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One

'Twirl.'

Jane Boyle spun obligingly, her skirt flaring in a satisfying burst of green silk. She craned her neck for a glimpse of the back in the boutique's narrow mirror, but it was hard to tell what she'd look like when she wasn't twisting around like a lime-coloured flamingo. This, she reminded herself, was why friends were so essential to the shopping process – especially when shopping to impress a man who was an unrepentant fan of the back view. Jane had spent every lunch hour that week hunting for the perfect dress, but by Thursday it had become clear that she needed an expert's help.

Fortunately, Atelier Antoine, the boutique architectural design firm where Jane had worked for the past two years, was also home to Elodie Dessaix, a fiercely talented shopper. Elodie was nearly as invested in Jane's budding romance as she was in

finding the perfect Swarovski-studded slingbacks. Jane cocked an eyebrow at her friend, whose long, brown legs were swinging cheerfully from her perch on a stool in the changing room of the *très chic* and *très cher* Soie et Vin boutique.

After a thoughtful pause, Elodie shook her head. 'It's just so *green*,' she explained unhelpfully in her charming British-French lilt before shoving a dusty-lavender sheath dress into Jane's hands.

'I'll freeze,' Jane muttered grouchily. She started to hand the dress back, but the steely look in Elodie's espresso eyes changed her mind. 'Are we down to the dregs?'

Elodie nodded crisply, her curly black bob swinging above her shoulders. Jane headed back into the gold-and-marble dressing room, complete with an ornate gilt-framed mirror. It had been Elodie's idea to target the pricey boutiques just steps off the fabled Champs-Elysées. 'Quality shows,' she had argued passionately and convincingly. Jane had allowed herself to be persuaded because, in her trim camel-hair coat and suede Lacroix heels, Elodie looked like a million bucks.

The drawback of the plan was soon apparent, though: Jane could only afford to shop the clearance rack, and even that was a stretch at some of the places Elodie had dragged her into. And the drawback of *that* was it was the middle of December and Jane was contemplating putting on a gauzy halter dress that had all the substance of tissue paper.

At least I'll look like I belong with Malcolm, she told herself grimly as she pulled over her head what felt like the hundredth dress. The thought of Malcolm brought a rush of heat to her cheeks and, well, other parts of her, too.

Malcolm Doran had swept her off her feet – literally – a month before, when they'd met over a chipped fifth-century vase at an antiquities auction. She had been there bidding on pieces with

Madame Godinaux, her first solo client; Malcolm was expanding his enormous art collection. He was tall, with broad shoulders, dark-blond hair, and perfectly kissable lips. The attraction had been immediate and overwhelming, and she'd lingered outside after the auction to light a cigarette in the bitter winter chill, hoping for another glimpse of him. Two puffs in, she had begun to try to talk her naïve and giddy self down. Malcolm's accent and business card agreed: he was American. Whether he was in France for business or pleasure, he wouldn't be there long. Casual flirting was as close as she could afford to get.

She'd dropped the barely charred cigarette on the cobblestone sidewalk and crushed it under the heel of her black Carel boot, trying to stamp out any attraction to Malcolm along with it. Instead, the stiletto had promptly snapped off. Just as she lost her balance, wobbling and stumbling ungracefully, Malcolm had appeared – golden, muscular, delicious-smelling – to steady her. His dark eyes had glittered in the lamplight, although he was evidently too gentlemanly to laugh out loud at her awkwardness. 'My car is right here,' he'd said in a wonderful, liquid-gold rumble of a voice, gesturing toward the street, 'and I'm going to have to insist on giving you a ride home, if only for the safety of other pedestrians.'

Before she'd realized what was happening, he'd scooped her up in his arms and strode easily toward a waiting limousine. Then she was ensconced in the warm, leather-covered back of the car, and Malcolm was handing her a flute of champagne.

Elodie's head popped through the curtain of the dressing room, curls bouncing like springs. 'You look gorgeous,' she cooed, interrupting Jane's reverie and bringing her crashing back to the reality of the boutique: flimsy clothes, ludicrous price tags, and a saleswoman who clearly knew she wasn't dealing with her usual clientele, as she'd been chatting on the phone incessantly

since the two of them had walked in. 'Your sexy American will never know what hit him.'

