re anywhere else, in classes or with our friends, all of that disappears. We go back to the side of us everyone is used to, making digs at each other and acting like we can’t stand to breathe the same air. It just makes it all the more fun.

“She’s right, my guy. It’s kind of annoying,” Grayson says, shrugging his shoulders.

I stop for the sake of him, and because I’ve got what I wanted out of it anyway, as Amelie rolls her eyes at me.

“There’ll be a test next week,” the lecturer says. “Two essay questions from this list of five.”

She pulls up a slide with different questions, and I quickly scan them to figure out which ones will be easiest to accomplish. Quiet conversations break out around the room as everyone starts discussing the questions and test before we all get dismissed.

I pack up my things slowly, taking my time as Grayson nudges past me to leave the room. I expect Amelie to do the same, but she lingers, and soon the room is empty except for us. Moving closer to her, I lean against her desk, gazing down at her over the rim of my glasses while she pretends I don't exist.

"Haven't you got somewhere to be?" I ask her, knowing full well we have a studio reserved in twenty minutes. It's just enough time for us to get back to our rooms and change before we start practicing again.

"Hmm," she taps her finger against her chin, "no, don't think so."

"Thought we were practicing tonight," I say, giving in to whatever game she's playing.

She stretches her arms above her head, feigning a yawn as a strip of deep brown skin exposes itself in the gap between her pink T-shirt and skirt.

"I think I've practiced enough for the week," she says as she stands and gathers her things. "I was thinking of going into Paris tonight."

My head tilts to one side as she looks up at me.

"What's in Paris?"

"There was a guy last time at the club," she says, brushing her hand against my arm and fiddling with the cuff of my shirt. "Real hero, gave me his jacket and everything."

"Oh, really? Must have been handsome for you to remember him."

"He had a face only a mother could love," she says, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from laughing. "Anyway, I was thinking I should return his jacket. It's not polite to keep a stranger's belongings."

"Very impolite," I say, as I figure out where she's going with this. "And what time are you meeting the gentleman?"

"I was thinking around eight. Maybe get dinner or something; who knows where the night will take us. Sure hope he wears his glasses, too."

She gives me a coy smile, lifting her free hand to push the frames further up the bridge of my nose.

"That sure sounds like a date." I let my fingertips trail across the side of her hand.

“Could be,” she says with a shrug, looking up at me through long eyelashes. “If he wants it to be.”

“I think he definitely wants that.”

“Great,” she says, turning her hand so her fingers graze across my palm. “Then it’s a date.”

“I’ll have my driver wait outside for us,” I tell her, dropping my voice along with all pretence. If Amelie wants to go on a date, then it’s going to be the best date of her life.

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Chapter 16

Amelie



I TEAR THROUGH ALL THE CLOTHES IN MY WARDROBE, LEAVING MY ROOM looking like a cloud of pink has exploded. I love dressing up, I've never had issues with finding an outfit for any occasion. But nothing feels right for this date.

I don't know what came over me when I suggested we go out together. As much as I want us to focus on the performance, I also want to explore whatever *this* is. I've never felt like this before, this rush of excitement and giddiness at just being around someone. It's a confusing, overwhelming feeling, made even worse by the fact that it's because of River.

But, deep down, I think if it was ever going to be anyone, it was going to be him. He's the only person who properly understands the dedication needed for ballet, who can empathise and experience all of it with me. And as much as I hate to admit it, he knows more about me than I could ever have guessed. All the things he said about me haven't just come from a couple of passing moments in classes. It's come from late hours in dance studios, waiting backstage at performances, sitting in a crowd of hundreds to watch a single dancer on the stage. It's come from River paying far more attention to me than I've ever realised.

I wish I could call Evie and Zena to my room and ask for their help, but whatever River and I are doing has to be a secret from everyone. It's still way too early, and maybe we're just caught up in practicing together and it'll all fade away once the performance ends. I'm not naive enough to

believe that whatever this fleeting happiness is will last forever, but I want to let myself enjoy it for now at least.

I've never thought of myself as someone who wanted to be in a relationship, but seeing the way Evie and Zena are with their boys, I can't deny I sometimes feel a pang of envy. Even if their situations are far more complicated than mine, fake relationships and denied feelings, they still have each other. I want to be cared for in the same way they are, have someone to share a suite at a nice hotel with, to call up at any time of the day, to sit with and enjoy the silence. I want to be wanted, just for me, not for what I show on a stage.

Maybe this will end disastrously, and maybe I'll hate River more than I ever have before if this performance goes wrong, but for now, I just want to pretend I'm a normal teenage girl, going on a date with a normal teenage guy. I don't want to think about the showcase, or about dancing, or the future, or anything that isn't simply how I feel when I'm with River now.

Looking through all of my clothes again, I settle on a pink corset midi dress that feels a good mix of casual and elegant. Although I told River I had plans to go into Paris, it was a lie, and he knew it. Judging by his text earlier telling me to be ready by eight so we could head in together, I'm sure he's managed to arrange something, even on short notice. I don't want to appear too eager, either with my clothing choices or by meeting him exactly at eight, so I take my time getting ready.

Once I'm reasonably late, but not enough for it to be considered too rude, I get a single question mark in a text from River, which I take as my sign to finally go and meet him. It's easy to slip away from my friends, Evie and Zena think we're practicing, just like we have for the whole week, so there's no excuses needed to explain my absence from them. I'm sure River's friends expect the same from him, too.

When I reach the iron gates that close off the university from the rest of the world, I spot River leaning against a black car, the same one that brought us back the night we left the club together. He's dressed in a dark grey suit, perfectly tailored, the fabric clinging to his muscles in all the right places. As always, the top button of his white shirt is undone, leaving a V shape that I want to trace my nails across. And he's wearing his glasses.

He's staring down at the ground but when he finally looks up at me, he does a double take, his mouth dropping open slightly. River approaches me, walking slowly as he stretches his hand out toward me.

“You look beautiful,” he says as I place my hand in his and let him lead me to the car.

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere,” I tell him, hoping he can’t feel my pulse racing.

“Can’t a guy give a beautiful girl a compliment?” River asks as he opens the door for me.

I get in, and he doesn’t close the door, hovering over me as he waits for my response.

“A guy certainly can, but that’s not what I see in front of me,” I trail my fingers across the base of his neck, moving them around to his nape as he dips his face closer to mine.

“What do you see then?” he says, voice low. “Let me guess. A handsome, talented, amazing dance partner?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of a performing monkey, but well done for trying.”

He presses a quick kiss to the inside of my wrist before he slips out of my grasp, laughing as he closes my door and gets in the other side of the car. It’s so fun to play with him, even more fun when he gives it right back. He leans over me to grab my seatbelt, fastening it before he does his own, and then the driver begins our journey.

“So, where are we going?” I ask, turning in my seat to face him, curiosity winning over me.

“There’s a great restaurant I’ve been wanting to go to.” He angles his body toward me, his knee grazing mine. “I came across it a week ago, but haven’t had the chance to go back yet.”

“Which arrondissement is it in?” I ask, glancing out of the window behind him as I wait for us to get closer to the centre of Paris. But then I notice we’re not heading in that direction at all. Instead, we’re going toward the airfield we flew out of last weekend when we went to Milan.

“More of a zone than an arrondissement,” he says, looking over at me with a glint in his eye.

“River, we can’t go to Milan for dinner.”

“Why not?” He shrugs. “The food looked great.”

I can barely hold back my smile as River takes my hand and brings it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back of it. Our hands stay joined together on the seat between us as the drive continues.

When we reach the airfield, the plane is ready. It's a short journey, only around an hour and a half, but we treat ourselves to a few snacks and drinks on the flight. River sits opposite me, watching me intently until I tell him to look away. It's strange having his eyes on me, feeling the weight of his stare as if he's physically pressing against me like when we dance.

It's still unbelievable that we're even here. If I went back just a few weeks ago and told myself I'd be on a plane to Milan for a date with River, I think I would have laughed loud enough to lose my voice.

I'm still not sure what I want from this, from getting closer to River. I'm sure it will help our performance, and that we'll dance better if we're more familiar with each other. But I'm worried getting too close to him will make me lose focus. I already made us skip practice today just for one night of fun. There's still plenty of time before the showcase, but that doesn't mean every second isn't vital.

"What are you thinking about?" River asks, tapping his foot against mine.

"What are we doing, River?" I ask, hoping he can give me an answer that sorts through all the confusion in my mind.

"We're going on a date," he says matter-of-factly, as if it's just something that simple. As much as I want it to be, we both know it's not.

River leans forward, reaching for my hand and I give it to him. He closes both of his over mine, brushing his thumb across the back of it as he speaks.

"We can figure out the rest later," he says quietly. "For now, let's just go eat some good food, and spend time with each other outside of a studio. That's all I want to do right now."

"But what about when we get back? This isn't real life."

"Why can't it be?" He rises from his seat to kneel in front of me, lifting one hand to cradle my cheek. "It feels pretty real to me."

I look into his eyes for any hint of a joke, or regret, or anything that might make me think he doesn't mean it, but there's nothing like that. Instead, there's a softness that I've never seen before, a gentle pleading look almost as if he does actually want this to be something real between us.

"I'm worried it'll complicate everything," I confess. "I don't like the way I've felt this week."

"How have you felt?"

I tip my gaze up to the ceiling, searching for the right words to tell him without exposing myself too deeply.

“Out of control. I don’t like that we keep getting distracted when we dance, or the fact that I actually think I do like it. You’ve made dancing fun, and I don’t know how to combine that with wanting to do well.”

“Shall I tell you a secret?”

I nod, unsure why he’s changing the subject. I feel silly for admitting how he’s made me feel just for him to talk about himself.

“I don’t enjoy dancing anymore.”

My eyebrows furrow as I look at him, his face sincere as he tells the truth.

“This past year, it hasn’t been fun for me. I do it because it’s an easy work out, and because it’s what I’ve spent so many years working on that it feels like a waste of time if I give up so easily. But you’ve made it fun, Amelie. I’ve never loved dancing this much before.”

I try not to hear something else underneath his words.

“This past week,” he continues. “I’ve loved meeting you at the studio every day. And it’s not just about kissing you although that’s a wonderful bonus,” he winks, and I roll my eyes, but I can’t stop a smile from blooming on my face.

“You’ve made me remember why I love dancing, why ballet is so important to me. Every time I see you dance, the way you make it look so easy when I know how hard you’ve worked, it does something strange to me here.”

He places his palm flat against his chest, curling his fingers slightly right above his heart.

“I don’t know what we’re doing exactly, Amelie. But I like it a lot, and I want to keep doing it. Whether that’s just practicing together, or whether it’s going on dates like this, I just want to keep doing stuff with you. And I hope you want that with me, too.”

I take a deep breath, letting his words sink in as I figure out how to respond. I do want that with him. I want to keep dancing with him, spending time with him, kissing him, and whatever else might happen. But I’m still worried I’ll mess up my one shot at getting into the summer intensive.

“I do want all of that,” I tell him, but he hears the hesitation in my voice as he leans closer. “But I’m scared, River.”

“I am, too,” he says quickly. “But if it feels right for both of us, we can’t let fear get in the way.”

He’s right. I want to give myself to him completely, let myself get carried away with him but something is still holding me back.

“I think,” I start, unsure of how I’m going to finish the sentence. “I think after today, we don’t go on any more dates.”

River nods, understanding even though we haven’t gone on our first date yet.

“I need to get this spot, River,” I say and he nods again. “And if I don’t get it because I’ve been distracted by you, I don’t think I could forgive either of us for that.”

“No more dates,” he says.

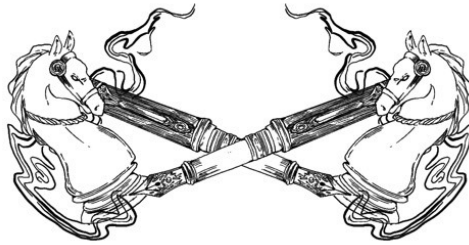
“But,” I add, and River perks up, sitting up slightly straighter. “I think we can still enjoy ourselves. Dancing with you has been fun for me, too. And I haven’t felt like that in a long time.”

“How about this?” he says. “Let’s not rush anything. When you’re ready for another date, I’ll be here. When you want to spend time with each other outside of practice, I’ll be here. Anything you want from me, you can have it, Amelie.”

I don’t say anything in response; I just bring his hands up to mine so I can kiss the backs of them and pretend it’s his lips instead.

Chapter 17

River



WHEN WE GET TO THE RESTAURANT, WE'RE SHOWN TO A TABLE NEAR A window, giving us a view of the streets of Milan. It's not a particularly famous place, and there's more of a homely feel to it, which is what caught my eye last week. The tables are all different shapes and sizes, the chairs don't match, and the walls are covered with family photos of the different generations that have worked here. Maybe I should have chosen somewhere more fancy for our first date, but this felt like the perfect place.

Amelie takes charge of ordering the food, picking out a few different choices because there's too many we both want to try. The old gentleman taking our order grins from ear to ear as we list off the dishes we want, nodding agreeably as he writes it all down.

"Would you like to move to a bigger table?" he asks.

"We're fine here, the window is nice," I reply with the basic Italian I know.

I'm not fluent in many languages, but I know enough to get by in various different countries, especially European ones.

"I'll bring them out for you slowly," he says, tucking his pen behind his ear and taking the menus from us.

"Thank you so much," Amelie tells him, and he gives her a fatherly smile before leaving.

"When did you learn Italian?" she asks, reaching across the table to fiddle with the cuff of my shirt.

“I never really learned it properly. Kinda just picked it up from being here a lot with my parents,” I explain, lifting my fingers slightly so my knuckles brush against her palm.

“You do the accent well,” Amelie says. “In French, too.”

“That one has come with practice,” I admit. “Never wanted to embarrass myself in front of you during ballet class.”

“In front of me?”

French was one of the first languages I picked up after English due to my parents spending a lot of time in Paris. At first, I settled for the basics, not caring that my heavy Americanised British accent would come out. But when I enrolled in ballet classes and properly met Amelie for the first time, I didn’t want her to hear me speak like that. It’s not something I’d get embarrassed about now. It’s only natural to not have a perfectly fluent accent when you barely know a language, but back then, I wanted to impress her.

“For some reason, younger me was very concerned about what you thought of me,” I confess, as her fingers curl under my cuffs and press against my skin, her palm resting against the back of my hand.

“And what about older you?” She tilts her head to one side, offering me a soft smile.

“Still am.”

“Why?”

I flip my hand underneath hers, intertwining our fingers together on the table.

“Do you know the first time I saw you?” I ask, ready to share something I’ve kept alone in my head for years.

“When you joined my class,” she says, matter-of-factly. It’s a testament to her character that she calls it her class, even when other students were there.

“My parents took me to watch Swan Lake right before I joined. It’s what made me want to learn ballet in the first place. We were in the lobby getting ready to go back in after the interval, and I heard a girl laugh so loud that it grabbed my attention straight away.”

Amelie’s eyes narrow as she thinks back to that moment, before we even knew the other existed.

“I noticed Evie at first, she was jumping around the place, imitating the dancers we’d seen. But then I saw you.”

Something clicks into place for her with that single sentence, and her mouth drops open slightly, as her fingers tighten around mine.

“You were there,” she says, half question, half statement.

“I was there. You started copying the dancers, too, and I guess you were just playing around with Evie but there was something about you that I couldn’t figure out. The way you moved, it looked exactly like the people on stage. I couldn’t understand why you were in the audience, when everyone should have been watching you on stage instead.”

“River,” Amelie whispers, putting the pieces together.

“I didn’t know you were in that class when my parents enrolled me.” I drag my thumb across the back of her hand, soothing myself. “It had been weeks since that performance, and I thought I’d never see you again. But there you were, as if I’d dreamed you up.”

“And then I was mean to you,” she says, her shoulders dropping as she thinks back to our first interactions.

“I gave it right back,” I tell her, squeezing her hand in mine, not wanting her to feel bad about something that happened when we were kids. “I hate that it made me like you even more. You were so passionate about dancing, and I wanted to be like that, too. I figured being mean was just part of being a ballerina.”

Amelie laughs, and I hope that she’s looking back on those moments fondly, just like I am.

“I really wanted you to like me,” I confess. “It was lonely sometimes being the only boy in class. I thought maybe we could have become friends.”

“And then I was mean to you,” she repeats, pulling her hand back from mine to cover her face with it.

“Amelie, you’ve been mean to me the whole time we’ve known each other.”

She laughs softly at that, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I’m sorry,” she says, reaching for my hand again and lacing our fingers together.

“I didn’t tell you that so you’d apologise. I don’t want an apology for any of it,” I tell her. “I just wanted you to know that. Maybe it would have been nice to be friends with you from the start, but I don’t think that would have helped me at all.

Every class, I wanted to get better and better, until I could impress you, have you admire me the same way I do you. I didn't think it ever happened, until you asked me to dance with you."

"Have you seen the other dancers at school?" she asks, raising her eyebrows, and I can only laugh. "You were my only option, River."

"I want to keep being that for you."

Amelie squeezes my hand in response.

"I love dancing with you, Amelie," I continue. "Nine-year-old me could only dream of being where we are right now."

She laughs, tipping her head back just like she did that first time I saw her. Amelie smiles at me, her thumb running across the back of my hand.

"Well, nine-year-old me would be having a heart attack if she knew this was happening," she jokes, gesturing back and forth between us with her free hand.

"And what about nineteen-year-old you?"

"Not quite a heart attack, but something close to it," she replies.

"I know you don't want to take this any further right now," I tell her, but it's more of a reminder to myself not to get too carried away. "And if this is the only date I ever get with you, I'm glad we at least had one."

"Me too," she says, her smile turning sad for the briefest of moments, her eyebrows furrowing.

I edge out of my seat, leaning over the table so I can finally kiss her for real for the first time, so I can get rid of whatever complicated emotion she's feeling right now. She moves closer too, our lips almost meeting before a booming voice announces his presence with our food.

"Ah, what a beautiful couple," he remarks, holding steaming plates of food over us.

I drop back into my seat, pressing my lips together in a thin smile as I look up at him and thank him for the food as he places it on the table.

"Young love is so sweet," he continues, standing with his hands on his hips. Amelie grins up at him, and he gives her that fatherly smile once again before sighing happily and leaving us to eat.

Amelie knocks her leg against mine beneath the table as I take in the various plates in front of us.

"There'll be time for that later, mon cœur," she says, reaching for her fork to grab a bite of pasta.

"Later, ma chérie."

I'll be holding her to that.



