



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-colored 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-Élysées. “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, Métro 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 blond 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 blond 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-colored 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, mut-

tering 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.