'I wish,' Jane admitted honestly. 'At least then we'd be even.' She'd done her share of dating, naturally; you couldn't be a curvy twenty-four-year-old blonde in Paris without getting asked out one or two million times a day. But she'd never understood what people meant by 'chemistry' until she met Malcolm. Even the air around him felt heady and intoxicating, and she simply couldn't get enough. Her resolve to keep a safe distance had lasted all of two minutes once they were alone together in his limo, as had, in fact, her resolve to keep *any* distance between them whatsoever.

Then she had been on the sidewalk, and the car was a pair of red lights vanishing around the corner, and the streetlight above her head had blown out with a rather spectacular shower of sparks that seemed to capture her frustration quite perfectly.

Luckily for the city's electrical grid, we spent every night after that together, Jane thought ruefully. She and electronics had always had an uneasy relationship: lights flickering, computers crashing, photocopiers spitting out reams of chewed-up paper, Mètro trains breaking down when she was in a hurry. Fortunately, her relationship with Malcolm was nothing short of blissful. They'd spent three weeks eating (when necessary), sleeping (barely), and making love more or less constantly, until Malcolm had regretfully announced an unavoidable business meeting in Italy. But tonight he would be back, and had suggested they try to maintain their composure long enough to have an actual date. And, apparently, it was going to be a rather dressy occasion.

Jane stepped out of the dressing room to examine herself in the full-length mirror on the main floor. She scowled in frustration at the embroidery along the hem. 'I'm so last season it hurts.'

At the counter, the saleswoman, a thin and rather pinched-looking blonde woman in her mid-thirties, laughed as if on cue.

She lowered her voice to a hush, no doubt whispering about her fiscally challenged customers. Jane blushed, and then mentally kicked herself for blushing.

'Men don't notice things like that,' Elodie told her soothingly, but Jane remained stubbornly un-soothed. Maybe the guys Elodie knew didn't, but Malcolm wasn't any ordinary man.

Although he was quite casual about it, Malcolm was loaded. The only child of a wealthy family in Manhattan, he was an art dealer out of passion, not necessity. His car, coat, voice, suits – *everything* about him – oozed the kind of wealth and breeding that an orphan from French farm country could barely imagine. Jane knew that she couldn't possibly manage to dress to his level, but at the very least she could avoid embarrassing herself. She picked at the hem. *Maybe.*

'The black one wasn't bad,' Elodie reminded her, holding up an admittedly boring, but affordable strapless gown with a tired silk flower bobbing at the waist.

'Mesdemoiselles?' the saleswoman said, finally hanging up the phone with a clatter. 'Excuse me,' she went on in heavily accented English, surprising Jane. The woman had barely seemed to be aware that she had customers at all, but apparently she had been listening in between gossipy phone calls. Jane had always spoken English at home with her American-born grandmother, and Elodie was the daughter of a British diplomat. They enjoyed getting to speak their first language too much to care about being mistaken – frequently – for tourists in Paris. The saleswoman nodded her blonde head to the back of the store. 'I believe that there is something perfect for you in our new collection. It is not supposed to be for sale yet, but . . .' Her long-fingered hands curled expressively in the air.

Jane's heart sank: perfect would be nice, but she couldn't even begin to guess what perfect would cost. 'Thank you,' she

began slowly, feeling heat rise to her cheeks, 'but I was really just looking . . .' She trailed off, unable to find just the right excuse. From her perch, Elodie held up the black dress brightly.

'But a Monsieur Doran called,' the saleswoman told them briskly, and Jane's head snapped up. *Malcolm*. 'You are Mademoiselle Boyle, yes? He has instructed me to charge anything you like to his account. *Anything.* And this, I think you will like.' She smiled, which seemed to strain the tight muscles of her face almost to the breaking point, then clicked her way to the back room.

'And he's generous, too,' Elodie sighed, wrapping a Beaujolais-coloured scarf around her neck and pursing her lips at the mirror. 'Here I've been wasting my prime dating years on French boys when there were men like that just a tiny little ocean away!'