When we finish eating and are sent off with a bag of food to take back with us, we decide to wander around a bit before flying back home. Amelie keeps her hand in mine as we walk through the slowly settling streets with fewer people around than before. She sticks close to me, wrapping her arm around mine as the evening gets colder. I break us apart for a few seconds so that I can take my jacket off and drape it over her shoulders. That same feeling from the incident at the club hits me again, my heart skipping a beat as my jacket looks better on her than it ever has on me.

It's too easy to imagine doing this over and over again, too easy to believe that we're a real couple and not just pretending for one night. I want this to be more than just tonight, so I ask her something before I can think too much of it.

"What are you doing next week?"

"Hmm?" She hums, looking up at me with a tilt of her head.

"I'm attending a charity auction with my parents next Tuesday. I can bring a plus one." I say the words quickly, hoping she won't read too much into them. It's not a date. Just an excuse to spend more time with her outside of the studio.

"And you want that to be me?"

"Why not?" I shrug, glancing down at her. "It's technically not a date because my parents will be there."

"Ah, so you want me to meet your parents. What happened to not moving too fast?" she says with a glint in her eye.

"I want you to save me from the boredom of sitting alone with my parents while they talk to all their friends."

"Why not take Damien?"

"Love that guy, but I'd much rather go with you. My mom has been wanting to meet you, anyway." I don't wait for Amelie to question it before I explain. "She's the one that got us the shoe appointment. She's just curious about you."

Amelie ponders it for a moment as we keep walking, and the silence would be stifling if her hand wasn't still in mine, our fingers locked together as her nails scrape against the back of my hand.

"Okay, I'll come," she says, stepping in front of me so we're facing each other.

The streetlights glow around us like a spotlight, illuminating Amelie so I can see her pretty face more clearly. There's warmth in her eyes and pain in my chest, and her hand is in mine, and everything about it is so overwhelming I lose my breath for a second.

It's brought back as soon as Amelie tips her head up and presses her lips against mine. It's not for a performance, or rehearsal, or any kind of practice. On this street, on this night, under the moonlit sky, this kiss is just for us.

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Chapter 18

Amelie



“I’M BORED,” EVIE GROANS, DROPPING HER HEAD AGAINST THE DESK. “Let’s go watch a movie or something instead.”

“Have you finished your essays?” Zena asks, leaning back in her seat and stretching her arms above her.

“Yes...” Evie replies in the most suspicious way possible, and she’s so bad at lying, it’s comical.

I nudge her arm with mine, encouraging her to keep going, but I know once she’s given up, it’s already over.

“Fifteen more minutes, then we can go to my room,” I tell her, as she lifts herself off the desk just to slump her entire body against mine.

“You can survive for fifteen minutes,” Zena tells her, pulling Evie off me and setting her upright.

The three of us have been set up in the library for a few hours now. River and I realised it wasn’t feasible to practice every single day so we’ve decided to take one day a week to focus on homework, or whatever else we need to do that isn’t rehearsing. Our weekends are free as well, but if both of us are still at university and don’t have anything else going on, we practice on those days, too.

We haven’t kissed outside of practice since that night in Milan a few days ago. We haven’t talked about it either. When we reach that point in the routine, it’s the most chaste kiss possible, even though I want more. But I was the one who told River we can’t get carried away, and he’s been very

good at sticking to that. I'm already distracted by thoughts of him, so taking whatever our relationship is now any further, would only make it worse.

"Amelie, what about you?"

Case in point, as I don't know what Zena is asking of me right now.

"What about me?" I ask, closing my books and stacking them on top of each other like Evie and Zena have done already.

"Are you giving up too?"

"What happened to fifteen minutes?" I ask both of them.

"It's been ten," Evie explains. "Close enough."

"Guess I am then," I say, packing up my things into my bag.

We walk back to the dorms slowly, taking our time to breathe in the fall air after being locked inside for so long. The leaves around campus are slowly starting to change, trees shedding as winter approaches. When it snows, the university looks like a palace from a fairytale, making it my favourite time of year.

"Any balls to attend this weekend?" Evie asks Zena as we reach the dorms and make our way to the common room.

"No, but there's an auction on Tuesday."

"Is it in Paris?" I ask her, wondering what the chances are that there could be multiple charity auctions taking place on the same day throughout Europe.

"Yeah, at the Louvre," she confirms, and I have to force myself to keep walking.

"Sounds fun," Evie says, before asking what she'll be wearing.

I accepted River's invitation without thinking that Zena would more than likely attend, too. She's always taking part in different charitable events, making appearances so that there's good press about her and her family. It's not like River and I will be all over each other in front of his parents, but how else can I explain why I'll be there with him?

But if I don't tell Zena and she sees us there together, maybe it'll be even harder to explain my way out of it.

"I think I'm going to the same one," I tell her before I can think better of it. "River's going with his parents, and invited me."

"Hold on," Evie says, breaking away from us to look out the window before coming back. "Sorry, I had to check if pigs were flying."

I shove her away from me playfully as Zena swats at her arm, laughing softly to herself.

“What do you mean River invited you to go somewhere with him? You hate the man.”

“I tolerate him now,” I shrug, as she links her arm through mine and keeps us walking further into the building. “It’s more like his mother invited me. She got us the appointment in Milan so she wants to meet me.”

This time it’s Zena’s turn to question reality as she steps in front of me and holds my face between her hands, moving it from side to side before pressing the back of her hand against my forehead.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asks, eyebrows furrowed together.

“You are both so dramatic,” I poke my tongue out at Zena and she takes her hands off me as she does the same back.

“One day you hate him, the next you’re dancing together, the next you’re meeting his parents. Forgive us, Amelie, but that’s a bit of a wild path to take,” Evie says, moving to stand next to Zena so they’re both facing me.

“It’s really not a big deal,” I say, pushing between them to keep walking. “It’s not like it’s a date or anything.”

“Neither of us said anything about it being a date,” Zena points out, as the two take up either side of me. “What’s been going on in those practices?”

“I wonder,” Evie instigates, the two of them giggling together at whatever absurd thoughts they’re having.

“This conversation is over. Both of you can make up whatever stories help you sleep at night.”

“Is River helping *you* to sleep at night?” Evie jokes, and my cheeks warm at just the implication of it.

“Last time I checked, both of you were in weird situationships, not me,” I say, hoping to turn the attention on either of them instead of me.

“Layth and I aren’t in a situationship. He’s my friend.”

“Understatement of the century,” Evie laughs before teasing her more about Layth.

With the heat momentarily taken off me, I take my phone out of my pocket to text River, knowing that both girls will be telling Layth and Damien about our outing this weekend.

AMELIE

Zena is going to the same auction next week

And somehow the girls have come to the conclusion that we're dating

RIVER

Are they wrong?

AMELIE

Now is not the time to argue semantics

RIVER

But that's one of my favourite things to do with you :(

AMELIE

You're ridiculous

I'm just warning you in case Damien gives you the same inquisition that I just got

RIVER

I don't think Damien cares all that much about my love life, but thanks for the heads up

Love life.

Two words shouldn't fluster me so much but they do, and I put my phone away so I can't see what else he might say. It's just a common phrase, but it feels like a lot more coming from him. I know River wants more out of whatever relationship is budding between us, but I've made it clear I can't give myself full to him like that yet. However, it's getting a lot harder to silence the voice in my head that wants to do exactly that.



As to be expected, the Hall Napoléon is decorated beautifully for the event. Under the Pyramid, the space has been transformed from a museum entrance to an extravagant space. Tables and chairs are covered in swathes of white fabric, perfectly complimenting the white concrete and beige stone. The light of the setting sun and the buildings around us illuminate the space in shades of yellow and orange, and I'm already anticipating how much prettier it will look once the sky turns darker.

River and I are shown to our table, and I thought I'd have some time to settle myself before meeting his parents, but they're already there. His mother is even more beautiful in person, long dark waves cascade over her shoulder, emphasising the asymmetrical cut of her black dress. She stands when she sees us approaching, walking to meet us halfway before she pulls River into a hug and kisses his cheek.

"You get more handsome every time I see you," she says, voice soft but there's a hidden power beneath it.

He does look handsome. His suit is perfectly tailored to fit him, the sharp lines emphasising his athletic body. It's a black-tie event and though I've seen River dressed up many times before, there's something different about it tonight.

"You must be Amelie." His mother directs her attention to me once letting go of him.

She wraps her arms around me as if it's not the first time we've ever met, and kisses me on both cheeks. It's comforting, in a strange way, to be held by this woman who seems to know a lot more about me than I do her.

"It's lovely to meet you, Mrs Campbell."

"Oh, please. I'm not that old yet. Call me Winter." She takes hold of my hand and leads me to the table, gesturing for me to take the seat next to hers.

I glance at River to see if he's following after me, but he's still in the middle of the hall, one hand in his pocket as he runs the other through his hair, while talking to his father. The conversation seems tense, River's fingers tightening around strands before he drops his hand and nods, agreeing to whatever the two are talking about.

Winter doesn't give me a chance to breathe; she bombards me with questions, and while I can give her enough attention to answer them as politely as possible, most of it is focused on River. His seat next to mine remains empty as multiple men come over to greet him and his father, standing off to the side.

River has a polite smile plastered on his face but it's so different from the one I've gotten to know over the past few months. There's no warmth in it, and his every action looks robotic as he pretends to laugh at whatever boring jokes his father's acquaintances make.

As if he can feel me staring, his eyes dart to mine for a split second, and then he does smile for real, his gaze lighting up. He takes his hand out of

his pocket and fans his fingers toward me in a small wave that's undetectable to the men standing around him, and wholly for me.

Winter turns her attention to the men too, and lets out a heavy sigh.

"I think he needs saving," she hints to me, with a small grin.

I'm not sure what River has told her about our relationship, but she might be getting her own ideas already.

"I'll go and get him," I tell her, smoothing out my dress as I stand.

I keep fidgeting with my dress as I walk toward them, my fingers curling around the silk that grazes the tops of my legs. I've never been nervous to talk to River before, but there's something about his father I can't quite put my finger on that makes me feel uneasy on River's behalf.

River does a double-take as I get closer, and it only takes him a second to excuse himself from the group. His steps are hurried but still measured as he approaches me, his smile transforming his whole face and making him look brighter, the dark cloud that was hanging over him in that small space gone completely now that he's out of it.

"Your mother asked me to save you," I tell him when he's in front of me.

His fingers fold around my hand for a second before we both remember we're in public, and he drops it. Some part of me wishes he would hold my hand in front of everyone, that we can go back to those dark streets of Milan where we were just two normal people holding hands under the moonlit sky.

"Of course she did," he laughs, reaching for my hand again so he can tuck it into the crook of his elbow as he pivots us to walk back to the table.

It reminds me of the night of the welcome dinner, when he escorted me to my room. The smell of his aftershave lingered on me as I got ready for bed that night. It's been on my skin ever since we started dancing together, and I don't want it to go away.

"Does that happen every time?" I ask him, knowing this isn't the first event he's attended with his parents since we started at d'Étoiles.

"Pretty much. Usually it's my mom who comes to my rescue, but I'm glad it's you this time," he says softly.

I want so badly to kiss him, to tell him to forget everything I said about taking it slow, because I want him in this moment, in every moment. River must be thinking the same as he changes our direction, away from the tables

and toward the back of the hall, into one of the hallways where no one else is around.

He takes us deeper into the darkness, his hand clinging to mine, our steps hurried as we try to get away from the room. Once we're far enough in, he spins me until my back hits the cold wall, but that's not why goosebumps erupt across my skin.

River lifts his free hand to cradle my cheek, his thumb stroking across it as his eyes dart down to my mouth.

"Can I?" River asks, and as soon as I nod, his lips are on mine.

It's just like the kiss in Milan, but somehow better. River holds me close to him, his heartbeat picking up as his body presses against mine. We shouldn't be doing this, but I'm tired of pretending this isn't what I want.

I want River in whatever way I can have him. Whether it's as a dance partner, or someone I can kiss whenever I want, or something way more. I want it all with him.

"Wow, this is unexpected."

River tears away from me, tilting his body to shield me from the owner of that familiar voice.

"Layth, this isn't what you think," River tells him.

"I don't really care," Layth responds, deadpan. "You're both adults."

"You cannot tell Zena," I rush to say, already knowing that there's no secrets between the two.

"But I tell her everything," he replies.

In the year and a few months that I've known Layth, I have had zero issues with him but right now he is my worst enemy. I push past River to reach Layth, pointing my finger at his chest as I glare up at him.

"If you tell her, I will actually kill you," I threaten, though I don't think he takes me seriously, considering I'm craning my neck to look up at him and he could easily kill me first if he wanted to.

"She'll get it out of me even if I don't tell her. She always knows when I'm hiding something..."

"You two are really something," River comments from behind me. "Just let Amelie tell Zena when the time is right. Keep it a secret for as long as you can."

Layth shrugs, saying nothing else before he walks away, leaving River and I to sit with the aftermath of what's just happened.

“I don’t think he’ll tell her,” River says, trying to comfort me, his hand circling my wrist. “He’s not a bad guy, really.”

“I know he’s not,” I sigh, as he steps in front of me, pulling me into his arms as I rest my head against his chest. “I have to tell her tonight.”

“If that’s what you want,” he says. “Are you okay with that?”

“Are you?” I ask. “This is about both of us, not just me.”

“Whatever is good for you, is good for me. I don’t mind if the whole world knows. But you wanted to take this slow, and keep me your dirty little secret—”

I knock my head against his chest and he feigns hurt before he continues.

“I’m fine with whatever you choose to do, Amelie,” he reassures me.

“This is going to be such an awkward conversation,” I groan, burying my face in his shirt as if I can hide away in there forever and avoid this. “We can tell the others later, but just let me talk to Zena first.”

“We can do it together if you want,” he suggests but I shake my head.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go find her now and tell her.”

River nods as I unwrap myself from him. He gives me one last quick kiss before hanging back and letting me go ahead to find Zena.

I don’t know how I can explain to her what I’m doing with River, when I don’t even know myself. This was never meant to happen. I was only supposed to dance with him in the showcase, tolerate him until we performed and I got a spot at the summer intensive. I was never meant to crave being by his side, being held by him, kissing him. I was never meant to start falling for him.

I speed-walk toward Zena and Layth’s table. They’re surrounded by people with vaguely familiar faces, likely connected to the royal family in some way, but I’m not entirely sure who they are. Layth sees me first and nudges Zena to look in my direction. She lights up when she sees me, and I smile as best as I can even though I’m crumbling inside.

“Can I borrow you for a second?” I ask her, skipping all formalities and greetings.

“Of course. Is everything okay?” Zena stands, taking my hand in hers. “I’ll be right back.” She tells Layth as she leads us away from the table.

We walk toward the bathroom, the safest space for a private conversation, and once we get inside, we both check the cubicles to make sure no one else is in here with us.

“What’s going on?” She asks, eyes scanning my face and body to check if anything is wrong. “Did River do something to you?”

“No, he hasn’t done anything.” I shake my head, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. “It is about him, though.”

I take my hand away from hers as I step back, turning to face the mirror instead of looking at her. I press my hands to the countertop, staring down at them as my nails drag against it and I clench my fingers into a fist. Zena rubs a hand across my back, gently urging me to get the words out.

“I think we’re dating,” I confess, blurting the words out before I can properly think about what I’m saying. “Or seeing each other, or just kissing, or I don’t know what we’re doing actually and that’s the worst part of it.”

Her hand keeps moving across my back in slow, steady circles that soothe my racing heart. It all feels too real all of a sudden. Saying what River and I have been doing out loud, to someone else, is making reality hit and it’s as if the room starts to spin around me.

“Breathe, Amelie,” Zena says, her voice calm, as she dips her head closer to mine. “Breathe.”

“This is so dramatic for no reason,” I splutter out, a laugh catching in my throat before it turns into a sob. “I don’t know what’s happening, Zena. I don’t know what we are, or if I want more from him. And what about the showcase? What if we get so caught up in whatever’s happening that we get distracted, and it all goes terribly wrong?”

“First, you are correct, this is very dramatic,” she says, as she uses her other hand to turn my head to face her. “Second, I can’t do this alone, let me call Evie.”

She pulls her phone out of a hidden pocket in her dress.

“Wow, it has pockets,” I state the obvious, and she pulls out the lining on both sides to show me said pockets.

“Isn’t it great?” She tucks them back in before video calling Evie, her face popping up on the screen just a few seconds later.

We position ourselves so the two of us are in frame as Zena explains to her what I’ve just said but in a more succinct and less dramatic way. Evie’s response is a loud, “I knew it!”

“We can talk about you being all-knowing later,” Zena says, dragging Evie’s attention back to the actual matter at hand—my relationship that’s not quite a relationship. “What are we going to do with our girl?”

“Well, how does River feel about all of this?” Evie asks.

“About what?”

“Does he think it’ll be a problem for the showcase? Or that you’ll get too distracted, or lose sight of what you truly want at the end of all this?”

“No,” I say quietly. “I told him all of that, and he said we can do whatever I’m comfortable with. But that’s what’s confusing me. I’ve never done anything like this before. He was my first kiss.”

“That’s so cute,” the two squeal at the same time, and Zena wraps her arms around me in a half-hug, half-headlock position. “What was it like?” She asks, glee in her voice.

“It was really nice,” I tell them. “The routine has a kiss at the end so I said we should get it over and done with. I was expecting him to just make it quick, but he kissed my cheeks, the corner of my mouth, all over my face before he even touched my lips.”

“That’s so romantic,” Zena says, her grip tightening around me as she shakes me, some form of cuteness aggression taking over before she lets go.

“Mine and Damien’s first kiss was nothing like that,” Evie laments.

She’s never actually told us how far her fake relationship with Damien has gone, and I assumed they hadn’t even kissed, but I guess not.

“I want that story later,” Zena tells her, taking the words right out of my mouth. “Amelie, are you happy?”

It’s not the question I expect, but the answer comes instantly.

“I am,” I confess. “The way I feel when I dance with him, I can’t even describe it. Every moment we’re together, I just feel light, like I don’t have to worry about anything, even the showcase.”

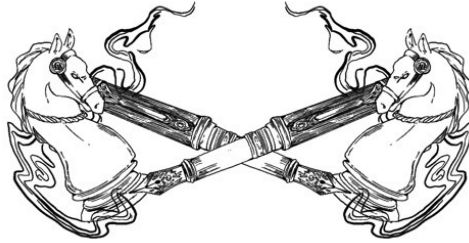
Evie and Zena share a look, both of them smiling at me.

“Then let yourself be happy,” Evie says. “You’re both insanely dedicated to ballet. I don’t think being together will distract either of you. If this is what you want, and I think it is, then let yourself enjoy it.”

Zena nods in agreement, taking my hand in hers again and squeezing our fingers together. I’m not sure whether this will be a huge mistake I’ll regret later, or one of the best decisions I ever make. Regardless, I know I have my girls by my side, whatever happens.

Chapter 19

River



IT'S BEEN OVER TWENTY MINUTES SINCE AMELIE AND ZENA DISAPPEARED into the bathroom. Long enough that Layth has taken Amelie's seat at our table while he waits for Zena to come back.

"I didn't tell her," Layth says, fiddling with the cutlery and lining it up perfectly next to the charger plate.

"You would have," I sigh, taking a sip of water. "Nothing we can do about it now, she's telling Zena anyway, and probably Evie, too."

"Do you want them to know?" He asks, surprisingly talkative tonight.

"I don't care who knows. Just would have been nice to do it on our own terms, I guess, once we'd figured out what we're even doing."

"So, you're not together?"

"I think this is the most questions you've ever asked me in our entire friendship," I joke, and he just shrugs in response. "We are, but we aren't. It's a little complicated right now."

"Do you like her?"

"Of course I do." I've never been more sure of anything.

"Then what's complicated?"

"Are you really asking me this as if you're not in love with the princess but doing nothing about it?"

He goes silent, his stoic face shifting for a second as a fleeting emotion passes over it.

"It's different for me and Zena," is all he says, giving no further explanation before he stands and retreats to his own table.

“Where’s Amelie?” Mom asks, and I’m wondering the same thing.

She’s been gone for so long now. I’m not sure how much detail she’s giving the girls, whether she’s telling them all about our date in Milan, or our practice kisses that turned into so much more. I hope she hasn’t said too much. Those moments together in the studio feel sacred, when we’re in our own world with no outside noise to bother us.

“She’s with her friend,” I tell her, giving as short an explanation as I can.

An announcement comes over the speakers that the auction will start soon, and my leg bounces restlessly under the table as I look toward the bathroom again. A few seconds later, Amelie and Zena appear, hands joined together as they walk through the hall. They part as they get closer to the tables, Zena going toward Layth while Amelie comes to me.

She drops into the seat next to mine, her hand finding mine under the table as soon as she’s sat.

“You okay?” I ask, leaning closer to whisper into her ear.

Amelie pulls back slightly to smile at me, her gaze soft as she takes me in.

“I’m great,” she says quietly, her fingers tightening around mine. “I’m really happy, River.”

“Me too,” I tell her, my nervous heart settling at hearing those words.

I press a quick kiss to her cheek, almost grazing the corner of her mouth, right as the auctioneer starts to speak. We spend the rest of the night with our hands joined under the table, her leg pressed against mine, and our hearts beating in sync.



Although Damien is proposing to Evie tomorrow, he’s insisted that we go into Paris tonight. It’s been over a week since the auction, and he hasn’t mentioned a thing about Amelie and me being together. I can only thank Amelie for having friends that are so good at keeping secrets.

“Let me see the ring again,” I ask Damien, as we sit in the back of his car.

He pulls it out of the inside pocket of his jacket, opening the black velvet box to reveal a diamond ring that's been in his family for generations. I take it from him, holding the small band between my fingers to get a better look at it.

It doesn't look like the kind of ring Evie would wear, but I guess their preferences haven't been taken into consideration for any of this. I can imagine Amelie wearing it, though. Can almost see the silver band set against her ring finger after I've asked her the question.

"It's nice," I say, handing it back to him, and trying to shake that image out of my head.

Even though we've decided to just do whatever feels best for us, we still haven't put a name to it. I suppose there isn't really a label for two people who used to hate each other, but now have to dance together, and that dance includes a kiss that both of them got a bit too carried away with, and now there's strange feelings developing, and they're kissing outside of practice. Whatever the name for that might be, I like it far too much. A heavy sigh escapes me as I wonder what this will end with, because I know it has to end at some point—everything does.

"You good?" Damien asks, tucking the ring safely back into his pocket.

"Just tired," I feign a yawn.

I can't tell my best friend what's really going on. That I think I'm too far into something that feels like the worst and best thing at the same time. That I'm falling for the girl I've spent most of my life complaining to him about.

"Amelie's really got you working," he jokes, and I can only let out a pathetic breath of laughter in response.

Thankfully, we reach our destination before Damien can ask any more questions. I'm not entirely sure where he's dragged me to; he just said he had to do something before tomorrow and asked me to come with him. We get out of the car, and I look around to see what might have caught his interest in the area, but there's nothing.

"What's the plan?" I ask, still searching around to figure it out.

"That is." He points down the street toward a tattoo shop.

I stare at him, wondering how I didn't notice my friend getting swapped for a stranger who gets tattoos.

"You're not," I say as he starts walking toward the shop. "A tattoo, Damien? For what?"

We stand outside the shop, Damien with his hand on the door as I watch him. There's an expression on his face I can't quite read, something I've never seen before from him. I've been friends with him for our entire lives almost, and he's never mentioned wanting a tattoo before. I wonder what else he could be hiding from me.

"Just something I need to do," he says, and it only leaves me with more questions.

I follow after him as he enters, the artist greeting him before showing him to a bed near the back of the small shop.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"You don't need to hold my hand, River. I'm a big boy now."

"Okay, don't ask me to go with you the next time you want to watch a horror movie then."

"That's a completely different scenario," he says, his voice going slightly higher. "Just wait there, it won't take long."

I shrug and do what he says, taking a seat near the blacked-out window. Art lines the wall, an eclectic mix of what I'm assuming the different artists here have created together. I've never really thought about getting a tattoo, but maybe it's something to consider. A lot of these designs look pretty cool.

RIVER

Have you ever wanted to get a tattoo?

AMELIE

Have you ever thought of opening a conversation with hello?

I stifle my laugh, hoping Damien doesn't look over and ask why I'm smiling at my phone.

RIVER

Good evening, Amelie. May I ask you a question?

AMELIE

Go ahead

RIVER

Have you ever wanted to get a tattoo?

AMELIE

Can't say I have

RIVER

What would you think if I got one?

AMELIE

That's your choice to make

I don't care what you do with your body

RIVER

I'd thought you'd be more concerned about my body

You seem to like it

AMELIE

I'm blocking you

I cover my smile with a closed fist, almost considering going outside so I can call her and hear her voice instead. But that will definitely lead to Damien wondering what I'm up to.

RIVER

I won't say anything like that again

AMELIE

You're a terrible liar even through text

Why are you asking anyway? Are you getting one?

I wonder if Damien has told anyone else about his plan for today. Considering he didn't even tell me until we were here, I highly doubt it.

RIVER

Just curious

And not right now

AMELIE

Not right now doesn't mean never

Her words echo mine from after our first kiss, and I wonder if she thinks about it as much as I do. That single phrase feels like it's defining our whole relationship, something close to feeling solid but still covered with a thin layer of uncertainty. I can only hope that layer disappears, leaving us with nothing but open possibilities.



“We’ve already set up some meetings for Q4 and Q1 next year,” my father says as soon as I answer his call. I sit up straighter at my desk and pull up my calendar on my laptop to note the dates.

He lists them off, starting with two general ones in January, a potential merger meeting in February, one fiscal reporting meeting in March, and three in April. It doesn’t even take me a second to realise that the April ones are the same week as the showcase.

“Do I need to attend all of them?” I ask.

He knows I have the showcase, and while he’s not completely opposed to me taking part, everything I do is on the condition that I work with him when he needs me to. I’m afforded the lifestyle I have by going along to meetings and events with him, playing the role of interested son who can’t wait to get involved in his father’s business, when that’s the furthest thing from reality.

“Of course,” he says, as if I’m foolish for asking.

“The ones in April, I’m not sure if I can make them. I have other commitments.”

“Well, you can reschedule them. This is more important.”

“It’s the showcase. I can’t reschedule that. They’ve got dress rehearsals planned for the week leading up to it, and I need to be at them.”

He lets out a heavy sigh that feels like it’s pressing down on me even through the phone.

“Figure out your priorities, River,” he says before hanging up without another word.

I throw my phone onto the desk before burying my head in my hands. There’s no way I can miss the dress rehearsals—they’re just as important as the performance. We won’t get our costumes until closer to the time, and dancing in them will be completely different from how we’ve been practicing.

It’s out of the question to let Amelie down like that. She’s put so much trust in me to dance with her, and I can’t take that for granted. No matter how much the pressure from my father feels like a burden, it’s nothing

compared to the pressure that feels like a weight pressing down on my chest when I think of disappointing Amelie.

My phone vibrates on the desk, and when I turn it over, it's like she's been reading my mind.

AMELIE

Ready to practice?

RIVER

Yeah, I'll meet you there

I stand, steadying myself as I get changed into my practice clothes before I leave my room and head for the studio. I'll need to figure out a way to avoid those meetings once April comes around, but for now I just want to see my girl.

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Chapter 20

Amelie



I'VE ALREADY BEEN IN THE STUDIO FOR AN HOUR WHEN RIVER ARRIVES. MY last class of the day was cancelled so I came early to get a head start. The past few months have been a whirlwind of practicing and studying as winter break draws nearer. River and I are both leaving the university for break, so we won't be able to practice, but we're already at a comfortable spot with the routine.

We've rehearsed it countless times, to the point where both of us could do it with our eyes closed. Our bodies have learned how to talk to each other without any words, his hand finding my waist at all the right moments, his arms lifting me with precise timing as I leap. The others still think the hours we spend together are for practicing, but it's really because this is the one place we know we won't be disturbed.

Although Zena and Evie know about our relationship, the others don't. Well, Layth does too, but he doesn't talk to the guys enough to tell them anything so I believe our secret is safe with him from them. It still feels too new to tell everyone about, and I don't think I've even properly told River how I feel.

I hope he can read my mind; into all the quiet moments we spend together lying on the floor of the studio as music plays over the speaker. When we're with our friends, we go back to how we used to be, making comments that have the others rolling their eyes, and telling us to stop arguing. It's a game for both of us, one we used to play against each other, but we're now teammates.

I continue dancing as River approaches me, dropping his bag on the floor and kicking his shoes off. He strips his outer clothing off, leaving him in a tight-fitting grey T-shirt and lighter grey tights, highlighting all his muscles. He fits behind me easily, his hands landing on my waist as we let the music guide us to finish the dance together.

River doesn't let go of me once it's done. Instead, he folds his arms around my waist, dipping his chin so it rests on my shoulder. He places a gentle kiss on my neck as I reach up with one hand to hold his nape, while the other rests on his arms. We stay like that for a while, and I wish I could take a picture of us in this moment. I settle for looking at us in the mirror, memorising as much as I can—the weight of him against me, the warmth covering my back, the citrusy woody scent of his aftershave.

I run my nails across his scalp, gently urging his face closer to mine as I turn to press my lips to his. He smiles into the kiss, his teeth clashing against mine for a second, leaving me giddy.

“How was your day?” he asks, turning me in his arms so I'm facing him. I lace my hands together at the back of his neck, playing with the overgrown strands of hair that tell me he needs a haircut soon.

“It was fine,” I tell him. “I've been looking forward to this, though.”

“Me too,” he says, leaning down to kiss me again. River doesn't let me reach up to him when I'm wearing my pointe shoes. Says I should save my energy for dancing instead of something he can give me so easily. It's all too well he's said it because my feet are hurting a lot more than usual today. I try to hide my wince as we shift backward, but River hears it anyway.

“What's wrong?” he asks, concern lining his face.

I run my fingers across his forehead, down his nose, trying to erase that expression, but he doesn't let it go.

“My shoes just hurt a lot today,” I tell him.

“Let me look,” River says before he goes to the corner of the room to retrieve a small stool.

I sit down, taking my shoes off to see spots of blood around my toe pads. They're worn down, and probably needed replacing a while ago but they fit perfectly. I didn't want to bother getting new ones and going through the annoying period where I have to adjust to them before they properly mould to my feet, so I've been putting it off.

River glances down, letting out a deep exhale as he moves to the other side of the room. He rummages around in one of the drawers, pulling out a

first aid kit before he comes back to me.

He kneels down and suddenly I've never felt more self conscious. I don't want him to see me like this. Don't want to expose the bruised and calloused parts of me that probably matched the view of me he used to have, when I was nothing but harsh to him.

"You don't have to do that." I lean down, trying to stop him, but he ignores me.

He gently peels off the toe pads, discarding the pieces of tape that cover my feet from past wounds. He does it all like it's the most normal thing on the planet, as if he's helped me a million times before. He acts like he's been in my room every night, going through the same routine, removing all the parts keeping me together.

River runs his hand across my ankle, heel, sole, until he takes it in his hand. Heat crawls up my cheeks. I don't like this, it feels too intimate, so I try to break the silence.

"Didn't your parents ever tell you it's rude to stare," I attempt to joke, to bring back our usual fieriness. I want him to say something back, a snarky quip, a sarcastic joke, anything at all to make me feel less exposed, but he doesn't.

Instead, he takes an alcohol wipe from the first aid box, swiping it across to clear the blood as I clench my teeth. It stings, and although I've been doing this for years, the pain never lessens.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly, but carries on.

Once the blood is all cleaned off, he finds some ointment and starts dabbing it across every cut and scratch. Each action is delicate, the gentle way his fingertips brush across my skin, the light pressure as he angles my foot in whatever direction he needs. It's all too much.

"River, please stop," I bite out.

He does instantly, his jaw tensing as he looks up at me.

"Let me do this for you," he asks softly.

"It's disgusting. You don't need to."

He scoffs at that.

"Disgusting?"

"They're all cut up and bruised and ugly," I ramble, hoping he'll listen to me.

"Nothing about them is ugly. How can the thing that gives you so much strength, holds you up every day, and allows you to dance the way you do,

ever be ugly?”

His hand travels up my leg, squeezing my calf as he speaks.

“How can the thing that helped bring us together be anything but beautiful?”

I look down at him, trying to figure out what I can say in response, but there’s nothing. For years, I’ve tried to show everyone only the best parts of being a ballerina. The pretty dresses and practiced moves that make it all seem so fun.

But I’ve never exposed this part to anyone. Never told Evie or Zena or my parents that I spend most nights with my feet in a bucket of ice water, attempting to ease the pain as my feet throb. Haven’t shown them all the bandages, torn and bloodied after every time I dance, whether it’s on stage or in the studio. Haven’t shown the bruises and cuts, the callouses built up from constricting my feet into pointe shoes and putting my entire body weight on a block of wood. It’s all too ugly, too harsh, too much to explain.

But now River’s seen it. And he doesn’t seem to think of it that way at all.

He goes back to taking care of me, applying new bandages and securing them just tight enough that they won’t move, but not so much that it’ll hurt me. Once he’s done, he runs his hands over them, inspecting his work before he decides he’s done a good enough job. It’s probably all in my head, but it already feels ten times better.

River stands, discards the old bandages, and puts everything back where it belongs before he comes back to me. He presses a kiss to my forehead, and I close my eyes, exhaling shakily at the same time he does.

“No practice today,” he whispers. “Just stay with me. *Laisse moi prendre soin de toi.*”

I nod, too worried to speak and ruin the moment. He leaves me again, putting his outer clothes and shoes back on before he grabs my slippers from my bag and guides my feet into them. He tidies away the rest of my things, throwing both of our bags over his shoulder as he comes closer to me again. He reaches his hand out to me, and I give it to him without hesitation, intertwining our fingers as I stand, and we leave the studio.

I should be more worried about someone seeing us like this, but all I can think about is how nice all of this is. I like the idea of River taking care of me, holding hands as we walk through the hallways like a normal couple. I want all of that with River, more than I care to admit to him.

It's a weird in-between time of day where it's too late to see everyone getting out of their last class, but too early to see them all going to dinner either. The hallways are mostly empty, and anyone who does see us doesn't care enough to spare us a second glance.

I expect River to take me back to my room, but instead he guides me toward his. I've never been in this part of the dorms before, and my heart rate spikes at the thought of getting caught by Damien or Grayson. They must be back from their classes, and we're so close to their rooms that if one of them steps out into the hallway for even just a second, we'll be spotted.

I cling tighter to River, stepping closer to him as if that will turn me invisible. He glances down at me, confusion on his face before he understands my worry.

"It's this room, right here," he says, gesturing to the next door on the left.

He unlocks it, then presses his hand to the small of my back to usher me in. His room isn't what I expected. Pictures line the wall of his family, his parents together at premieres and on catwalks, with a smaller version of the boy I'm falling for attached to them. There's some of us, too. I don't remember half of these pictures being taken, but there's us in ballet classes together, on stage at performances together when we were younger. I'm surprised to see even a few from last year, of our group together as we started our new journey here. He has so many pictures of him and Damien growing up, and River is smiling brightly in all of them.

His desk is messier than I expected, with textbooks and notes scattered across it. He catches me looking and attempts to organise them into a neat stack, but stops when I can't hide my laughter.

"I've been slacking a bit," he gives as an excuse. "Needed to catch up."

I nod, giving him a wry grin as he shakes his head, holding back his own smile. River sits on his bed, pulling me down with him until we're both flat against it. He turns on his side to face me, and I do the same. He strokes a hand across my cheek, pushing stray curls of hair out of my face.

I graze my finger across his face, mapping out all the details of it in my mind. I don't know if we'll have more moments like this, so I want to keep as much of this one as I can.

River shifts closer to me, his arm curving around me as he pulls me in until my head is tucked under his chin. His thumb runs back and forth

across my cheek as he drops a kiss to the top of my head.

“I’ll order food for us,” he says, tipping his head back and tilting mine up so we can see each other. “Then I’ll check your bandages.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “Then we’ll sleep.”

He presses his mouth against mine before I can even realise what he’s said.

“I can’t sleep here,” I tell him, shaking my head.

His thumb keeps grazing across my cheek, and the motion makes me want to fall asleep right away so I can stop overthinking it.

“Why not?”

Because it’s too intimate, I want to say. Because if we do fall asleep together, and I hear your breathing in the middle of the night, feel your weight and warmth around me as I drift off, then I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to sleep without you again. Because I think I’ve fallen in love with you, and that was never in my plan.

“I need to go back to my room,” is all I say.

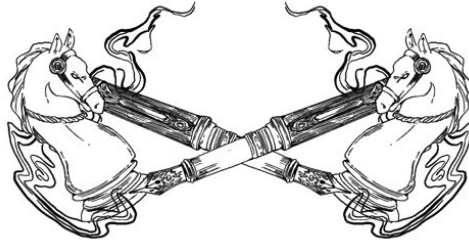
“Stay with me, Amelie,” he pleads quietly, the words ghosting across my skin. “Let me have one night with you.”

I should leave now, should tell him that this is all getting to be too much for me, that I can already feel myself shifting my priorities to spend time like this with him instead of practicing.

Instead, I nod, giving in to him because, in this moment, I can’t find it in myself to care about anything except the way River’s looking at me, like maybe he’s falling for me, too.

Chapter 21

River



I NEVER THOUGHT I'D LOOK FORWARD TO COMING BACK TO SCHOOL AFTER winter break, but spending the whole three weeks following my father around to meetings, dinners, and events makes university feel like a haven. At least Damien was with me for some of it, but even then, he's just as bored of it all as I am.

Both of us are glad to be back, and once we get settled into our rooms again, we go off to find the others. Amelie spent most of the break with Evie's family in Switzerland because her parents were off around the world somewhere, and she didn't want to join them. Although we weren't that far from each other, we never had time to meet up. Having that break apart only makes the thought of seeing her now feel so much better.

When we reach the common room, the three girls are already lounging on one of the sofas, showing their phones to each other as they point and chatter at whatever's on the screen. Layth is sat at our table, the chess board reset and waiting for us to start a game. Damien starts walking toward the girls, leaning down to kiss Evie on the cheek before he greets the other two.

I hold back, watching the scene unfold as Damien talks to them, all three smiling up at him until Amelie glances my way. Her smile changes then, to one that's just for me, her eyes almost sparkling with the way her face lights up as she looks at me. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from grinning too widely at her, but it feels like an impossible task.

I tilt my head to the side slightly, gesturing toward the door behind me that leads out of the common room and to the bedrooms.

“Is that River?” she says to the girls and Damien, but loud enough for me to hear it. “I need to go talk to him about our costume fitting.”

Evie and Zena giggle as she untangles herself from them, leaving Damien with a look of confusion, his eyebrows pinched together as he tries to figure out what’s funny about that.

She approaches me calmly, and I have to stand firm to not move closer to her, as if I haven’t been dying to hold her in my arms again.

“Costume fitting?” I ask when she’s in front of me.

“Yep, they’re next week. Very important.” She crosses her arms across her chest, and I’m glad her back is to everyone else because I want to be the only one who gets this smile from her.

“Guess we should go talk about that somewhere else then,” I suggest.

“Definitely needs to be a private conversation,” she confirms.

We leave the common room, Amelie walking in front of me as I turn to quickly roll my eyes at Damien, as if I’m being forced to go off somewhere else to get back to work. Damien shrugs as he sits next to Evie, taking Amelie’s vacated spot.

Once we’re out of eyesight of everyone else, I grab Amelie’s wrist and pull her back to me, turning her so her front collides with mine as I wrap my arms around her.

“I missed you,” I whisper, kissing the shell of her ear.

She sinks into me, her arms pressing tighter around me as she echoes the words back to me. She tilts her head up to kiss me, and I wish I could stay in this moment with her forever.

“We do actually have a costume fitting next week,” she says once we’ve parted.

“Just let me know when and where,” I tell her, before kissing her again.

It’s been months since we started whatever our relationship is, and we’re still no closer to naming it. I want her to be my girlfriend. I want to stop pretending in front of our friends. I want everyone to know we’re together. But Amelie has to be the one to do that for us. There’s more at stake for her here, and I don’t want to cause any problems by trying to classify us before she’s ready for that. Once the showcase is done, we can focus on that stuff, so for now I’ll just take whatever I can get from her, even if it is just stolen kisses in a dark hallway.



“What do you think?” Amelie asks, turning to face me.

She twirls the bottom of the dress as she moves around the room, and it looks like she’s floating, the elegance of every move only furthered by the soft fabric as it drifts around her. It’s a long pink dress that flows to the middle of her calves, with roses dotted around the bottom half. The sleeves cover her arms entirely, with ribbons around a white puffy piece of fabric that frames her elbows and shoulders. It suits her perfectly, and it’s made even better by the shy smile on her face that tells me how much she likes it, too.

“You look beautiful,” I say as my heart stutters.

There’s no one else here as the tailors move from room to room to deal with each dancer. It would be too easy to reach for Amelie, to pull her down into my lap and kiss her so she believes what I’m saying, but someone could walk in at any moment. Instead, I settle for running my hands across my thighs to stop myself from doing exactly that.

Amelie doesn’t seem to feel the same nervousness I do, and she takes the risk, moving closer until she’s standing between my legs.

“Mon cœur, do you like the dress or me?” She winds her arms around my neck, her hands finding the back of my neck as she fiddles with my hair.

“Can’t I like both?” I pull her closer to me, resting my hands on the back of her thighs as she leans down to kiss me.

She’s intoxicating. All rational thoughts leave my mind whenever I’m with her, logic escaping me completely as her lips move against mine. I could stay here forever with her, but we’re interrupted by a knock at the door, and pull apart from each other instantly.

“Have we made our decisions?” the tailor asks as he enters the room, completely oblivious to the moment he’s ruined.

“This one,” Amelie tells him, smiling brightly as she twirls the skirt with her hands.

“Perfect. I’ll pin it where we need, and we’ll get it ready for you.” He shifts his focus to me. “Any preferences on outfit?”

“Whatever you think will look best with that,” I tell him, getting a hum in response as he mentally considers the options while pinning Amelie’s dress.

He works expertly, marking spots where the dress needs to come in a little more so it fits Amelie perfectly. He leaves the room to retrieve some options for me, and Amelie disappears behind the changing screen to get back into her regular practice clothes. I pull my T-shirt over my head, stripping off my sweatpants until I’m down to my boxers and ready to try on whatever outfit they give me.

I scroll through my phone as I wait, ignoring follow-up texts from my father about upcoming meetings, until a small gasp grabs my attention.

“What are you doing?” Amelie yelps, half-hiding behind the screen as she shields her eyes with her hand, though her fingers are splayed. “Put some clothes on.”

“I would have guessed most people would say the opposite to me,” I joke, and she glares at me, something close to possessiveness flickering in her eyes.

“You cannot be like this in front of other people,” she says, a slight warning in her voice.

“Getting jealous are we, *ma chérie*?” She throws her bag at me, the solid heap landing against my chest with a thud, and slightly winding me. “Okay, no being naked in front of other people,” I huff out, trying to catch my breath.

Amelie laughs, finally moving out from behind the screen as she steps between my legs again.

“You have an unfairly nice body,” she says, her eyes grazing over me. The weight of her stare burns, as if she’s physically touching me.

“I only kept dancing last year because it’s a good workout,” I tell her, intending for it to be an offhand comment but she holds on to it.

“Did you really want to stop dancing?”

“I’d considered it,” I shrug. “It really wasn’t fun for me anymore. You made me fall in love with it again.”

I hope she hears what I’m not saying, that I’ve fallen in love with her, too.

“Thank you for dancing with me.” She takes my face in her hands, leaning down to kiss me.

“I’d do anything for you, Amelie,” I confess.

She kisses me again, peppering them across my face, and every worry in my head disappears—right until the tailor knocks on the door again. He has an uncanny talent for coming into the room at the worst times.

He shows me a few options, but one catches my eye instantly. It's a dark blue top with a deep V down to my navel, the undershirt striped blue and white with a rectangular neckline. The sleeves are similar to Amelie's, full length and puffy at the shoulders, with ribbons framing the elbows. It's paired with a simple pair of light blue leggings, and I know it won't be hard to find ballet slippers that match the colour.

I try it on, and it fits almost perfectly, with just a few adjustments needed to bring in the waist slightly and widen the shoulders. The tailor pins the outfit where needed before I change out of it and back into my own clothes.

Amelie hooks her pinky through mine as we leave, our bags on my shoulder covering our hands just enough that no one will be able to see. We were excused from classes for the rest of the day as they weren't sure how long fittings would take, but Amelie and I got through ours pretty quickly, leaving us with most of the early afternoon free to do whatever we want.

"Shall we get a quick practice in before the others finish classes?" Amelie suggests.

We already have a studio booked for later this evening, and it would make sense to just start now considering we have the time. But I want to do something else with her instead.

"Come to my room for a bit first," I say to her. "There's something I want to show you."

"I think you've already shown me enough," she jokes, poking a finger into my stomach.

"Nothing like that," I laugh. "Though I'm more than happy to oblige."

Her elbow digs into my side, and I step away from her before she pulls me back closer.

"Really, though," I continue. "It's just something I want to share with you."

She nods in response and we head out of the sports building, across the campus, and into the dorms. It's almost second nature to lead her to my room, I don't need to guide her as she remembers the path from last time.

She sits cross-legged on my bed, her hands tucked under her ankles. She looks adorable in her all-pink ballet outfit, and I think in the future the walls

of my house will be painted the same colour.

“Okay, what is it?” she asks, cutting straight to the chase.

“Someone’s eager,” I joke.

I pretend that I’m going to pull my shirt off again and she leans over to drag the hem of it back down, her nails scraping against my hip bone.

“Eager to kill you, yes, you’re right,” she says, but there’s no venom in it.

“I’ll stop messing around,” I tell her, as I turn and pull open the top drawer of my desk to get what I need.

The old wooden box weighs heavy in my hands as I take it over to Amelie, placing it in front of her on the bed as I perch on the edge.

“What is it?” Amelie traces her fingers over the checkered pattern covering it until she finds the small hinges on one side and the latch on the other. “Can I?”

I nod, and she opens the box, the top flipping open to reveal the pieces inside.

“A chess set,” she says, picking out each piece delicately and placing them on the bed between us.

“My grandma gave this to me when I was younger,” I explain, flipping the box over to set up the board. “She taught me how to play.”

Amelie joins me in placing the pieces in their rightful places and it doesn’t take her long to notice one is missing.

“Where’s your queen?” She pats around the bed, trying to find the missing piece, but it’s not there.

“Look under my pillow,” I instruct her, and she does, her hand running under it until she pulls out the missing piece.

Amelie hands it to me, our fingers brushing, and I place it on the board.

“Grandma told me the queen should be your most protected piece,” I start as I move my first pawn forward two spaces. “Though most would say it should be the king, it’s the weakest piece on the board in her opinion.”

Amelie moves her pawn, and we start a slow game as I keep talking.

“Every move in the game is focused on capturing the king, but the queen can move pretty much wherever she wants on the board. That gives her more power than any other.”

“Is that how you always win?” Amelie asks, as she moves her rook to capture one of my pawns.

“Yeah. It’s easy for people to get caught up in protecting their king that they forget all about the queen’s power. But I never do.”

We go through a few more moves each, and it’s clear Amelie has taken in my words as she captures my king.

“Checkmate,” she says, a proud smile on her face as she tilts her head to one side and holds up the piece between us.

I take it from her, swapping it for the queen that my grandma gave to me.

“Take this,” I tell her, closing her fingers around it as I kiss the back of her hand.

“River, I can’t,” she says, reaching her hand toward me, but I push it right back.

“You can. I want you to have it. It’s brought me a lot of good things over these past few years, more than I could ever need,” I start, tipping my head toward her on the second half of that sentence. “Hopefully it can do the same for you, too, get you that spot in the intensive.”

Amelie leans over the board to press her lips to mine, the pieces beneath us toppling over as she shifts to move into my lap, her legs folding around my waist as I hold her. With her kiss, I hear the words that we’re both too afraid to say yet, but I hope we’ll have the courage to soon.

Chapter 22

Amelie



WITH THE SHOWCASE JUST UNDER TWO MONTHS AWAY, RIVER AND I decided it was time we actually tried performing in front of an audience. Though we might have perfected it alone with just the two of us in the studio, it's different to have the pressure of an audience watching. We've both performed on stage plenty of times, but this is the first time we'll be dancing together for other people. We've spent so much time away from our friends that it's only natural for them to be curious about what we've been doing, so today we'll show them.

I came to the studio right after finishing classes for the day, wanting to practice a few different variations before River arrives. It's been a while since I've danced for myself, and with the music on shuffle I manage to get through a few of my favourite pieces, muscle memory kicking in to guide me through each step. I love dancing with River, being able to rely on him, share the joys and pain with him. But I love dancing alone, too. Knowing that I can still feel full confidence in my abilities, command a room with just a few graceful yet powerful steps. I've never felt more assured of myself in my life.

The door clicks open as I'm ten turns into the thirty-two fouettés from the Black Swan pas de deux. I haven't attempted them again since my audition at the start of the year, some unknown feeling coming over me whenever I think back to that day. But I can't avoid it forever, and as my confidence grows, I keep spinning.

With each turn, I catch a fleeting glimpse of River, arms crossed as he leans against the wall, his stare burning into me as I spin and spin and spin. My legs ache, but I keep counting in my head, twenty-eight fouettés turning into twenty-nine, then thirty, and so on until I hit thirty-five and finally stop. My chest heaves up and down, every muscle in my body taut with tension, my feet throbbing from the pain of holding myself up en pointe for that long.

River claps his hands together slowly as he takes small steps toward me. I can't get enough air in my lungs to look at him properly, the proud grin on his face, the tinge of pink on his cheeks, the look in his eyes that I'm too scared to name. None of it makes it any easier to breathe.

"You're so wonderful," he says reverently, as if seeing me is the answer to some prayer he's made. "God, Amelie. You're so beautiful."

River takes my face in his hands, and kisses me like it's something he's been commanded to do, like it's a requirement for him to keep living. He takes me into his arms, lifting me off the ground and giving my aching feet some reprieve as he deepens the kiss.

"I always imagined this," I breathe against the corner of his mouth, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"What? Kissing me?" I hear the smugness in his voice, feel the upward curve of his lips against mine.

I drag my nails through his scalp before grabbing his hair and giving it a not-so-gentle tug as River's teeth scrape my bottom lip.

"No, yanking this hair out of your arrogant head."

River lets out a breathy laugh, and I swallow it down, tightening my grip around the dark brown strands. I let the kiss go on for longer than I should before releasing him and pulling back.

"The others will be here soon, let's get ready."

"Can we just cancel on them? I'd rather keep doing this." He chases me for another kiss, and I give it to him before squeezing his arms.

"Later, mon cœur."

A heavy sigh escapes him but he doesn't argue back as he places me back on the ground, the pain in my feet still there but slowly subsiding. I circle my ankle a few times, the ever-present dull twinge there as a reminder of the one thing that has the ability to stop me.

"You okay?" River asks, stretching his arms above his head, his white T-shirt rising high enough to show me the bottom of his torso and the

defined lines of his abs.

“Yeah, just need to roll it,” I say, and before I’ve even finished speaking, River’s already moving to grab my foam roller.

He brings it over, sits on the floor, and pulls me down with him. I lean backward, stretching my leg out in front of me, and River lifts my ankle to place the pink foam roller underneath. The ridges dig into my skin as I press my ankle and calf into it, moving my leg back and forth while River keeps it in place. He uses his other hand to gently squeeze my ankle, massaging it in tandem with the roller. Within a few minutes, the pain slowly fades, and I reach forward to run my fingers through his hair.

River closes his eyes, nuzzling his head into my palm as I play with his hair. He’s like a puppy, a content smile on his face while he lets me scratch my nails against his scalp.

“Stay in my room again tonight,” he murmurs, eyes still closed. “I could fall asleep right here.”

I push his head back gently, a small huff of laughter escaping me. I’ve spent a few nights in River’s room now, on days when I’m too tired from practice, and I’ve allowed him to carry me there through the darkened hallways. Or when I’ve overdone myself, and my body aches so much that even the thought of soothing the pain myself is too much to bear, and he does it for me. River has become an expert at cleaning my wounds, treating me with so much care, and putting his own needs ahead of mine. I know he hurts, too, but he hides it from me. He thinks I don’t notice the small winces and noises whenever he’s worked his muscles too hard, but I do.

“*D’accord*,” I say quietly, already looking forward to the way it’ll feel to be in his arms as we fall asleep together.

“Knock, knock,” Grayson announces as he enters the studio, without actually knocking on the door.

River stands, completely composed as if he wasn’t just putty in my hands, and takes the roller with him to pack it away in my bag as he greets our friends.

I stay seated as Evie and Zena approach, practically skipping over with excitement. They both bend down to hug me, Evie shifting her mouth closer to my ear.

“Were we interrupting something?” She giggles, saying it just loud enough for Zena to hear it, too.

I shove her back playfully, Zena still clinging to me and squeezing tightly.

“Give us a heads up next time, and we’ll leave you two lovebirds alone,” Zena adds, only making Evie laugh more.

I extract myself from Zena’s grip, standing to get away from the two of them and their wild imaginations. I’ve felt so much lighter not having to keep it a secret from them, being able to tell them more about mine and River’s relationship, while still keeping all the best parts of it for just us two.

“Are we here to watch a performance, or to see you two rolling around the floor?” Damien asks, gesturing to Evie and Zena, who have shuffled closer together, whispering and laughing as they lie on the studio floor.

Evie shoots him a glare, and Grayson mimes zipping Damien’s mouth shut before his hand gets swatted away. Zena stands, sticking her tongue out at him as she pulls Evie up.

“Alright, children, let’s get started,” River says, corralling everyone to one side of the studio with a wave of his arms. “No arguing during the performance, please.”

They all drop to the floor, Layth putting his jacket down for Zena to sit on, and Damien following suit for Evie. It’s not like the studio is dirty, but it is scuffed from years of people dancing on it. Grayson stretches his legs out in front of him before Zena pats his knee as a silent way of telling him not to. He smiles sheepishly at her, then crosses his legs and tucks his hands underneath him.

River and I move to the other side of the studio, setting up the music on my phone so we’re ready to start.

“You good?” he asks, dipping his head closer to mine slightly as we stand side by side.

I nod, turning to give him a quick smile, which he reciprocates just as fast.

“I’m a little nervous,” he admits with a shy huff of laughter.

“How come?”

“Just feels weird to dance in front of them. Weird that it’s not just us anymore.” He shrugs, shaking his head as he places the phone next to the speaker, his hand gripping it.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen this side of River before. He’s always so confident, overly at times, that I can’t understand why he’s suddenly

worried.

“No matter who’s watching, whether we’re on a stage in front of hundreds of people, or in this studio with our friends,” I cover his hand with mine, our bodies blocking the action from the others. “It’s always just us, River.”

I lace my fingers with his, curling my fingers into his palm so I can give him that reassurance.

“It’s just us,” he repeats back to me, his face more relaxed than it was just a moment ago, that nervousness washed away with just a few words, and a simple gesture.

“We’ve got this,” I tell him, squeezing his hand before I let go. “Evie, can you come over here and start the music for us?”

I’ve barely turned to look at her before she’s already halfway across the studio, bounding toward us to take up her role.

“Let us get into our positions, then you can start it,” I explain, passing the phone to her so she can take her seat again. She returns to Zena’s side, wide grins on both of their faces. River moves to the centre of the room, and I follow after him.

I step in front of him, taking up our starting position with his hands on my waist, my right leg outstretched to the side while my left rises en pointe. He grips on to my waist, his fingers drumming against my skin as he settles himself. I can feel the rise and fall of his chest behind me, as he holds me a little closer than he needs to. I close my eyes, blocking out our audience of five as I match his breathing, every exhale and inhale we take as one being together, while we wait for Evie to start the music.

Once we hear the first note, our bodies move, executing every move perfectly just like we’ve practiced so many times before. In this moment, we’re no longer the River and Amelie that our friends know. We’re Romeo and Juliet, living out that swooping-in-your-stomach feeling of falling in love for the first time, that terrible unease that comes with overthinking every action and reaction. We’re two star-crossed lovers, our lives intertwined long before I even knew it. We’re just a boy and girl in love with each other.

River spins me into him, bending his knees as he lifts me with one arm so my back rests against his shoulder, but something goes wrong and we both drop to the ground in a heap. My limbs are tangled with his as I lay on top of him, his face contorted in pain as he clenches his teeth together.

There's a panicked yelp followed by impossibly fast words.

"Oh my god, are they dead? Someone call an ambulance."

"Dear lord, Grayson, haven't you seen people fall over before?" Damien responds, and I can almost hear his eyes rolling.

The music continues to play as I remain on top of River, my hands reaching up to hold his face.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Forget about me. Are you? Did I hurt your ankle?" He shifts his head out of my grasp in an attempt to look further down our bodies.

"I'm fine," I reassure him.

He took the brunt of the fall, and I'm still unsure what even caused it. This has never happened to us before, and although he was nervous, this doesn't seem like performance jitters.

"My knee locked up, I couldn't stand properly," he explains, tipping his head back against the floor.

I finally push myself off him as our friends gather around us, Evie and Zena checking that I'm okay before turning their attention to River. Damien kneels beside him, their faces close as they talk quietly. I sit back on my heels, my chin quivering as the realisation of what just happened hits me. River hurt himself, and it's because of me.

I must have angled myself weirdly on his shoulder, not balanced my weight enough, and that's why he couldn't stand. Maybe deep down I was nervous about performing in front of people, showing what we've been working on to others for the first time, and I'm the reason we couldn't do it well enough.

Layth crouches next to River, pressing his hand against River's knee as he hisses before clenching his jaw. He continues moving his hand, feeling the joint and muscles around it, before he says something to River that I can't hear over the pounding of my heart.

Zena comes back to my side, sitting next to me and wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

"Layth's had a couple of injuries in his time," she gives as an explanation for his actions. "He doesn't think it's anything serious, River probably just needs to ice it and stay off it for a few days."

"He's okay?" I ask her, scared to say anything else for fear of bursting into tears.

“He’s okay,” she reassures me, rubbing her hand up and down my arm. “You were amazing up until that point. You dance so well together. What you’ve done is magical.”

I let out a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob, because it’s true. Dancing with River, being able to share this experience with him, to fall in love with him, it’s all so magical.

“I’m in too deep, aren’t I?” I ask her quietly, already knowing the answer.

“You are, and that’s okay, too,” she says, smiling as she wipes away the stray tears on my cheeks.

Layth and Damien each grab one of River’s arms, Grayson standing behind to help with pulling him up and setting him on his good leg, the other hovering in the air.

“Let’s get you back to your room,” Damien says, clapping a hand on River’s chest and nodding to Layth.

The two start to move slowly with him, River hopping to avoid putting weight on the knee he’s just hurt. I stand and follow, thinking of nothing but being with River. I quickly brush my fingers against his hand that’s hooked over Layth’s shoulder, and River shifts his gaze just enough to give me a comforting smile.

“Always knew you’d try to kill me one day. Looks like you didn’t quite get it this time,” he jokes.

“Still have plenty of time for that,” I fire back, and he lets out a soft laugh.

The usual five-minute walk takes twenty as we move slowly, Layth and Damien slowing their pace whenever River needs a chance to catch his breath or rest his leg. Grayson carries both our bags and everyone’s jackets left discarded on the floor, and though we offer to help, he declines.

When we finally reach River’s room, we all bundle in, taking up far too much space in the already cluttered area. Damien and Layth drop River onto his bed, the two of them groaning as they stretch their bodies to their full height again, after being hunched over for the entire walk.

“Keep some ice on it, and put some pillows underneath to keep it elevated,” Layth instructs.

River holds his hand up to his forehead in mock salute, earning a laugh from Grayson and Damien, but zero reaction from Layth.

“Don’t walk on it for a few days,” he continues before turning to me. “Sorry, Amelie, he won’t be able to dance either.”

I thought I’d feel more panic at hearing those words, some overwhelming sense of dread, but instead it’s just relief. He’s not hurt as badly as I thought he might be, and that’s all that matters.

“Guess you guys will just have to wait until the showcase to see the full thing,” I tell them all, Evie, Zena, and Grayson letting out faux heavy sighs of disappointment. “It’ll be better on stage, I promise.”

“A million times better,” River chimes in, as Damien stacks pillows beneath his knee.

“We’ll leave you guys alone,” Evie says, hugging me before making way for Zena to do the same.

“Let us know if you need anything,” Grayson adds, placing our bags on River’s desk, before he leaves the room.

Zena and Layth follow after him, while Evie has to pull Damien away to stop him fussing over River.

“His pillows are really soft,” Damien mumbles, and Evie shakes her head as she pushes him ahead of her and out of the room.

She closes the door behind her, and the moment she does, I all but throw myself at River.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck as his arm curves around me.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” he tells me.

“I did, it’s my fault. I don’t think I balanced my weight properly, or maybe I was at the wrong angle, I can’t remember.”

River shifts us so I’m on the bed, half lying on top of him, before he runs his hand over the back of my head, down the nape of my neck, and to my back. Our faces are so close together, noses almost touching.

“*Calmes toi, ma chérie. Je vais bien, ça va,*” he says, his fingers grazing up and down, the motion settling me.

“*Non, ça vas pas,*” I pout, and River laughs.

“It was not your fault, Amelie. It was just an accident.” He keeps his eyes fixed on mine. “Say it.”

I shake my head, but he moves his hands to cradle my cheeks.

“Say it, Amelie. It’s the truth.”

I stare down at him, steel-grey eyes observing me closely as he waits for me to speak.

“It’s not my fault. It was an accident,” I repeat, more for him than myself, but it gets a smile out of him, and that’s all I care about at this moment.

I adjust myself so my head rests on his chest, his hand still moving across my back.

“Was this just your plan to get me to stay here with you tonight?” I ask, thinking back to our earlier conversation.

“Yep,” he presses a kiss to the top of my head, “and tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that, until I’m all better.”

“Good. We take care of each other now, okay?”

I want to say more, to tell him that I want to look after him the way he’s constantly been looking after me. I want to say I’ve never been more scared, that the worry I felt for him was so overwhelming I wasn’t even thinking about what it might mean for the showcase, but about what it meant for us just being able to dance together. I want to tell him that I’m so grateful for every single moment he’s given me, in the studio, in Milan, in his room, every single moment has meant so much to me.

“It’s just us,” he tells me, as if he can hear every thought racing through my head, and silence it with those three words.

“Just us.”

Chapter 23

Amelie



EVIE AND ZENA HAVE BEEN IN MY ROOM FOR HOURS TO HELP WITH TAKING my hair down, but there's only so long either of them can avoid their own responsibilities. Evie has a dinner soon with both her and Damien's families, and Zena has a video conference to take part in with the members of her family and parliament. They've both done as much as they can, and most of my braids are taken out, leaving just a few for me to finish alone when they leave.

We say goodbye to each other, and I take a break to lay back on my bed, close my eyes and rest, my fingers and arms tired from using them for so long. We have a photoshoot in a few days for the program that will be given out before the showcase, detailing all the dancers and what they'll be performing.

Most of the photos will be taken from past performances or from the dress rehearsal, but some posed ones are also needed for it. With the showcase just a few weeks away, and our costumes now ready for us, I want to make sure that my entire look is perfect from head to toe.

I scoured through different shows, watching other Black ballerinas to see how they styled their hair for their performances. Most ballerinas keep their hair tied up in a bun, slicking it back and fixing it with tons of gel and hairspray, but I don't really like doing that. For this performance, I decide it's easier to press my hair, and then I can add a few waves to it before dress rehearsals and the performance.

I let out a heavy sigh, wondering if the other ballerinas in the showcase have to put this much effort into their hair, when a knock sounds at my door and I wonder which of the girls left something behind.

“It’s open,” I half shout so they can hear me.

The door clicks open and then shuts, footsteps approaching me as I keep my eyes closed and wait for them to grab whatever they left and leave again. Instead, my bed dips, weight settling against it as lips press to my forehead. I open my eyes, and River is above me, his face so close to mine that I can barely see the soft smile on it, just the small creases at the corner of his eyes.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” I run my fingers through his hair, gently urging him back so that I can sit up. “What are you doing here?”

“Saw Evie and Zena leaving, so figured you were alone,” he says, giving me space to shift one leg off the bed and tuck the other underneath me. “Just wanted to see you.”

He holds my hand, rubbing soothing circles on the back of it as his free hand cups my cheek, and he kisses me again.

“We’re seeing each other tomorrow,” I tell him.

We put off practicing today so that I could get ready for the photoshoot. River’s knee is a lot better now, but I’m still worried about us overdoing it, so our practice schedule has been less strict than it was before. We don’t spend hours in the studio every evening anymore, instead just sticking to a few run-throughs every day so we can keep up perfecting smaller details. Weekends are free rein now, and we either spend time with our friends or with each other doing stuff that isn’t related to ballet.

As much as I’ve been worried about us losing focus as our relationship developed, it’s only been the opposite. River seems even more determined for the showcase, working himself to the bone during each session, and taking it as seriously as I am. It’s not what I expected when I first asked him, but I’m glad it turned out this way.

“Too far away,” he says, moving his face closer to mine again, as well as his body, until he’s pressing me against the sheets, my back flat on them as he hovers above me.

His kisses are exhilarating, my entire being coming alive just from the feel of him against me. River lies on top of me, his hand moving to cradle

the back of my head, and that action brings me back to my senses. I stop kissing him, and he pulls back instantly.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asks, eyes darting across my face.

“No, nothing at all,” I reassure him, giving him a quick kiss on the lips. “I need to finish taking my hair down.”

River looks me over, as if he hadn’t even noticed the few stray braids still in my hair while the rest is undone, the loose curls tumbling down my back. I sit up, and River follows, adjusting his position so he mirrors me, one leg on the bed and the other over the edge.

“Can I help?” he says, an earnest look on his face as one corner of his mouth ticks up slightly. River reaches out to grab a loose strand, twirling it between his fingers as he waits for my response.

“That would be nice,” I answer, shifting on the bed so my back is to him.

I pull the loose hair forward over my shoulder, leaving just the braids behind. River takes hold of one, working his way up as he untangles the strands, fingers moving deftly as if he’s done this a million times before.

“I used to help my mom at shows,” he explains without me asking. “They used to do all sorts to her hair, especially during fashion week. After every show, I’d sit and help her become my mom again, instead of whatever persona she’d had to put on that day.”

I pull my legs up, tucking my chin into my knees as he speaks.

“A lot of my favourite moments with her are like that. Whether she was coming off a movie set or had just finished walking a show. It was cool to see her do all of those things, but the best part was when it was just us two. Maybe it’s because she always let me eat ice cream after, but I think there was something else in those moments, too.”

I let out a soft laugh as the image of a young River settles in my mind. I never imagined that small boy I detested during classes, someone who seemed so arrogant and as if the world owed him everything, was going home and doing all of that for his mother.

“She raised you wonderfully,” I tell him.

From meeting her at the auction, it’s clear how much she adores River. The way they were with each other that night, sharing inside jokes and secret laughs, things that can only come from years of being close. River’s opened up to me a lot about his family, but I haven’t done the same. There’s not as much to say, hardly any fun stories like he has.

“I didn’t see my parents much growing up,” I say, and River’s fingers pause for a second before he goes back to undoing the braid he’s working on. “I remember moments like this, though. Days where I’d lie on the kitchen island and have my head in the sink while my dad washed my hair. Mom would style it after, braiding it or pressing it, whatever I wanted. We’d always eat dinner together after, and I’d get to pick my favourite foods.”

I don’t think my parents ever intended to leave me alone as much as they did. But as their businesses grew, and they had more to handle, they knew they had to work twice as hard as others to maintain it. The world of the wealthy and powerful was never designed for people like them, working-class people in a country that wasn’t even their own, but they were determined to carve their own path into it.

“As I got older, they were always super busy, barely even spending time in France. They had a few nannies that took care of me, and to be honest, I don’t know if I ever really noticed their absence.”

River hums in response, not saying anything as he allows me to continue.

“Evie became my sister, and her parents became mine. They were busy, too, but they still found time for Evie, and I guess at some point they realised my parents weren’t doing the same.”

“That must have been hard for you,” he says quietly.

“I don’t know. I never really knew I was missing out on anything.”

I consider my childhood, all the days and nights spent with Evie and her family, the ones spent alone with whatever nanny had been assigned to me.

“They were both dedicated to their work, wanting to be the best at whatever they did, and I guess if I took anything from them, it’s that.”

“It’s your best trait,” he tells me. “And maybe worst. That determination is what made me hate you when we were younger, and it’s what makes me lo- like you now.”

I catch the unsaid word, but River moves straight past it as if he didn’t almost say it.

“For what it’s worth, my mom loved meeting you. She asks about you all the time,” he continues.

“Really?” The word comes out breathless as I’m still trying to get air back into my lungs from what he nearly just admitted to.

“Yeah, she thought you were enchanting, her exact words.”

I laugh, wondering why she chose that over every other word that could possibly describe me.

“I’d like to meet her again, too,” I tell him, turning my head to one side so I can see his face.

A blush creeps up his cheeks, the tips of his ears red as he stares at my hair, avoiding my eyes.

“I really like you, River,” I tell him, for what might be the first time. I don’t think I’ve said the words outright to him yet, just danced around them, hoped my actions would convey them, but I’m tired of that now.

River glances up at me, his fingers twisted in my hair as he absorbs my words. I turn to face him properly, untangling his fingers and taking his hands in mine.

“Did you hear me?” I ask, knowing full well he did. “I like you, River. A lot.”

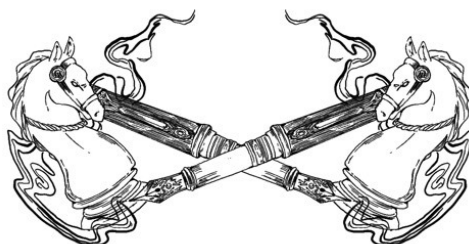
He doesn’t say anything; he just leans forward until his forehead tips against mine and we’re breathing the same air in sync. His breaths are shaky, his hands cling to mine, and his forehead presses against mine as if he can fuse our minds together and telepathically tell me how he feels instead of saying it out loud.

“It’s okay,” I reassure him.

I know what he wants to say, a word that’s stronger than what I’ve just confessed, a word that truly encompasses how I feel about him. But it’s too much for either of us right now. So I settle for the feel of him against me instead, his hands in mine, and my lips on his, sealing those words between us without saying them.

Chapter 24

River



THE PHOTOSHOOT IS AN ALL-DAY AFFAIR. THERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT photographers, and the dancers are split into rooms to make the process go faster, but there's still a lot of stages. First, we have to take solo shots: Amelie in a leotard and tights, while I'm just in shorts, and then in our costumes. Once the individual photos are done, Amelie and I have to take them together, again in our basic outfits as well as our stage ones.

Amelie goes first, wearing a light pink leotard and white tights underneath as she takes her place on the white backdrop. The photographer directs her into various poses, Amelie contorting her body in different ways to achieve the position wanted from her. I alternate between watching Amelie and the photographer's laptop as each photo appears automatically after it's taken.

She looks stunning, somehow even more beautiful under the harsh lighting, which accentuates every muscle and displays her strength. The way she moves, her arms stretching above her while her legs angle into a split as she leaps, every line of her body elegant and poised—she's a masterpiece.

I grab my phone from the side, because although we'll get copies of these photos once they've been edited, I want my own. I cycle between taking videos and photos, enjoying the way her laughter between takes quickly shifts to professionalism as soon as the photographer starts counting down. I can already imagine myself rewatching these videos over and over

again, when I'm old and grey and my body can't even think about moving like it does now. I can only hope I'll be watching them alongside her.

Reality hits as soon as my screen lights up with my father calling. I've been ignoring him for a few days, hoping that he'll give up on forcing me to attend these meetings. No matter how many times I've explained to him that I can't make it, he's still insistent that I do. The call disconnects before ringing again, and though I know it'll worsen my mood, I answer.

I mouth to Amelie that I'm going outside to take a call, and excuse myself from the room as the photographer and Amelie continue. I close the door behind me and step into the hallway as I answer the call.

"I've scheduled the plane to be at the airfield in two weeks," he says, without any greeting. "Please make sure you're on time, these things are horribly overpriced when you're off schedule."

"I've told you I can't go to Madrid." I run my fingers through my hair, pulling at the strands in exasperation. "Can't you just video call me in? I don't even contribute anything to these meetings."

Nine times out of ten, all I do is sit next to my father, nodding or shaking my head at the right times, while saying absolutely nothing of substance. It's purely for appearances before I join him properly after graduation, so I can't understand why missing just one meeting is such a big deal.

"No, River, that's not how it works," he states. "The plane will take off at six pm, that's plenty of time to finish classes and get to the airfield. See you then."

He hangs up without saying anything else. My body hums with frustration, my fingers tightening around the phone in my hand until my knuckles turn white. It doesn't make any sense that he's so insistent when he knows the showcase is soon, and every rehearsal leading up to it is vital.

Even though I know it's childish, I call my mom, hoping she can talk some sense into him. She answers after just a few seconds.

"Hi, Mom."

"How are you, my darling?" Her voice is bright, in complete contrast to my frustration.

"I was fine until your husband just ruined my day."

"I know it's bad if you're calling him my husband instead of your father," she laughs. "What has he done now?"

“He’s insistent that I go to Madrid, but I’ve already told him that I have dress rehearsals that week and can’t miss a single one. Can you talk some sense into him?” I really do feel like a child, complaining to my mom like this, but it’s the only solution I can think of.

“I’ve tried talking sense into him for years now,” she says. “I never liked the idea of him going into all these investments, but he said it was the best way to build a stable future for you.”

A sigh escapes me. I know my parents are just trying to do what they think is best for me, trying to provide me with the best possible life they can. I just wish they’d listen to what I want from my life, too.

“Are you sure you can’t just miss one rehearsal?” she asks, and I know I’ve lost the battle already.

“I can’t do that to Amelie,” I tell her. “This showcase is so important to her.”

“I’m glad your heart is in the right place for this performance, but you need to think about your future, too, River. I adored meeting Amelie, and I’m sure she’ll be fine with you missing one rehearsal.”

“Why does she have to be fine with me missing out, instead of him? What difference does it make if I miss a meeting that will happen god knows how many times again?”

“I can’t help you with this, River. Whatever goes on in that company is between you and him,” she sighs.

“I’ll figure it out myself,” I tell her. “Love you, bye.”

I hang up as soon as she says it back. My hands ball into fists at my side as I drop my phone to the ground, my nails digging into my palms as I try to calm myself. I thought Mom would have had more sympathy toward the situation, but it seems she doesn’t realise how important this is to me either.

I pick my phone back up and take a few deep breaths before going back into the studio. Amelie stands with the photographer looking through the photos on her laptop, a wide smile on her face as she points out her favourite shots.

Seeing her like that settles something inside me, and I walk over to them, plastering a smile on my face as I join them. Amelie wraps her arm around mine, intertwining our fingers together as her other hand circles my bicep. She clings to me as the photographer goes through a couple of reference photos she wants me to try imitating, just like she did with Amelie before she started her shoot.

I nod along, but my brain isn't fully processing anything as I try to think of how I can avoid going to this meeting. Amelie lets go of me so that I can move to the centre of the backdrop, and the photographer starts directing me into the positions she wants. It takes me multiple attempts to get any of them right, and it'll be a miracle if we can get any usable shots.

Once the photographer has given up on me, we move on to the joint poses. She shows us references for those, too, the dancers on the screen twisting their bodies around each other, contorting into all sorts of poses that she wants us to replicate.

We take our positions for the first one, Amelie hooking one leg above my shoulder while she rises en pointe, creating a straight line from one foot to the other. I support her with my arm as she arches backward, bracing my other hand on her calf next to my face as I rest it against her knee. I extend one leg to the side, the other planted firmly to keep Amelie and me both balanced as we hold the position long enough for the picture to be taken.

We go through more poses, each one harder than the last, as I start to lose focus, my mind fully preoccupied as it replays the conversation with my parents.

"Can we take a break?" Amelie says, once we've finished another shot.

"Sure, let's take five," the photographer says, going over to her laptop to check over the photos.

Amelie pulls me aside, tucking us into a corner of the studio as her hand finds mine.

"Are you okay?" she asks, looking up at me, a crease between her brows and her mouth slightly downturned.

"I'm fine," I tell her, giving her the best smile I can muster. I don't want her to worry about whatever I'm dealing with. There isn't a point in telling her when I'm not going to the meeting anyway. "Just a bit tired."

"We still have to get some shots in our outfits," she reminds me, and I nod as she reaches up to run her hand through my hair, her nails scraping my scalp and soothing me. "We'll get it done as fast as possible, and then we'll go back to your room and sleep."

She leans up to kiss me, but I drop my head to meet her first, our lips finding each other easily. The promise of falling asleep with her later puts my mind at ease, all other thoughts but that pure comfort escaping me as she smiles up at me.



It only takes us two hours to get through the rest of the shoot, with most of that time spent getting into our outfits. It goes a lot smoother than the first half as my mind relaxes and we find our poses easier, our bodies working together to balance each other out as we hold each position for a few seconds to ensure the best photo can be taken.

The photographer lets us send a few pictures to our phones, and I don't waste any time changing my lock screen to one of them. Amelie rolls her eyes when I show it to her, but she does the exact same thing just a few seconds later.

When we get back to my room, we fall into the routine that we've been doing for the past few weeks. Amelie has spent more and more nights in my bed, my room slowly turning half pink with her things. I changed my pillowcases to silk for her after the second time she slept over when I realised that was better for her hair.

Amelie sits on the edge of my bed as I check the bandages on her feet. Although we haven't danced today, she's still gone en pointe a lot and had to hold herself up like that for extended periods to make sure the photos came out well. They're not as bad as some days, but I unravel them so she can shower without them.

Once she's showered and changed into a pink tank top and shorts that graze the top of her thigh, she sits back on my bed, resting her feet in my lap again so that I can reapply the bandages. I take care to wrap them delicately, doing my best not to cause her any pain.

When I'm done, she gets into my bed, cosying up under the blanket while I go to shower. I let the frustration of the day wash over me, the hot water almost scalding me to the point where it's the only thing I feel instead of burning anger at slowly losing control of my own life. I expected this to happen closer to graduation, not in my second year. But reality has started to crash down around me, and I can only pretend for so long that my future hasn't been set for me.

I get out of the shower and change into a pair of sleep shorts before I go back out. Amelie shuffles closer to the wall, lifting the blanket for me as I

settle down next to her. She pulls my arm behind her head, resting on it as she curls into my side. I graze my fingers back and forth across her shoulder, until her breathing evens out and she falls deep asleep.

I might not be able to control what I can do in my future, but I can't let that stop me from enjoying the present. I pull Amelie closer, tucking her head under my chin as our breathing syncs up, and I fall asleep thinking only of how good it feels to have her in my arms.

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Chapter 25

Amelie



THE THEATRE IS BUZZING WITH ENERGY. EVERYONE IS GATHERED TOGETHER for the final dress rehearsal, the excitement of how close the showcase, just two days away, is almost a living thing surging into the room. We all stand in the wings to watch each other perform, and it's been a beautiful experience to see so many talented dancers in one space.

The order of the show alternates between solo and pair performances, River and I getting the final pair spot right before the solo that was meant to be mine. I should be more bitter about it, but as time has passed, I've realised that it was a blessing in disguise. I lost the solo but I gained River, and that's something that means far more to me than dancing alone.

He's still not here, though. Everyone else arrived earlier to get into their outfits and have their hair and makeup done. I thought he might be running a bit late, but the final run-through has started, and he's nowhere to be seen.

I've texted and called him multiple times with no response. In the whole time we've been dancing together, he's never ignored my calls like this. He's shown up for every other practice, tech run-through, and dress rehearsal this week, so I can't imagine why he wouldn't be here.

But time keeps passing, dancers keep finishing their routines, and he still doesn't show.

AMELIE

Have you seen River? He's meant to be at the dress rehearsal now

DAMIEN

Not since last night

AMELIE

Do you know where he is?

DAMIEN

I'll go and check his room

I pace anxiously, my phone clutched tightly in my hand as I wait for Damien's response. If anyone can find River, it's him.

DAMIEN

Not in his room but I just checked his location

AMELIE

Is he on the way to the theatre?

DAMIEN

I'm sorry Amelie

He's in Madrid

I read his message over and over, waiting for the words on the screen to change.

River is in Madrid.

Not at the theatre, not in Paris, not even in France. I don't understand what's happening. This is one of the most important practices. He's shown up for everything else, but not this.

My mind races as I cycle through every possible reason he could be there. A family emergency maybe? But I'm sure he would have told me, or even Damien. I go through his behaviour the past few weeks, trying to figure out if I missed something, but I can't think of a single thing. There has to be a good reason for why he's not here, I just can't understand why he hasn't told me.

"You're up next," one of the stage crew says, clipboard in hand as he checks something off it. "Where's your partner?"

He glances around and I do the same, as if River will magically appear, when I know full well that's impossible. He's in Madrid. Hundreds of miles away at the time I need him most. Everyone around me starts clapping for the dancer who just finished, but I can't move.

“If he’s not here, we’ll have to move on,” the boy says, tapping his pen against the clipboard.

Words escape me as shock settles in. River is in Madrid. This is our final dress rehearsal, the showcase is in two days, and River is in Madrid.

“Skip to the finale,” he says into his headset, turning to walk away from me without a second glance.

My feet stay rooted to the ground as people move around me, everyone crowding around the wings to get a better view of the stage. Charlotte walks to the centre and it takes her a ridiculous amount of time to find third position and hold it for long enough for the music to start.

She darts around the stage with the grace of a baby giraffe that’s just been born, her arms loose and flapping around, steps heavy and ill-timed. It’s a joke that she’s got the final solo, but when I glance over at Madame sitting in the centre of the second row, there’s a sickening smile on her face.

Anger overtakes every other emotion swirling through my mind. That spot should have been mine. I’m an immeasurably better ballerina than Charlotte; I just lack the connections needed, apparently. And now River’s not here, and I can’t perform at all. How could he do this to me?

Maybe I was a fool for wanting to trust him with something like this when we hated each other for so long. Regardless of how we feel about each other now, River was never someone I could truly depend on. And while I want to have more faith in him, to believe there’s a good excuse for why he hasn’t said a single word to me today, all of that is overpowered by the disappointment I feel toward him.

Reality hits me like a gut punch as my knees give out and I squat close to the floor. What if he doesn’t come back for the showcase? Not performing in that means the scouts won’t see me, which means I don’t stand a chance of getting into the summer intensive. My eyes sting as I try to compose myself, my nails digging into my palm to try and direct the pain somewhere else. It’s over. Everything I’ve worked for, the long days and sleepless nights, the pain and hurt, all for nothing.

AMELIE

I can’t believe you’d do this to me

I should have known you were going to disappoint me in the end.

My words are harsh, but it's exactly how I feel right now. I don't care if he never comes back to Paris, would actually prefer it if he didn't. He has humiliated me, left me out to dry for something that he knows is important to me and my future.

I run back to the dressing room, gathering my things and leaving the theatre without giving anyone an explanation. I can't face them all and embarrass myself even further. People stare at me as I walk through the campus in my full outfit, but all I care about is getting back to my room before I break down in front of them all.

I'm rushing so fast that I barely notice Evie and Zena in the common room, both calling out to me as I hurry past. I don't spare a glance in their direction as I keep going to my room, finally reaching it and throwing myself inside right before I burst into tears.

Months of built-up emotions pour out of me—anger at not getting the solo, stress at having to ask River to dance with me, worry that we might not work well together, fear of wanting River but not being able to give myself to him wholly. It's all too much and I break down.

"Amelie, what's wrong?"

I can barely see Evie through my blurred vision, but she comes to my side, dropping to the ground with me as I hold on to her. Another pair of arms wraps around us, Zena resting her head against my back as I cry.

I'm not sure how long they hold me for, but neither of them makes a single move to leave my side. Once I've exhausted myself and there's no more tears left to cry, Evie swipes at my cheeks with the sleeve of her cardigan, while Zena rubs a hand across my back.

"What happened, my love?" she says quietly.

"It's over," I tell her. "River's in Madrid."

"Madrid?" Zena asks, peeking over my shoulder to look at me. "Why is he in Spain?"

"I don't know. I just found out from Damien."

Evie pulls her phone out, and I assume she's going to try and get more information from him.

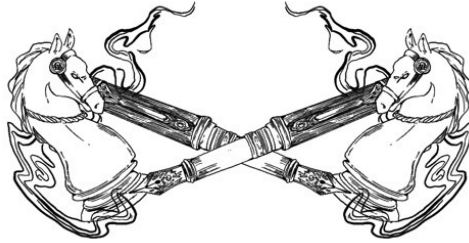
"He'll come back for the showcase," Zena says, but a part of me doesn't believe her. It's the part of me that spent so many years hating him, treating him terribly because of my misconceptions, yet still expected him to upend his entire life for me.

But then I think about how he did exactly that: sacrificed his free time for me, dedicated hours to learning a routine that he would have had no business ever performing if it wasn't for me. I think about the River that holds me while I sleep at night, who takes care of me in a way no one else ever has before. I cling to that idea of him, to the River that knows me better than I know myself, and I silently send a message into the universe, hoping for him to come back.

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Chapter 26

River



MY LEG BOUNCES UP AND DOWN RAPIDLY UNDERNEATH THE TABLE AS THE men around me wrap up their conversations. They lean over the table to shake hands, and I shoot up, my chair dragging across the carpeted floor and almost tipping over as I push it back.

I shove past everyone to leave the room, not even stopping as my father calls after me. I'll talk to him on my own terms, considering he forced me here on his. I should have known better than to trust him when he invited me out for dinner last night. Once his driver arrived, I assumed we were heading into Paris somewhere to eat, but instead I was taken to the airfield, my father waiting on the tarmac to ensure I got on the plane.

I barely had time to realise what was happening before I was being rushed up the stairs, the door closing behind me as the engines roared to life. I stayed silent for the entire flight, not responding to a word my father said, even when the plane landed and we got to the hotel.

When I woke up this morning, I thought it was all a bad dream, that I'd be back in my room at d'Étoiles with Amelie by my side. Instead, I was alone in a different country, with nothing but my phone, because I hadn't expected to be this far away. The phone is useless too because the battery is dead, and the hotel didn't have a spare charger, so I couldn't even text Amelie to tell her what's going on.

"River," my father yells down the hallway as I attempt to make my escape, but this office is a labyrinth and I can't remember which way we entered this morning.

“I need to get back to Paris,” I tell him as I open a door that leads to a storage cupboard instead of the exit. “Who built this place?”

I throw my hands up as I keep moving, trying every door I see as my father gets closer.

“River, just talk to me for a second.” He grabs hold of my upper arm, and I spin out of his grip to face him.

“You had no right to bring me here.” I point my finger toward him, almost hitting him in the chest with it. “I told you I had other plans.”

“I needed you here, today, son,” he says, as if that’s a good enough excuse.

“And Amelie needs me in Paris,” I tell him. “This could ruin her entire future.”

“What about your future?” He steps closer to me. “That’s what all of this is for. Everything I do is for you, River.”

“Don’t give me that,” I scoff. “You think I care about any of this? I only pretend I do because that’s what you want from me.”

“Have you ever thought about why I expect you to care about this stuff? Why I invite you to every meeting, send you weekly updates on everything that’s happening. I know you don’t care about any of it, but it’s all for you. I never want you to lack anything in life, and money can give you everything you want.”

I’m not delusional enough to argue with him about that. I know that’s the reality of the world we live in. But it can’t give you everything. Money can’t buy the feeling of Amelie beating me in a game of chess, the smile on her face as she does it like it’s her biggest victory. It can’t buy the weight of her hand in mine as we fall asleep together, the press of her lips to my cheek when she wakes up before me. Money can buy a lot of things, but it can’t give me back the time lost today, time where she’s probably lost all faith in me.

“Did money give you Mom? Did it make her fall in love with you, stay with you all these years?”

“Of course not.” His features soften at the mention of her. “She would have loved me with just the clothes on my back.”

“And that’s how I love the both of you,” I tell him. “Yeah, it’s nice to be able to buy whatever I want, and not have to worry where my next meal is coming from. But my favourite moments with you guys were when we sat

together after you walked a show, or got off a set. The stories you'd tell me from the day while I played with Mom's hair. Money can't buy any of that."

"River," he starts, but I shake my head.

"I'm going back to Paris, right now," I say.

"The plane can't go back today," he tells me. "It'll take hours to get it refuelled and scheduled in at the airfield, and by then the crew will be out of their working hours."

"I'll figure it out," I say, wracking my brain for other methods to get back to Paris as soon as possible. My phone is still dead, and I'd be wasting time hanging around to charge it.

"I'm sorry, River," he says, and whether he's apologising for what happened over these two days, or for the past year, it doesn't matter right now.

"It's okay," I reassure him. I don't think his intentions were bad, but I wish he'd told me all of this before. "We can talk about it later."

He pulls me into a quick hug, patting me on the back a few times before he lets go.

"It's that door to get out." He points to the one directly behind me.

"Thanks," I say, flashing him a quick smile before I turn to leave.

Once I'm out on the street, I try to get my bearings, looking at the public transport signs to figure out the best way back to Paris. A flight would be easiest, but it'll take me at least an hour to reach the airport, and then I'd have to hope there's a flight going out to Paris immediately.

My next best option is the train. It'll be a much longer journey, but at least I can start it immediately. I don't think any more about it as I head for the station, planning out the best route with my very limited knowledge of the interrail.

The station is bustling with people crowded everywhere, tourists with huge backpacks that could probably take out a small child with one wrong move, residents who are just trying to get where they need to go. I do my best to ignore everything around me as I stare at the boards above, each one detailing their destinations. There's no direct train to Paris, so I'll have to change at Barcelona which will then get me to Gare de Lyon. Getting to the university once I'm there is a bridge I'll cross when I get to it. For now, I just need to get out of Spain.

Only when I'm walking toward the ticket counter do I remember my phone is dead, and I don't have my wallet with me. Getting on this train and

finding my way back to Paris without a single cent on me feels like an impossible task, but I have to do it.

I glance around the station, and it takes me only a few seconds to realise that the ticket barriers are open. It may be considered petty crime, but I can't find it in myself to care. I slip through the barriers, keeping my composure as I find the right platform and enter the train. I find the unreserved carriage and drop into an empty seat, my heart pounding as the train starts to fill up, and then eventually sets off a few minutes later.

I relax into my seat, my heartbeat settling as the scenery changes from the cityscape of Madrid to the countryside. I just need to get on one more train and then I'll be back in Paris.

"Billete."

My eyes widen as a hand braces across the top of my seat.

"Sorry, I don't speak Spanish."

"I speak English. Ticket."

Of course he does. I sink further into my seat as I try to figure out how not to get kicked off this train. The conductor stares down at me, an unimpressed look on his face as if he already knows I don't have one.

"Sir, do you have a ticket?"

I search for an excuse, but I end up spilling everything instead.

"I don't have one, but I need to get back to my girlfriend so I can tell her I love her. I mean, she's not even my girlfriend; we haven't put a label on it yet, but that's what I want to call her, and I think she might want it too, but we haven't really talked about it. But also maybe she doesn't want that anymore because I was meant to be at a dress rehearsal yesterday but my dad made me come to Madrid, so I've let her down, and she probably hates me even more now than she did before. I just need to get back to Paris so I can talk to her."

The conductor blinks slowly at me, his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"There's a faster route if you change at the next stop," he tells me, as I catch my breath from the marathon of words I just said.

He pulls a notebook from his pocket and scribbles something down before passing it to me.

"Get this train, it will take you directly to Paris."

I clasp my hands together, raising them above my head as if I'm praying to this man who has become my saviour.

"Thank you."

“Do you have money?”

“I don’t have anything on me.” I pat around my pockets, turning them out to see if anything has magically appeared.

The conductor lets out a heavy sigh, pulls out a different pad of paper, and starts writing. He hands it over to me, and I see it’s a ticket, my destination written in.

“You can show this to a conductor if they ask. You’ll have to go back and pay when you arrive in Paris.”

“Yes, of course.” I nod frantically, wondering if angels exist and if this man is one.

“Next stop is in ten minutes,” he says before he starts walking away, but I call him back. I get his details, making sure I’ll be able to heavily repay him for this once I’m back home in Paris.

When we reach the next stop, I race off this train and to the next one, making it just in time. I breathe heavily as I collapse in an empty seat. For the next seven hours, I think only about Amelie.



The journey back to the university feels longer than ever, but it’s the final hurdle. Paris comes alive at night, and as much as I love this city, I can’t stand the traffic right now. I managed to get my phone charged just enough at the station to call my driver and ask him to pick me up. A wall of notifications flooded through once it turned back on, but all I cared about was Amelie’s messages.

AMELIE

Where are you?

Everyone else is here already

River?

I can’t believe you’d do this to me

I should have known you were going to disappoint me in the end.

I switched my phone off just so I wouldn't torture myself by rereading them over and over again. Her last words hurt more than she could ever imagine. Did she really think that the whole time? Was I always going to disappoint her in some way? Insecurity flares up, and I try to push it down, but maybe she's right.

I don't know why I thought doing this with her would be a good idea. I didn't even like dancing when she asked me, but I couldn't say no to her when she looked so sad that day. Amelie is the most stubborn and proud person I've ever met—it's part of why I love her so much now—so I know it took her a lot to ask me initially.

But now I've missed the most important rehearsal, almost missed the showcase, and potentially ruined everything for her. It's hard to believe she'll give me a second chance but I have to try anyway.

I barely let the car stop before I fling the door open and start running. Most people are in their rooms by now getting ready for bed, and if I was looking for anyone else I'd head straight for the dorms. Instead, I head toward the arts building, straight for the studios.

The hallway is dark, the only light creeping out from under one of the doors and the small window on it. It has to be her. The faint sound of music carries through the walls, a piece from Giselle, and I know it's Amelie.

I peer in through the window, expecting to see her dancing but she's sat on the floor instead, pointe shoes in hand as she slams them against the ground. I've seen her break in her shoes before, but there's a lot more force this time. She's probably imagining the shoes are me, and I can't blame her for that.

I push open the door, and her head snaps toward me as I enter the room. Her eyes widen for just a second that I barely catch it before her face transforms into a scowl. She picks up a pair of scissors and points them at me as she stands.

"Ma chérie, put the scissors down," I say, my hands held out in front of me as I slowly step closer to her.

"Don't call me that. And don't tell me what to do."

"Let me explain."

"No. There's no excuse you can give me that will be good enough."

"I didn't want to go," I tell her anyway. This may be my only chance to talk to her. "My father said we should meet for dinner, and the next thing I know I'm on a flight to Madrid."

She crosses her arms, the scissors still poking out, and I reach to take them from her as I keep talking.

"I told him so many times that I couldn't go, that we had dress rehearsals this week. He stopped asking so I thought he'd given up on the idea, but he hadn't."

She doesn't resist as I take the scissors from her, and even though my story seems completely far-fetched, I think she might believe me.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, but I swear it's the truth." I scramble through my pockets to find my train ticket to show her. "Look, I was on the train all day to get here."

She takes it from me, reading over the ticket multiple times. Her expression softens for just a moment, and hope blooms in my chest. It's quickly buried by her words.

"It's over, River. We're over."

"Don't say that."

"What else do you want me to say? Do you want me to forgive you for abandoning me? For leaving me wondering if you were even going to come back for the showcase, which is tomorrow, if you hadn't remembered. Maybe you want me to forgive you for making me so scared that my dream could be taken away from me, right at the finish line, just because I decided to rely on you for it? Or do you want me to forgive you for making me believe that we really could have had something together?"

The words come out in a barrage, every question punctuated with a push against my chest as she takes all her frustration out on me. There's a glassiness in her eyes, and I hate being the reason for it.

"We do have something together," I plead. I move closer to her, but she steps back, and it guts me. I retreat, giving her the space she wants. "We can do our own dress rehearsal. I'll go to Madame and explain everything to her. We've practiced it enough times, we'll be better than ever tomorrow. We'll do it, and you'll get scouted, and it'll all work out."

"Of course you think it'll work out. That's all everything ever does for you."

My heart twists inside my chest at those words, ones she's used against me before we knew each other properly. After everything I told her, she knows that's not the case. As much as it hurts, I know she's doing it on purpose, trying to hurt me as much as I've hurt her.

"Amelie, please trust me."

“I already did that, and look where it got me.” She turns away from me, picks up her things, and shoves them into her bag. “Just leave me alone, River.”

“I can fix this. Please, Amelie,” I call after her, but she’s already halfway out the door.

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Chapter 27

Amelie



I DON'T KNOW WHETHER I'M MORE FOOLISH FOR TRUSTING RIVER IN THE first place, or for believing his wild excuse for why he didn't show up. I turn the train ticket over in my hand, inspecting every single part of it. It looks real, but maybe he made it himself to give his story some sort of evidence.

"Amelie?" a muffled voice calls through my door, but it's not Evie or Zena.

I get up from my bed, where I've spent the whole night wallowing instead of sleeping, and open the door for Damien. If River's sent him here as some kind of mediator, he's wasting his time.

"I don't want to hear it," I tell him.

"Just give me a couple of minutes," he says, and although I know it'll probably only annoy me more, I let him in.

Damien thanks me as he enters, and he looks out of place standing in my room. I wonder if he can tell that River has spent so many nights here, whether he can see the traces of him everywhere like I can. A few of his pens and notebooks are scattered on my desk, right next to my neat piles. If Damien goes in my bathroom, he'll see River's toothbrush in a cup next to mine.

"He told you what happened, right?"

"That his father whisked him away to Spain without telling him? He could have at least thought of a better excuse if he wanted to get away for a night."

“Do you really think he would do that to you?” Damien asks, a calm anger in his voice. “He’s my best friend, and I’ve barely seen him the past few months because he’s been with you. Every meeting his dad makes him attend, he complains to me that he’d rather be with you. He was fighting with him about going to this one in Madrid, trying to find any way not to go because he knew you had a rehearsal.”

River has given every last ounce of his energy to this performance, to *you*. He’s asleep in my bed right now because he spent all night pacing around my room trying to figure out how he could make this up to you.”

I think about River staying up all night after travelling all day, how tired he must have been after that long journey, yet he came to find me first.

“I know you two haven’t always gotten along with each other, but he would never go back on his word.”

He told me the same thing after our first kiss: that he doesn’t make promises he can’t keep. I believed him then. It was impossible not to, with the way he made me feel. But I don’t know how I can do the same now.

“I can’t make you forgive him, or dance with him, or whatever. And maybe this ruins our group, and it’s awkward and none of us hang out with each other anymore. Regardless of all of that, I will not stand for you thinking River is the worst person in the world, when he’s given his all to you.”

I let Damien’s words sink in as I try to think of a response, but nothing feels right. I don’t think that of River, never have. And although deep down I believe his story is real, it still doesn’t make up for the humiliation and embarrassment I felt about not being able to perform in the last dress rehearsal. The anger at seeing Charlotte on stage when she’s so undeserving of that place. The pain I felt at finally considering saying three words to him, just for him not to show up when I needed him the most.

But I can’t deny the wave of relief that washed over me when he came into the studio last night. Knowing that he was fine, and nothing bad had happened to him, was a tiny moment of comfort before all my other emotions overtook me. I wanted to go to him and find out what had happened in Spain with his father, but all I could think about was the way everyone looked at me while I waited alone at the side of the stage.

“I don’t...” The words struggle to come out.

“You don’t need to say anything to me,” Damien states. “I just needed to get that out. I’ll go now.”

He leaves my room without another word, and I drop to the floor, bringing my knees up to my chest as I bury my head in my hands. Everything Damien said was the truth, he has no reason to lie to me. Logically, I know I should go to River and hear him out so we can move past this and perform as normal in the showcase tonight. But my heart won't let me.

I gave River parts of myself no one else has ever had, and I trusted him in a way I've never trusted anyone before. Even though we never put a name to our relationship, that's exactly what it was. I was just too scared to admit it in case something like this happened, and it did.

My phone pings and it's as if he can hear the million thoughts running through my mind.

RIVER

I spoke to Madame, she says we can have the stage this morning for a final rehearsal

We can still do this

I stare at the screen, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. Can we still do this? Can I still dance with him, kiss him on stage in front of an audience, and pretend as if my heart hasn't been broken by him?

I think back to the reason I wanted to perform in the first place. The scouts that will be sat in that audience, deciding who will get a spot at the summer intensive. I have one chance to show them I have what it takes. If that means pulling myself together for a five-minute performance with the boy who broke my heart, I have no choice but to do it.

AMELIE

What time?

His reply comes instantly.

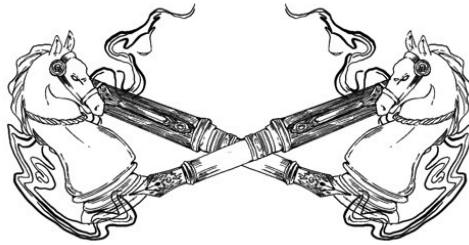
RIVER

It's ours at nine

I lock my phone as I stand. In one hour, I'll have to face him and decide whether I forgive him or we forget any of this ever happened.

Chapter 28

River



AS THE CLOCK TICKS CLOSER TO NINE, I START TO WORRY AMELIE MIGHT not show up. I don't know how I can make her forgive me, but if she walks on to this stage, then there's a chance she will.

After checking in with the lighting coordinator to make sure everything's set up correctly, I pace around the stage waiting for Amelie. Being up here is a lot different than the studio. Hundreds of people will be watching us tonight, but the most important ones will be sat dead centre in the front row, right next to Madame and the General Director. Amelie has the best chance out of everyone performing, I just have to make sure she doesn't hate me before we do it.

I check the time again, the minutes creeping past nine with no sign of Amelie. Worry pulses beneath my skin, my heart feeling like it's about to collapse in on itself at the possibility of her not showing up. But then I hear the light tap of footsteps, slow and measured, and it can only be her.

Amelie doesn't look at me as she places her things on the side of the stage, shedding her outer layers so she can change into her dress. It fits beautifully on her, the fabric swaying around her as she walks toward me on the stage.

Instinct tells me to reach out to her, to let my hand brush against hers before I pull her close, but I stop myself. I still need to earn her trust back before I can get carried away like that.

She's silent as she moves into the starting position, and I don't try to say anything either. I signal to the audio tech at the back of the theatre to start

the music as I find my place behind her, my hands falling to her waist.

The music starts, notes I've heard countless times over the past few months, and my body moves of its own accord. I've memorised the way Amelie moves her body, too, the exact position and weight of her as she takes every step. The leaps and dips, the playful push and pull as we leave ourselves behind to completely transform into Romeo and Juliet.

Dancing with Amelie changed my life, brought back happiness to something I thought I'd lost forever. It gave me her—her trust, her mind, her body, her love. But she's holding back from me.

There's the slightest millimetre of space as she holds herself further from me, imperceptible to anyone who's watching, but it feels like a chasm to me. Her eyes don't catch mine like they used to; her gaze avoids me completely, even in moments when our faces are so close together and she's the only thing I see. Her smiles are weak, a fake, polite one that she gives to strangers, the one reserved for me, completely devoid of her face. I can't feel her heart beating in time with mine anymore.

We continue through the routine, and I try to do it just as we've practiced, to show Amelie the most perfect version of me, the one that I'll show to everyone tonight. But there's an ache in my chest, and my entire body feels weak at not being in sync with her anymore. To anyone watching, there's no doubt that we're a perfect pair. Our moves flow perfectly, neither of us missing a single beat or step as the music draws to its close.

The climax approaches, Amelie prancing away as I chase after her, Romeo reaching out for his love. My hand wraps around her wrist, and she stops moving, releasing a heavy breath before she turns to face me, her hand resting in mine. We face each other, and while this moment should be full of excitement and anticipation, Romeo and Juliet finally taking that step together to solidify their relationship, it's the opposite.

There's a crease between Amelie's brows, her fingers curled into her side instead of relaxed. She holds her breath, a sheen in her eyes, and as I step closer to her, it wrecks me completely. I place my hands on her waist as she rises en pointe, supporting her weight as her face comes almost level with mine. We're supposed to kiss now, supposed to perform the part of the routine that everyone looks forward to the most. But when I dip my head to meet hers, I get her cheek instead of her lips, and a shaky exhale that makes me fall apart.

There's more we're supposed to do; Amelie is meant to race off stage, and I follow after her seconds later, but instead we stay in that same spot. My hands still on her waist, fingers digging into her sides because I don't want to let her go. She goes weightless, her body collapsing against mine as the music ends.

My eyes sting as I cling tighter to her, the stage lights lowering until there's only a faint glow over us. This was our final stage rehearsal, and I'm worried it was our weakest performance, worried that I've completely ruined everything for her, for us.

"I hate you so much." She punches at my chest.

It doesn't hurt at all, each beat feeling like CPR as she restarts my heart, bringing life back into it just by speaking to me again.

"I know." I wrap my arms around her, holding her closer to me as she starts to cry.

"Why didn't you tell me anything?"

"My phone died. And by the time I charged it, it was too late." I run a hand across her back, the other moving up to cup the nape of her neck.

"Not that," she sniffles before tilting her head up to look at me, her chin digging into my chest. "Your dad's been bothering you?"

I haven't told her anything about that. I avoided saying anything that might make her worry I'd mess up the performance, for fear she'd lose trust in me. I didn't want her to think that anything would get in the way of us dancing together.

"I didn't want to make it your problem," I tell her.

"It should be my problem, too," she says, punching me again.

"Why?" I ask, moving my hand from the back of her neck to cup her cheek, swiping my thumb across it to wipe away the tears that have settled.

"That day in Milan, you said we were partners."

"Yes, and you said that made us sound like we were on a mission," I remind her, and she lets out a soft laugh.

"Forget what I said then." She rolls her eyes at me. "Partners are meant to support each other, bear the heavy things when the other feels too weak to carry it all alone. You should have let me bear it with you, River."

A heavy sigh escapes me as her hands come to cover my wrists, her thumbs running back and forth across them.

"Next time, if your dad is bothering you, or if there's anything else going on with you, I want you to tell me. Whatever happens from now on,

River, we deal with it together.”

“Okay,” I tell her, a smile finding its way onto my face as one blooms on hers.

She tucks her head under my chin, her arms wrapping around my neck as I press our bodies together, not wanting any space between us.

“I still hate you,” she mumbles into my skin, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Hate you, too,” I tell her, and this time, when she looks up at me and my head dips closer to hers, she doesn’t move away.



After we’ve cleared the stage and changed back into our normal clothes, I take Amelie’s hand in mine as we leave the theatre. We’ll have to be back here in just a few hours, but for now I want to be alone with her.

Our steps are hurried as we go back to my room, every second before the performance tonight feeling precious. Amelie practically drags me along, staying ahead as she guides us there, not a care in the world about who might see us.

She opens my door, and we bundle into the room, my arms instantly wrapping around her so I can hold her close to me, breathe her in, feel every beat of her heart.

“Oh, I didn’t-”

Amelie lets out a small scream and I whip around to see my dad sitting at my desk, his hands over his eyes.

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

I step in front of Amelie, urging her behind me as I move closer to him. Surely, I must be hallucinating.

“Damien let me in,” he answers, dropping his hands from his face to look at me. “I wanted to apologise, I didn’t realise...”

He doesn’t finish his sentence, the words trailing off as he glances over to Amelie.

“I can leave,” she says quietly, her fingers squeezing my arm in reassurance.

“No, whatever he wants to say to me, he can say in front of you. You’re owed this apology, too.”

I say the last words to him, letting him know exactly what I expect of him now that he’s here. Making me go to Madrid didn’t just take something away from me; he took it from Amelie, too.

“Amelie, I didn’t realise how important this was,” he starts, standing and turning his attention to her as she moves to stand by my side, lacing her fingers with mine. “River tried explaining it to me, but I was too stubborn to listen. I’m sorry if my actions caused any harm to you.”

“I don’t need an apology from you. I just have one request,” she says, and I glance down at her, wondering what it could be. “Trust your son more. If River says something’s important to him, then believe that. I know you have your own plans for him, but he’s his own person, and he contains multitudes. He can dance and do whatever boring business stuff you want him to do.”

She says the last sentence with a wave of her hand, and I stifle a laugh, but Amelie digs her elbow into my side.

“It’s *extremely* boring, Dad,” I say, dragging out the word.

“Do you think I’m not bored, too? The way those old men speak, I’ve had more exciting conversations at funerals,” Dad laughs.

“Some of them look close to their own,” I add, and Amelie bursts out laughing, setting off Dad and me.

The mood lightens, sun shining through the window as the three of us laugh at the ridiculousness of the entire situation.

“I’m sorry, River. I’ll try to reel it in in the future. You don’t have to attend all the meetings if you don’t want to, and if you have other commitments, I’ll respect them.”

“Thank you,” I say with a smile, relief settling in my chest at knowing that it won’t always be like this anymore. It’ll be easier now to talk about everything with him, not just whatever investment he has his eyes on, and that I have to feign interest in.

“You’ve never looked happier, son,” he remarks, his eyes darting down to where Amelie’s hand is joined with mine, the barely there gap between our bodies as my arm presses against hers.

“I’m so happy, Dad. Ballet has never meant this much to me before,” I tell him, and Amelie squeezes my hand tightly.

“Are there any tickets left for tonight?” he asks, and it feels like my heart is going to burst.

“I’m sure we can get you one,” Amelie tells him, her smile matching mine.

The two talk about the performance, Dad asking questions about the showcase, and Amelie happily answering them. I’m content to watch in silence, the weight that’s been pressing down on me for god knows how long, finally lifted.

It’s a scene I never imagined in my head, but as it plays out in front of me, it feels right. One aspect of my future speaking with another, the two finding common ground, and holding space for each other. I don’t have to choose between them anymore, don’t have to worry that picking one over the other will compromise either relationship. Dad will always have my back, and Amelie will always be by my side.

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Chapter 29

Amelie



THE SOUND BEHIND THE CURTAINS IS ELECTRIFYING. THE LOUD WHISPERS OF hundreds of people waiting for the showcase to start, the buzz of excitement, the rustling of everyone finding their seats.

I take a peek from side stage, looking out to find where our friends are seated along with River's dad, all of them a few rows from the front. Immediately I spot Grayson, standing alone while the others sit. He aims his phone at the stage while Damien yanks his jacket to pull him down.

"Are they here?"

River's warmth covers my back as he stands behind me, one hand resting on my waist. I point them out, River's laugh vibrating against me as Grayson fights Damien to stand up again. Somehow he spots us and starts waving frantically in our direction with both arms above his head, and I can't stop the laugh that escapes me as I wave back. This time Evie is the one who's had enough, and she yanks his arm down. Grayson doesn't fight her, and we don't see him stand up again before we head farther behind the stage.

"He's going to whistle at the end, isn't he?" River says, and I nod, knowing all too well that Grayson doesn't care for propriety. "We really need to work on him."

"He's fun," I say with a shrug.

"That's one word for it," River says, rolling his eyes.

We go back to our dressing room, a shared space with a couple of other dancers who are on stage before us, so we're alone. River closes the door

behind us and wastes no time in wrapping his arms around me. He rests his chin on the top of my head, but I remind him not to mess up my hair.

“What about this?” he asks, running his thumb across my bottom lip. “Can I mess this up?”

“You’re the worst,” I tell him, but I don’t stop him as he leans down to kiss me.

Although I never thought this was a possibility when I first asked River to dance with me, I’m so glad we’re here. I can’t imagine doing this with anyone else, trusting someone so wholly to join me in what is the most important performance of my life so far.

And as much as I wanted to deny it at first, pretend that I wasn’t falling for him, there’s no way to stop the rapid beat of my heart when I’m around him, the excitement that bubbles within me whenever we dance together, the contentment I feel when we fall asleep and wake up together.

River kisses me as if we don’t have a show to do, and although I would love to stay here with him and make up for lost time, I can’t forget why we’re here.

“Let’s go and watch the others,” I say as I pull away from him. He lets out a sigh, his fingers squeezing my waist before he lets go.

“Fine, I guess,” he pouts, and I squeeze his cheek at how adorable he looks. He gives me a smile that lights me up from the inside before we go back out of the room to watch the others from side stage.

The performances are as wonderful as I expected, everyone performing at their absolute best. The talent in this room right now is immense—well, apart from Charlotte, who is arguing with a stagehand about something trivial. The other day, all I felt was anger when I saw her, but now there’s nothing. Charlotte may be able to get everything handed to her while we’re at university, but that doesn’t mean the scouts won’t see right through her, that the real world won’t hit her once we graduate in a few years.

The rest of the showcase passes quickly, and it’s almost time for me and River to perform. We don’t say a word to each other as the lights go out and the previous dancer hurries off the stage to applause, leaving it clear for us. River takes my hand in his, squeezing it tightly as he brings it up to his lips, then drops it and kisses my cheek before he leads me to the centre of the stage.

He steps behind me like he’s done a thousand times before, and when his hands come around my waist, I don’t feel any worry about this

performance. Even when those curtains come up, and we're faced with hundreds of watchful eyes, we're still just us. It's always been just us.

The music starts as the curtain rises, and River and I dance better than we ever have before. We're in tune with one another in a way we haven't been before, our breaths syncing like our hearts. I'm so full of pure joy, every move I make only elevated by that feeling. River smiles at me the whole time, his touch firm, steady, and reassuring, every tiny action of mine perfectly reciprocated by him.

We are Romeo and Juliet, in an alternate universe where tragedy doesn't await them, just a long life together full of love and happiness. And when we reach the end, and our breathing is heavy, and my body aches in the best way possible, and River's lips finally find mine, I silently tell him everything I haven't said yet. I know he hears it from the smile I feel against my lips, the press of his body against mine, and the adoration in his eyes when we finally break apart at the sound of applause from a standing ovation.

A loud whistle catches everyone but us off guard, and I don't even have to see them to know that Damien has tackled Grayson to sit him down again. I just about catch a glimpse of River's dad, pride clear on his face as he smiles at both of us. Evie and Zena have tears in their eyes as they clap loudly for us, and it sets me off before I even know it. River pulls me into him, holding me tightly as he lets me cry out the months of hard work we've put in, all finally culminating in tonight's performance that went better than I could have expected.

The lights go off, and River sweeps me off the stage. We barely make it back to the dressing room before his mouth crashes against mine.

"I love you, Amelie," he whispers into the kiss. "God, I love you so much."

"I love you, too," I tell him, my arms wrapping around his neck.

"Finally," he breathes, his shoulders relaxing like a weight has been lifted off them before he kisses me again.

"Knew it, you owe me a hundred."

We break apart at the sound of Grayson's voice and Damien's heavy sigh. Our friends are gathered at the door, flowers in hand, trying to hide their smiles. Damien reaches into his pocket, pulls out two fifty-euro notes, and slaps them into Grayson's outstretched hand.

"You made a bet?" River asks, his voice rising on the last word.

“It was always gonna happen, my guy,” Grayson says, gleefully tucking the money away.

“You’ve known us for a year,” River reminds him.

“Okay, and I’ve had eyes for that whole year. You should be more annoyed at Damien; he thought it wouldn’t happen until summer.”

“You’re meant to be my friend,” River turns to him.

“I’m your best friend,” Damien says, with a quick wink in my direction.

I probably wouldn’t have given River another chance if Damien hadn’t come to my room and told me everything, so I guess he’s earned that title.

“The rest of us already knew anyway; you’re both late to the party,” Evie interrupts, and Grayson and Damien just stare at the rest of us, mouths wide open. “You were amazing! Both of you!”

She hurries over, embracing us both tightly before she passes the flowers to me. Zena does the same, and I’m so grateful to have them both in my life. We make our way around the group, hugging everyone as they congratulate us on a great performance. Happiness overwhelms me as I look around at all of them, wondering how fortunate I really am to have found a family that loves me so much.

We spend the rest of the show in the dressing room. I have no desire to watch Charlotte embarrass herself in front of an audience. I’d rather spend this time with my friends instead, the people that have always supported and encouraged me. The faint sound of applause filters through our conversation, and we all leave the room so River and I can get ready for the final bow.

Our friends stay in the wings as the dancers take turns going back on stage and bowing, the room filled with clapping hands and cheers as everyone is celebrated for their performance. River and I go out when it’s our turn, and once again, Grayson starts whistling from the side. He’s like an overexcited puppy, but it only makes the smile on my face brighter as River raises our joined hands up before bringing them back down, both of us bowing to the crowd in thanks.

At the end, every dancer comes on stage together for one final bow as the curtain falls, and the applause slowly comes to a stop. The loud chatter returns soon after as people filter out of the theatre, and we go offstage to find our friends and River’s dad.

They stand in a circle talking about their favourite performances, and while they compliment the other dancers, all of them agree that ours was

the best. Whether they're saying that because it's true or because they're obligated to, I don't mind either way. A tap on my shoulder gets my attention.

"Amelie Devereaux?"

I turn to see the scouts, a petite woman with light brown skin and dark curly hair like mine, dressed smartly in all black. She's joined by a taller man, olive skin and light hair, dressed in a similar fashion to her.

"That's me," I tell them, and our friends go silent behind me. River's hand tightens around mine.

"River Campbell, correct?"

He nods, squeezing my hand even tighter, to the point that I worry he's cutting off both our circulation.

"Your performance was wonderful. I've only seen passion like that in a pas de deux at the Royal Ballet from our principal ballerinas."

I try to let the words sink in, storing them in my head for later when I can process them at a time when my heart doesn't feel like it's about to burst out of my chest.

"We have our summer intensive coming up," the man starts to say.

In my peripheral, River's head snaps toward me, his eyes widening but I don't dare to look at him, or I'll fall apart.

"Unfortunately..."

My heart drops instantly, and River rubs his thumb over the back of my hand, stepping closer as if he can shield me from whatever they're about to say.

"We only have one spot available."

"It's Amelie's," he says, before she's even finished her sentence. "You have to give it to her. I wouldn't have even performed if it wasn't for her. I don't even like dancing if it's not with her. It's Amelie's spot."

The lady smiles, her eyes darting between River and me before dropping to our joined hands.

"Amelie, would you like to join us this summer?"

My mouth falls open, but I can't get enough air in my lungs to get a word out. River uses his free hand to shake me slightly, bringing me back to my senses.

"I'd love to," I say, shakily.

"Then welcome, Miss Devereaux. We look forward to seeing you this summer."

The two walk away as quickly as they arrived, and the only reason I don't collapse to the ground is that River lifts me into a hug, his arms crushing me to him.

"You did it," he whispers into my ear. "I'm so proud of you."

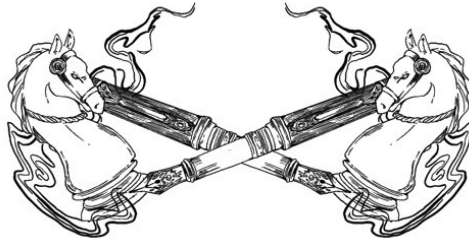
He holds me tightly, and even though I can hear our friends crowding around us to congratulate me, I don't want to let go.

I've dreamed of this moment for years, imagined every single possible way it could happen, but nothing could have prepared me for how good it feels to have achieved this long-held dream, and to do it with River by my side.

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Epilogue

River - Five Months Later



THE PALAIS GARNIER IS EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL INSIDE THAN IT IS OUTSIDE. An iconic part of Paris' landscape, a firm reminder of the history of art that lives within this city. It's always been a beautiful building to me, somewhere I enjoyed visiting with my parents when I was younger, and even after spending plenty of time here this summer, I'm not sick of it.

The journey from the university takes just under an hour, and while some days I'm exhausted from working long distance with dad, the end goal is more than worth it.

I pass the grand staircase and the hubbub of tourists gathered on it, taking photos of the painted ceilings, the onyx balustrades, the marble steps, all the beautiful features that have been expertly maintained for hundreds of years. I'm lucky enough to see them pretty much every day at this point so I bypass them all, making my way through the just as ornate hallways so I can reach the auditorium.

It's closed off to the public today, but I show a pass to the attendant standing by the door to one of its many entrances, and I'm allowed through. As soon as I open the door, I hear the orchestra playing the opening notes to a piece from *L'Histoire de Manon*, a tragic tale of a young girl torn between two worlds. They're seated in the pit below the largest stage in Europe, each member of it playing expertly as the dancers move to their tune. There are dozens of people on stage, but there's only one that commands my attention.

Amelie moves across the stage as if she was born to perform on it, as if the architects built it just for her all those years ago. There's power and elegance in every step, her face perfectly poised, and such clear awe from everyone watching her. Even though they're sharing the same stage, in this moment, it's just hers.

I take a seat near the back of the auditorium, not wanting to cause a disturbance by moving closer. I can still see her perfectly from here, the stage lights illuminating her, making her glow like some ethereal angel sent here just to grace us with her presence. It's an honour to be able to watch her like this, to know how hard she worked to get here, to see her live out her dreams.

The music reaches its climax, the dancers fluttering around the stage as Amelie takes centre position to finish off the performance, the lights dimming along with the final notes from the orchestra. There's scattered applause from the few people that have been granted access to view the rehearsal, applause that will be multiplied immensely later on when the showcase actually begins.

I get up from my seat and make my way back into the hallway, showing my pass at various points so I can get behind the stage and to the dressing rooms. The dancers chat amongst themselves, a few greeting me as I walk past but I don't have time to talk to them properly. I don't have to think about where I'm going as I navigate through the backstage area, ignoring everyone and everything around me until I reach Amelie's door.

It's ajar just enough that I can see her sat in front of her mirror, patting her face and neck with a small towel. The queen chess piece I gave her sits right below it. I barely touch the door before her eyes catch mine in the reflection, the corners of her mouth curving upward.

I can't help but smile back as I approach, my hands winding around her shoulders as I lean forward and rest my chin on her head. Her hands come up to meet mine, her head ducking down as she presses a kiss to them before tilting back to look at me. I drop a kiss to her forehead, her nose, her lips as she sighs contentedly.

She dips her head again to kiss my wrists before she pulls me down so I'm sitting next to her, and then she kisses me properly, her fingers running through my hair as she tugs it gently.

"Still want to rip my hair out?" I murmur against her lips, my teeth grazing them as I can't hold back my smile.

“Always,” she whispers back, her nails brushing against my scalp. “So arrogant.”

“You love it,” I tell her, winding my arm around her as I slide her into my lap. “You love me.”

“And I hate you, too,” she breathes. “So much.”

“Of course you do,” I reassure her, our kisses turning more hurried as if it’s been years since we’ve seen each other rather than just a few days.

“I thought I wouldn’t see you until tonight,” she says, leaning back to look over me.

“Dad postponed today’s meeting, told the shareholders there was an emergency.”

“And what was it?”

I pull her closer to me, wrapping my arms around her tightly as I bury my face in her neck.

“I missed you.”

She plays with the hair at the nape of my neck before sliding her hands down to trace patterns on my back.

“Very serious emergency,” she says against the shell of my ear.

“Extremely. Almost killed me.”

Amelie lets out a soft laugh, fisting her hands into my shirt as if there’s any way for us to get even closer than we are now. She kisses my neck, complete bliss overwhelming me before she pulls away, her hands traveling up to cradle my face.

“Everyone has their tickets for tonight, right?” Amelie asks, her thumbs moving back and forth across my cheeks.

“Grayson’s got it all taken care of.” I cover her wrists with my hand, mimicking her actions as I run my fingers across them. “I don’t think he’d let anyone miss it even if they wanted to. He’s on the flight back here now.”

“I can’t believe he’s flying all the way here from California just for this.”

“That’s our Grayson,” I tell her.

“You say that like he’s your son,” she laughs.

“Feels like it sometimes with that boy.” I roll my eyes, but it’s all in jest.

Grayson spent most of his summer back home in America, but he’s more than happy to come back to watch Amelie perform tonight. I’m not sure why he couldn’t get an earlier flight, and he hasn’t really said much

about what he was doing back home, but I'm sure he'll update us when he gets here.

"Evie and Damien are already in Paris," Amelie continues. "Zena and Layth should be getting in soon, too."

Evie divided her time between Switzerland and Paris this summer, even joining me to watch Amelie rehearse sometimes. Any time I was stuck in a meeting, whether it be in London, Paris, Madrid, or anywhere else, Damien was right by my side, just as bored as I was. We only got through it because we had each other.

Zena went back to her home country, Layth going with her of course. I'm not sure what the two of them got up to, but I'm sure Amelie will hear it all later, and then tell me.

"Do you want me in the wings or in the audience?" I ask her.

While everyone else needed to get tickets for tonight, mine was secured as soon as Amelie got my all-access pass at the very start of the summer. I've made good use of it, visiting her as many times as I can to watch her rehearse.

I didn't think she could get any better, but this summer intensive has only honed her skills even more. I thought I was captivated by her before, but now it's like something otherworldly. There's no word to describe what it feels like to watch her dance.

"Wings," she tells me. "I want you as close as possible."

I tip my head up to kiss her, giving her exactly what she wants.

"Then I'll be in the wings," I assure her. I'll stay there for the rest of my life, watching her on any stage in the world, if that's what she wants from me.

Amelie kisses me back, her body moulding to mine as she wraps her arms around me. I don't know how long we stay like that, making up for the past few days of not seeing each other, before I pull back.

"Let's go for a walk," I tell her, tracing my thumb against her bottom lip. "Want to show you something."

Amelie tilts her head curiously, but she shifts off my lap, stands, and pulls me up with her. I take her hand in mine, then lean down to take her shoes off and put her slippers on. We're not walking far, and I know she probably needs to check all of her tape and toe pads are fine, but I can do that for her after.

I help her out of her costume, give her my hoodie to cover her leotard, and she pulls the hood up, tightening the strings so her face is framed in an oval of fabric. She looks adorably cute, and I want to stay here alone with her but there's something important I need to do first.

I guide her out of the dressing room, away from the dancers, until we reach one of the exit doors and head into the hallway. Tourists continue to mill around, but we move through them with ease, none of them paying attention to us at all as we walk to the lobby at the bottom of the grand staircase.

I look around, observing the surroundings as I try to remember the exact place. Amelie doesn't ask what I'm doing, just trusts me completely as I shuffle us around a bit more before letting go of her hand.

"Wait right here," I tell her, giving no further explanation.

Amelie gives me a puzzled look but does as I ask, tucking her hands into the front pocket of the hoodie as she waits for some kind of explanation. I take a few steps back, moving until I find my own spot. Once I do, I turn to look at Amelie, the gap between us feeling bigger than I remembered.

"This is where I first saw you," I say, not shouting but loud enough for her to hear. "This is where you first captivated me, where I first experienced that heart-stopping, stomach-tied-in-knots, overwhelming feeling of something I didn't even know the word for."

A crease forms between her brows, her eyes smiling but her lips downturned.

"I dreamt of that night so many times before I saw you again," I continue, taking a step closer to her. "Imagined seeing you again, what I would say to you." Another step. "Those dreams never went away." One more step. "That feeling never went away."

I'm in front of her now, and she reaches out her hand for mine, intertwining our fingers.

"I love you so much, Amelie. It all started here. It's never going to go away."

"River, if you propose right now, I will kill you," she sputters out.

"Not today," I tell her, a huff of laughter escaping me. "We've got plenty of time for that in the future, *ma chérie*."

"Then what's all this?" she asks.

“I just wanted you to see where it all began for me. Every day I’ve come to this place, it’s all I’ve thought about. Our story started here. You’re living your dream here, and so am I.”

Amelie doesn’t say anything, just uses her free hand to grip the back of my neck as she pulls me down until my lips meet hers. I’ve never been happier in my life, all those overwhelming feelings settling comfortably in my chest, finding their space after all this time. I tip my forehead against hers, breathing her in as people move around us, but they don’t matter at all. In this moment, all I do is remind her of one simple truth.

“It’s just us.”

“Always just us.”

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I usually write quite long acknowledgements but I'll keep it short this time.

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And finally, thank you reader for picking up this book and giving it a chance. I hope you enjoyed Amelie and River's story.

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Also by Zarin Madiyha

[The Story Of Us](#)



When Violet Ayaz and Isaac Evans discover they share a birthday, they don't expect it to lead to a friendship, let alone a relationship. Five years of secret birthday meetings and stolen moments pass, and the two realise they can't deny their feelings any longer.

But when Isaac doesn't turn up on their seventeenth birthday and the two break up, Violet is left heartbroken and all of their plans for the future disappear.

Isaac attempts to reconnect all summer break, but as their last year of school begins, Violet refuses to listen.

Their final year already has enough challenges as they both contemplate their future, but the biggest challenge comes when Violet and Isaac are forced to work on a project together.

Is this a chance for the two to rekindle their relationship that's been years in the making, or will they go their separate ways when the final school bell rings?

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[The Secret Of Us](#)



Izzy Evans thought her final year of boarding school would be a quiet countdown to freedom—a chance to dodge university brochures and steer clear of her ex, Ryan.

While everyone else seems to have their futures mapped out, Izzy is paralysed by the thought of making the wrong choice.

Noah Park just wants a fresh start. Kicked out of his old school, he's now the new boy with a target on his back, and Ryan seems determined to make his life miserable.

But when Izzy steps in to defend him, it ignites a rumour that catches fire: Izzy and Noah are dating.

And once the school rumour mill starts turning, there's no stopping it.

Dealing with Noah's sudden bad reputation and Izzy's ex who won't leave her alone, the two strike up a fake dating deal. But the more time they spend with each other, the harder it gets to pretend that it's not real.

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