Before Jane could respond, the saleswoman returned, holding out a gorgeous dress in sapphire chiffon. Jane gasped. The elegantly pleated bodice plunged to a deep V, and the folds of the long skirt cascaded down to Jane's toes. It was truly extraordinary.

The cash register's drawer slammed open of its own accord with a ringing crash, and all three of them jumped. '*Cette fichue chose; c'est la quatrième fois . . .*' The saleswoman stormed away, muttering darkly at the misbehaving register, leaving Jane with an armful of whisper-soft chiffon that cost approximately as much as her monthly rent.

'Try it,' Elodie whispered excitedly, and Jane practically skipped behind the curtain to do exactly that.

Two

By that evening, Jane's confidence had completely evaporated. She looked doubtfully at the address in her hands for what had to be the thousandth time before stepping out of the taxi in front of 25 Avenue Montaigne, which just so happened to be the iconic Plaza Athénée. *Thank God I'm dressed right*. She took a deep lungful of the humid winter air, and smiled at the uniformed doorman who ushered her deferentially into the impossibly magnificent five-star hotel. The lobby was a sumptuous mixture of marble, velvet and crystal that set her teeth on edge, and Jane felt a pang of longing for the clean lines and simple track lighting of her studio apartment.

She fought the urge to panic and instead focused on her image in the mirror across the lobby. Her pale blonde hair was swept loosely into a low knot, and she'd opted for minimal makeup. Her grey eyes looked wide and innocent; the blue of the dress

set them off nicely – and showed a tantalizing stretch of creamy décolletage. She looked sexy, but tasteful . . . almost as though she belonged here.

Of course, she also looked a bit vain, since standing there, over her reflection's shoulder, was Malcolm. Watching her watch herself. Perfect.

She turned and pressed her lips to his, wiping the amused smile off his face. She inhaled deeply; she had forgotten how delicious he smelled. His spiced-champagne scent made her feel half-drunk already.

'You look good enough to eat,' he whispered in her ear when they broke apart, and she had to fight off a sudden impulse to point out that he could easily skip dinner and do just that.

A real date. Like civilized people. In chairs.

As if he had read her thoughts – the second, less scandalous set of them, anyway – he took her arm and led her into the restaurant. He held a white-silk-cushioned chair for her, and she sat carefully, scooping and arranging the full skirt of her dress in a futile attempt to keep it from creasing or pulling.

'God, I missed you,' Malcolm's deep voice rumbled, and she forgot all about the chiffon. The candle at their table flickered, making his deep, dark eyes glow orange. 'Those were the six longest days of my life.'

'I missed you, too,' she told him softly, and she meant it. She couldn't quite explain it, but whenever she was around Malcolm, every part of her body hummed, desperate to be touching him. But at the same time, her mind felt peaceful, calm, as if it were perfectly happy to step out of the way and let her body take over. She was glad that their table was tucked in a private corner of the room, at least ten feet from the nearest other couple; an entire meal in public suddenly seemed like an awfully long time to avoid doing or saying something embarrassingly intimate.

'The auction house delivered my vase today,' Malcolm told her conversationally, unfolding his crème-coloured napkin and placing it on his lap. She smiled automatically – of course he would make this easier with small talk. She felt her mind adjust itself to match the lightness of his tone.

'They did?' Jane said teasingly. His carbon-dated tastes had been their very first topic of conversation. 'Let me guess: you'll put it in some corner where no one will bump into it by accident, and then go tell all your friends how yours is two centuries older than theirs.'

He laughed. 'You know, I didn't think France gave passports to people who weren't fanatical about preserving history. We're surrounded by people who haven't changed their traffic laws since horse-drawn carriages were the cool new hybrids. How did a serial renovator ever manage to slip through airport security?'

'I looked surprisingly innocent as a baby,' she answered. On their second date (they'd made it as far as her tiny kitchen table), she'd confessed that she was actually an American citizen, too, although she had lived in France with her grandmother since she was ten months old.

A white-jacketed waiter appeared just then with glistening flutes of champagne and two small glass bowls of radish foam with caramelized leeks.

Jane cocked a suspicious eyebrow. It smelled good, but it looked like shaving cream. 'You know, they don't eat foam in Alsace. This is strictly a pretentious Parisian thing,' she joked as the waiter glided off.

'Tell me more about your farm,' he suggested, taking a sip of the effervescing wine.

'You mean my own personal juvenile detention centre?' She poked her bottom lip with the prongs of her fork. Malcolm's eyes shifted for the briefest moment. 'You don't want to know about that.'

'I want to know everything about you.' His toe touched hers under the table, and a shiver ran from her pearl-painted toenails all the way up to her spine. She thought about all the luxury rooms in the floors above and had to clutch her chair to keep from dragging Malcolm upstairs. But that was the whole point of the evening, she reminded herself: to stay out of bed long enough to exchange more than pillow talk.

'Well, Gran keeps a fully stocked bomb shelter,' Jane admitted with a wry grin, feeling the warmth of the champagne begin to spread outward from her stomach. Six years away from her childhood home had given her the ability to see some humour in her unusual upbringing . . . as long as she didn't linger on it for too long. 'She was convinced we would one day be under siege.'

Malcolm laughed. 'That sounds a little paranoid.'

Jane smiled and took another sip of champagne. Her grandmother was more than paranoid, but it wasn't entirely without merit. Her daughter – Jane's mother – and son-in-law had died in a car crash in North Carolina just ten months after Jane was born. The woman was so petrified of losing her granddaughter, too, that she'd moved her to her home in a tiny village in France and barely let Jane out of her sight. And when that had been completely unavoidable, Gran had sent her faithful dog, Honey, along to watch over her. 'She was very . . . protective of me.'

The delicate sounds of a Mozart sonata filtered down from hidden speakers, and the waiter wordlessly refilled her water glass.

'Well I guess we have that in common then,' Malcolm said. A few tables over, a couple dug into goat cheese salads and fresh bread. 'What's your grandmother's stand on antique art?' he teased, wriggling an eyebrow comically.

Jane smirked. 'The woman has the absolute worst taste – even worse than yours, Mr Quaint-French-Whatever. She has

all these awful china plates on the wall and everything's huge and floral and heavy. She can't hang her hideous knickknacks and depressing oil paintings to save her life, so they're constantly slipping and falling and breaking, and she was convinced that I was going around knocking them down myself. It didn't even matter that I was in my room or outside; she always thought it was me. Let me tell you, though: if just hating those things was enough, then I broke every last one just by looking at them.'

'Now that's quite a talent,' Malcolm said, an unreadable expression in his eyes.

'Wouldn't it be? I could redecorate without lifting a finger.' Jane chuckled, lifting a polished fingernail in demonstration. 'It would certainly make my job a lot easier. Madame Godinaux has me running all over the city to pick up light fixtures and furniture. I don't know how she thinks it'll all fit into one house. I'd love to be able to get rid of a display nook or six without leaving fingerprints.'

Malcolm leaned forward, his gaze suddenly intent. His abrupt intensity made her breath catch in her throat. 'You're amazing, Jane. Do you know that?' He reached across the table and grasped her hand. 'I had this whole plan in place, but . . .' he trailed off, shaking his head ruefully.

Jane's heart started pounding, and her skin sizzled at his touch.

'Jane, I've always believed that when you meet the one, you know it.'

Jane glanced around, sure that her heartbeat must be echoing through the whole room.

'I'm not a patient man', Malcolm continued, 'and a month is already too long.' He set a small box covered in deep blue velvet on the table between them like a challenge, and gave her one last long look before snapping it open. Set on a platinum band, the diamond – an emerald-cut solitaire of at least five carats –

sparkled fiercely in the candlelight. 'Jane,' Malcolm said, his voice throbbing with passion, 'you're the one. I don't want to spend another day away from you, and I don't want to wait. Please,' he added, but there was no pleading in his tone, 'Jane, say you'll be my wife.'

The room spun fast. Jane's heart was in her throat and her cheeks flamed, as though the heat had been turned up full-blast. Marrying Malcolm would mean leaving France behind: her job at Atelier Antoine, her adorable apartment in the fifth arrondissement with its charming view of Notre Dame from the fire escape, her friends, her entire life . . .

The choice was easy.

'Of course. Of course I will.' She held out her left hand so he could slip the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly.