



Turn the page for an exclusive series
of vignettes between
ROMA and JULIETTE!

"THE YEAR WAS 1922, AND NOTHING WAS IMPOSSIBLE."

I .

Juliette closed her left eye, trying to line up her shot. This was life-or-death. This had everything riding on it: the fate of the day and the fate of her reputation. . . .

She flicked her finger and the marble sped into the circle, colliding against the others with a satisfying *clink-clink-clink*. For a moment, there was a dizzying array of colors skittering in all directions. Then the red beads settled, the green beads came to a stop by the piece of string, and Juliette scrambled to her feet with a high-pitched squeal.

"Victory," she crowed, "is *mine*!"

Roma Montagov rolled his eyes, bending down to collect the marbles. He feigned annoyance, but Juliette caught him trying to suppress his smile.

"Okay, drama queen. It was a game of marbles, not a cage fight."

"I would win that too."

Juliette stopped a still-rolling marble with her shoe and kicked it over to him to help with the tidying efforts. She had struck her last shot so hard that the marbles had scattered everywhere in the alley, one hiding behind a half-rotting trash bag damp with rainwater. With a grimace, Juliette pushed her dress sleeve up, folding the fur around her wrist so it wouldn't get dirtied when she nudged aside the trash. These alleys were cramped, soggy, and vaguely dark, even with the morning sun hovering somewhere along the winter horizon.

Nevertheless, it was where they came to hang around, because it was the place with the fewest prying eyes.

Juliette finally rolled the marble out, huffing a breath as she stood and nudged it again with her shoe. It was then that a sudden pressure struck against her temple, like something had fallen from the sky. Juliette reared back, blinking in shock as her hand flew to cup her head. By the time she realized it was not the heavy sky pelting miniature rocks at her, but *Roma* plucking marbles from his palm one by one and shooting them at her with deadly aim, another had struck the back of her hand and bounced to the ground.

“Hey!” she whined.

“What?”

“What do you mean, *what?*” Juliette dodged the next marble. “Quit it!”

“Make me.”

The sea breeze blew in, salty and cold and wicked. It seemed to liven *Roma* up further as he grinned. Even at fifteen, he was a better marksman than half the gangsters in the city, though not for any notorious reason. Money simply bought the best tutors and teachers. He was good . . . but Juliette was better.

She caught the next one he threw, right out of midair, and hurled it back at him.

It struck his shoulder. *Roma* gave a short yell, all the marbles in his hand falling to the ground loudly. The Bund was nearby, making a constant ruckus from the ship workers and crew men as they bellowed and made haste, trying to get home earlier and earlier in the day as the end of the year approached. Juliette didn’t hear *Roma* emit any other noise of pain after his first yell, but she saw his lips part as he staggered against the wall, his head lolling down.

Juliette blinked. “Ro—”

She cut herself short. It had been a month since they first met by the Bund, a month of coming here to play with marbles, but they had

not yet acknowledged who the other person was. There was no doubt that Roma knew—he knew she was Juliette Cai, heir to the Scarlet Gang, heir of the group that was his greatest enemy. All the same, they did not speak of it.

“Hey,” Juliette tried again, stepping closer. “Are you okay?”

No response. Roma was looking to his feet, his hair fallen into his eyes, hand clutched around his shoulder. She didn’t *think* she had thrown that hard. What could it be? Paralysis in the nerves? Internal bleeding? Those involved in the blood feud would be awfully happy if she had accidentally killed the White Flower heir.

Juliette reached out with her hand. And in the blink of an eye, Roma grabbed her wrist, hauling her up against the wall until her back was to it and he had her boxed in, both of her hands pinned above her head. They were pressed close enough that it would be a scandal between any two kids in this city—and even more so that it was the two of *them*—but Juliette only loosed an irritated breath, vexed to have been caught out in his charade.

“Still winning that cage fight?” Roma asked cheerily.

“Ugh!” Juliette tried to kick with her feet, but he only side-stepped, avoiding each strike. “You are such a sore loser.”

“It doesn’t look like I am losing.”

“At *marbles*, you wet blanket.”

Roma laughed, the sound so warm, so all-encompassing that it trembled throughout his whole body. Juliette couldn’t help the grin that slipped onto her face too—that sudden flood of happiness, rare in a city slick with blood.

“Now look at that.” Roma released one of her hands from his grip, only so his own was free to grasp her chin lightly. “I count this as a victory.”

His touch was soft, and yet she felt it like a divine burning, like taking a drink directly from the sun. Juliette didn’t know what to make of any of that, so she simply wiped off her grin and batted at him with

her free hand until he stepped away. There was a sigh in the wind, like the sigh of the world, displeased that this was how Juliette would choose to respond. But there was nothing it could do except blow a strong breeze that whirled around the two, darting through Roma's shirt collar and ruffling it against the hollow of his neck, darting in and out of the pomade in Juliette's hair, yanking just one strand loose from her finger waves. The two heirs stood there in stillness, simply looking at one another in curiosity, until the wind died down and the moment passed. Juliette picked up one of the fallen marbles. "Shall we play again?"

II.

Roma leaned against the bookshelves, his book resting against his knees. The cold tiling of the floor sunk into his bones, but he didn't shift around, afraid that if he fidgeted it would make Alisa fidget as well, and she had only just gotten comfortable, reading from the book of world maps that he had picked out for her. With December rolling around and the start of the Western holiday season approaching, their foreign tutors had already stopped coming in to teach lessons. It had left Alisa bored around the house this week, so Roma took it upon himself to start hauling her around the city with him. When Roma was eight, as Alisa was now, he and Benedikt were already running about the borders of White Flower territory, slinking around the corners to investigate where the shootouts were happening. Give it a year or two

and he was sure that Alisa was going to stop humoring him and find her own ways to spend an afternoon too.

The library suddenly boomed with sound, ringing with the echo of the heavy front doors slamming closed. Someone had entered, and the library was small enough—only ten or so shelves extending past the librarian’s front desk—that her heels clicked loudly on the marble. Roma could mark her progress as she walked, could mark where she hurried and where she paused, slowing to inspect the chandeliers dangling from the tall ceiling and the little jade statues decorating the hollows of the walls.

The footsteps finally approached the back of the library. Juliette Cai turned around the corner, offering no smile in greeting but instead a click of her tongue and a wink, which was somehow better.

“Hello, darling,” she said.

Roma blinked, heat rushing to his cheeks. A prolonged second passed, his heart pounding in his chest, before he realized with a jolt that Juliette was talking to his little sister, not him. In fact, Juliette’s attention was only on Alisa, head ducked to coo at the little girl before she passed her a vegetable bun.

“Xièxiè!” Alisa shrieked gleefully, snatching the bag. She ran off immediately, scurrying like an attic mouse to go eat elsewhere. Alisa never ate in front of people. It was such a strange quirk.

Juliette watched Alisa go with a glint in her eyes, folding her gloved hands in front of her.

“Do you think she’s going to remember in a few years how well I fed her?”

“Only if you keep feeding her,” Roma replied evenly. He was quite impressed that he kept his voice level, setting his book down next to him and calmly gesturing for Juliette to come sit. “She already calls you Bun Girl.”

Juliette snorted, closing the distance between them and dropping onto the floor too, so that she was seated beside Roma but facing him,

her knees pulled up and pressed to the shelves. She was graceful even with such abrupt movements.

“I offer her a bun three days in a row and suddenly I am Bun Girl.”

“Well—”Roma couldn’t help himself. He reached out and ran a finger along the edge of her glove, fascinated by the lace hem, the delicate pattern pressed to smooth skin “—shall I give her your real name?”

Juliette tensed. She tried not to show it, tried not to react, but it was the subtlest change in the air, the darting of her eyes to his face, moving from relaxed to alert.

“And what would you tell her?” Juliette asked, testing him.

The truth was that Roma had known since the very first moment. He knew Juliette had discovered it sometime later, after their first meeting, perhaps their second. She had made the active decision to come back and keep seeing him, but he had been looking for her from the beginning. Juliette Cai, heir of the Scarlet Gang, the terrible thing with bloodlust in her veins, raised in the West to be as ruthless as a snake. Then he had rolled his marble at her, and she had merely raised an eyebrow, a picture of stillness as the rest of the Bund hurried and bustled, and all Roma could think was *Hello, kindred soul*.

“Princess of Shanghai, of course.” He withdrew his hand. “Nothing else would be worthy.”

Juliette’s posture eased. Just as Roma was pulling back, she leaned forward, setting her gloved hand on his shoulder. He felt the smoothness of the silk brush against his jacket, as starkly as if it were skin-to-skin.

“As ruler of this kingdom,” she intoned, “I hereby dub thee Sir Barnacles, Lord of the Garbagelands.”

Roma’s hand came up immediately, laid atop hers. “I heard they were in search of a Lady Barnacles too. Interested?”

Juliette’s lips parted, her eyes narrowing for a beat as she seemed to decide whether or not Roma was joking. A moment passed. Then

another. Though the library remained humming around them, though the old antique clocks were ticking to mark time, though the first droplets of rain pressed against the stained windows outside, it was all distant and far away, of another world separate to the one only Roma and Juliette occupied.

Then there was a loud thud behind them and Juliette jumped, yanking her hand back. Roma, too, swiveled around, squinting through the gaps of the shelves with his heart at his throat.

“Hello.”

It was only Alisa, who had climbed a shelf and was now waving from the top, having thrown one of the books onto the floor.

“*Christ*, Alisochka,” Roma chided. “Get down from there, would you?”

Alisa squeed, running along the top. With a soft exhalation, Juliette got to her feet.

“I’ll get her.”

III.

Juliette held a hand up, trying to shield her eyes from the sun. It was mid-December, so it was strange for the day to be so bright, and for it to be rather warm too. The collar of her coat felt too snug around her neck while she lay on the grass. She would be collecting stains on her clothes and gathering dust in her carefully curled hair, but she had no interest in leaving the park and going back home either. Under the beating sun, she closed her eyes hoping that a cloud would come eventually.

Her etiquette tutor had dismissed her for the day. Juliette had learned the lesson at record speed, and there was little use for sitting around the kitchen table wasting more time while Nurse lingered around her asking if she was hungry. It only stressed Nurse out when Juliette was sitting idle—but Juliette liked sitting idle, even if that seemed to be taboo in the Cai mansion, where everything was always moving, where *something* had to be happening. She liked observing, and thinking, and watching. She liked being a menace too and driving Nurse up the walls when the woman tried to shove more food into her, and all Juliette would do was put her nose in front of the bowl of rice and heave in a deep, peaceful inhale.

Poor Nurse.

“What are you smiling about?”

Juliette cracked one eye open, turning her head to the left. The grass under her head bristled, the stout, green blades tucking around her cheek. While she was flat on the cold ground, Roma was sitting against the tree, sharpening a pocketknife against a rock. The light hit him perfectly, so that his dark hair glowed slightly golden at the edges.

“The sweet, sweet sound of you sharpening that blade,” Juliette teased, sitting and propping herself up with one hand behind her. She tried to smooth out her hair, but the back was beyond saving. “Like music to my ears.”

Roma quirked a brow. He held the blade up, its edges glinting.

“A gift, then,” Roma said. “For you.”

Juliette rolled her eyes, pushing his hands back before he could give her the pocketknife. “Don’t be ridiculous. Only White Flowers carry pocketknives.”

If Roma hadn’t known about the Scarlet aversion to pocketknives, he didn’t show it. Or perhaps he did know, and had expected to have been declined anyway, offering for the sake of playing pretend.

“Some other day then,” he said, “I will commission the best dagger in the city instead and carve your name upon it.”

Juliette winced. He had been doing this a lot lately. Inching closer and closer to their identities. Pushing through the bubble between them that contained only Roma and Juliette, letting in the shards and pieces that read Montagov and Cai instead.

A rustle came from afar, interrupting Juliette just as she opened her mouth. She would have tried to change the subject anyway, but her reaction now was genuine, her head whipping to the sound of intrusion. She had passed a construction team around a gazebo earlier, all of them hurrying onto their ladders and passing buckets up. It had looked important from afar, as if something on the gazebo was coming loose, only when Juliette walked closer, she saw that the buckets were filled with tinsel and the construction workers were merely decorating for Christmas. They had enough tinsel among them that the whole park would soon be covered in it, but Juliette didn't think they would come into *this* area. It was usually unoccupied, surrounded by a dense cluster of trees. There was a pond that ran somewhere to the west, and a path that curved around the trees. No one came by unless it was a local nanny taking her foreign charges on walks, which was why Roma and Juliette came often, even when the grass was hard with frozen ice.

Juliette strained her ears. Now that she was paying attention, it didn't sound like Englishmen installing tinsel at all.

"Are they speaking Russian?" Roma asked, listening too.

"It appears so."

The more she concentrated, the easier it became to decipher the voices, until she realized it wasn't because she was particularly good at focusing, but because they were getting nearer and nearer. Whoever was coming, they were directly upon the path that would wind into the clearing.

"We need to hide."

"What?" Roma exclaimed. He folded his pocketknife, putting it away. "There would not be White Flowers on foreign territory like this—"

“I don’t think they are White Flowers.”

Juliette gave him a push without waiting for a response, sending him sprawling to the other side of the tree. Before Roma could complain or yelp in indignation, Juliette flopped right onto him and slapped her hand over his mouth.

“Bolsheviks,” she explained, her eyes wide. “I think they are Bolsheviks.”

They stilled, listening again. It was two men, discussing something about the Communist Party, which had only formed last year. Juliette had heard bits and pieces from within her own house, but certainly not enough to think it any big matter.

Roma squirmed, shaking her hand off his mouth.

“Dorogaya,” he hissed. “Can you let me *see*?”

Juliette gave him a pointed look, warning him not to be so loud. She relented, however, and eased her elbow off his chest, letting him twist just enough to peer around the other side of the tree. The two men came into view, dressed in Western suits. The style was similar to the sort Roma wore, but where Roma never had his jacket on, the front buttons of his shirts always undone, these men were stiff in their getups.

“ . . . *Voitinsky*? . . . *Comintern* . . . *cannot next* . . . *week*.”

They faded from view, disappearing through the trees.

“Did you catch any complete sentences?” Juliette asked. She wasn’t sure if it was her vocabulary that was lacking, or if they hadn’t spoken very clearly.

“Something about the Party,” Roma replied. “I doubt it is anything we have to worry about.”

“Yes, well . . .” Juliette bit down on the inside of her cheeks, still running through what they had picked up. “I am worried nonetheless.”

“I know. You shoved me so hard that I am going to bruise.”

Juliette frowned, plonking her palm flat on Roma’s face. It was a

light smack—a teasing one, if anything—but Roma still feigned pain, scowling. His hands came to her waist, fit snug around each side.

“I shall throw you off now.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“One, two—”

“No!”

“*Three!*”

He tightened his grip, his fingers pressing into the thick fabric of her coat. Juliette tensed, squeezing her eyes shut and bracing to be tossed right off and onto the grass, but nothing happened. When a few seconds passed and she still remained sprawled atop him, Juliette opened her eyes slowly, cautiously.

Roma looked entirely too gleeful. “Scared you, didn’t I?”

Juliette smacked him again, this time with both her hands on his chest, and with much more vigor. “*Clown.*”

IV.

Roma paced the length of his room, the letter crumpled in his hands. It was too sappy. Too orchestrated. Juliette would laugh at him if he gave her this.

With a huff, Roma stopped in the middle of his carpet, glancing at the letter again. It was Christmas Eve today, and the streets outside were abuzz with noise. Though few locals in Shanghai celebrated such a holiday, it was prime time for the foreigners to be throwing money around, and so the shops were

pulling out all the stops, the markets slashing down their prices. He could hear the street-level bartering and bantering from here, albeit faintly as he stood surrounded by the uproar of his own thoughts.

Juliette, the letter started with. *Though our families are at war, I—*

Roma folded the paper up roughly, uncaring when the edges creased. He shoved his hair out of his eyes then turned a fast pivot on his heel, facing his mirror as if the other figure in the glass were Juliette.

“I am in love with you,” he declared.

It was only for practice, yet his face turned red nonetheless. This was ridiculous. He was fifteen. He could be more suave than this. Roma didn’t know much, but he knew that he had fallen too hard and had fallen too fast. If he didn’t speak now, he might never have a chance, because this city was brutal to dazzling things walking its streets, and Juliette was the most dazzling of them all.

“Maybe that is coming on a little too strong,” he muttered under his breath, bracing his two hands on his desk and leaning closer to the mirror. It wasn’t as if Juliette had ever indicated she felt the same. *She* was the suave one, the one who gazed back coolly anytime he was caught staring at her over a game of cards. *She* was the one who always held her composure when they smuggled bottles of champagne up to their rooftop meetings while Roma’s world turned bright and glittering, unable to stop gravitating around her.

Roma pushed away from the desk, blowing out a breath.

All the same, Juliette looked at him more fondly than anyone. Not his mother, and certainly not his father—although it wasn’t the sort of fondness that he would expect from his parents either. It was . . .

A light tapping sounded from his window. Roma jumped, thinking that it would be Alisa catching him fretting over the letter in his hands. Their bedrooms were high up on the fourth floor of White Flower headquarters, but his sister was prone to climbing the outside of the house, shuffling along a water pipe that ran just under the windows.

However, it was not Alisa sliding along the pipe and tapping to be let in.

It was Juliette.

Roma had to be hallucinating.

“Let me in!” Juliette whispered, her voice muffled by the glass. She wasn’t hanging from the walls like Alisa would but leaning out from the window of the neighboring building. The apartments were built closely enough that when Roma came to open his window, Juliette clambered onto the windowsill of the other building and climbed over, hopping the space between two buildings easily like she wasn’t minding a gap from four stories high.

“What are you doing here?” Roma asked, flabbergasted. He offered a hand and Juliette took it, landing softly on his carpet. “I thought we were meeting *tomorrow*.”

Juliette straightened, tossing her head so that her hat shifted back into place. “I was in the area.”

“You were in the area?” Roma echoed. “And you decided to enter enemy territory?”

Juliette wrinkled her nose. She never liked it when he reminded her that they were supposed to be enemies, as if he were manifesting the thought by speaking it too many times and that it might come true one day.

“You don’t want me dropping in?”

“I never said that.”

“Hmm . . .” Juliette wandered about his room, peering at his bookshelves and the photo frames on the painted white walls. Roma still had not entirely grasped the situation. Juliette. Here. In his house. In his bedroom. Juliette. Here. Now. Plopping onto his bed.

“I am serious,” Roma said. Juliette had collapsed like a marionette doll, her shoes planted on the floor but the rest of her upper body splayed to the side, so he approached her and crouched too, bringing their faces near. “What are you doing here?”

Juliette propped her head up on one hand.

“My house got too loud,” she said quietly. “So many foreigners invited over for their little Christmas party. I could hardly hear myself think.”

Roma breathed a soft sigh, his heart twisting in his chest. Panicked as he was—over Juliette being here, over Juliette in general—he hardly hesitated before reaching out and smoothing a thumb along the curve of her cheek. Juliette immediately held open her arms, squirming against him until her chin settled in the crook where his shoulder met his neck, locking him into an embrace. No matter what they were, no matter what it was between them, they were comfortable enough for this at least: for a safe place to land and a shoulder to lean on.

A few moments passed. Roma wanted to close his eyes and stay like this forever. But, because this was a serious matter:

“There are other quiet spots in the city,” he said against her hair. “Quiet, *safe* spots. The parks. The riverside. Anywhere but the White Flower central building.”

“I know,” Juliette replied, her words equally soft. “Maybe I just missed you.”

Roma was going to start bawling, right here and right now. He wasn’t built for so many feelings.

Fortunately, before he could, Juliette pulled out of his arms, then frowned, tilting her head.

“What is that in your hand?”

“Nothing,” Roma answered, at the same time that a sudden knock came on his door. The sound drove such alarm into him that he bolted to his feet, all the blood rushing from his head. His vision flashed white for a second as he shoved the letter into his pocket and marched to the door, stepping directly in front of it in case someone was about to open it and find Juliette Cai in his room.

“Who is it?”

“Me,” a voice that sounded like Marshall said. “Come on, we need to go.”

“Go?” Roma echoed. “Go where?”

“Can you open the door?” another voice asked. His cousin, Benedikt. “We are needed downstairs.”

Roma spun fast on his heel.

“I hate to do this,” he whispered to Juliette, “but you must leave.”

Juliette folded her arms. She was feigning annoyance, but there was also amusement sparkling in her eyes, her shoulders too relaxed to have any true irritation. “You will toss me out on the streets?”

“Yes, it is a better option than getting caught here.”

A huff, then Juliette hopping to her feet. “Fine, fine.”

While Roma reached into his wardrobe, finding a new jacket so it didn’t seem like he was keeping his friends outside for no reason, Juliette walked to the windowsill again, clambering up and readying to duck back out.

“Wait! Roma!”

Roma startled. This was the first time he had ever heard his name from her lips. It was beautiful. He never wanted to be called anything else again. Not Roman, not Montagov. Just Roma.

“What?” he asked, his pulse rocketing. Was there something he had forgotten to hide? He didn’t know what he could possibly have in his room that would give away his friendship with the Scarlet heiress, but still he searched in a panic, glancing around at his feet.

“No, come *here*,” Juliette hissed, still balanced precariously on the window ledge, her hands clutching the frame.

“What?” Roma asked again. He rushed in front of her. “What is it?”

Juliette brightened suddenly with a grin and leaned in, her hand touching his face and her lips pressing a kiss to his cheek. It was so quick he might have imagined it; he would have thought so if the spot weren’t humming with sensation, the imprint of her mouth buzzing like an electric shock.

“You are trying to get me killed,” Roma whispered, breathless.

Juliette didn’t respond—she merely blinked innocently, and then she was gone, hopping the gap again and climbing through the other window. Soon as she disappeared, Roma drew his curtain tight, afraid that he had somehow left evidence all over the glass, and with his heart thudding in his chest, he went to open his bedroom door.

“Okay, we may go,” he said. “I needed my jacket.”

Marshall turned on his heel immediately, starting down the hallway. Benedikt, meanwhile, stared at Roma a second longer.

“What is that on your face?” his cousin asked, frowning.

Roma touched his cheek. It came back smeared with red.

“Blood,” he lied without hesitation.

V.

Juliette was freezing cold, but she was the one who had set their meeting place today, so she only had herself to blame as she hovered around the alley, trying to burrow her neck into the fur of her coat. She had given Roma enough grief yesterday by showing up to his house, she figured she wouldn’t wander around now in case he couldn’t find her when he arrived.

The air was so frigid that it hurt a little to breathe. The foreigners in the Concessions were in peak festive mode, so the streets echoed with ringing bells, the nearby churches pealing with sound on the hour. Every storefront she passed had been decorated with wreaths and mistletoes, over-decorated if you asked her. She hadn’t celebrated

Christmas even when she was in New York, so she certainly would not start in Shanghai, even if the whole city seemed to be caught up in the fervor today.

She didn't think Roma celebrated either, until she turned around and saw him approaching, a gift box in his hands.

"What is that?" Juliette asked, her voice accusatory. "You didn't say we were getting Christmas gifts! I would have gotten—"

"It is not a Christmas gift," Roma interrupted before Juliette could start prattling all the various items she knew Roma would like. "It is a birthday gift."

Juliette blinked. "My birthday was October 15th."

"Your Lunar calendar birthday. I calculated. It is today, is it not?"

Juliette thought for a second. "Oh. Oh, it is."

Roma was already opening the gift box for her, revealing a string of pearls. Before Juliette could speak on how beautiful they were, he had already looped them around her neck, pulling the clasp tight and then stepping in front of her again, adjusting her coat so the pearls fell inside, protected from the cold.

Juliette stared at him, her jaw agape. She needed to crane her neck ever so slightly because Roma was taller, but Juliette was sure she would catch up—Nurse kept saying she had yet to hit her growth spurt.

"What?" Roma asked, catching her staring.

"Thank you," Juliette replied, her eyes wide. "You didn't have to—"

"We are not finished celebrating yet." He grabbed her hand, pulling her along. "Come on, I have just the place."

Juliette followed wordlessly, at a loss for what to say. They ran through the streets, bursting into laughter when a tram pulled up fast ahead of them and drove into a puddle, almost dousing Roma in dirty water before Juliette yanked him quickly onto the pavement. Another few streets later, a rickshaw driver almost collided with

Juliette when she dashed into the road too fast, but Roma picked her up just in time, plonking her back on the sidewalk while Juliette gave an adrenaline-filled screech.

Eventually, they arrived before a jazz club, but they didn't enter through the front. Roma eyed the building carefully, then when the patrons around the door all disappeared inside, he tugged on Juliette's hand and pulled them around the side, entering through a tinsel-covered back door and trudging up a set of stairs before anyone could see them.

"Are you cold?" Roma asked, holding the rooftop door open for Juliette.

Juliette stepped through, feeling the wind slap against her face. Strangely, she was not. "I'm okay. How did you find this place?"

The walls of the rooftop were low, only raising up to her knees when she wandered over to look out at the city. From below, the music of the jazz club was loud enough that every beat was audible: the twang of the strings and the dizzying rhythm of the piano. This wasn't like any of the other rooftops they had hidden out on. This one had some strange quality to it: the flooring was a little too clean, the view a little too nice. The city stretched on before them, twinkling with daytime lights as people spilled onto the streets with hot drinks in their hands and others hurried home with shopping bags overfilled in their arms.

"Asked around. Did some research."

Juliette turned around, arching a brow at Roma. He sounded rather cryptic, but he was grinning.

"Research? Of what kind?"

Roma waved her off, then held his hand out.

"Dance with me?"

A little white fleck settled onto his palm. Juliette looked up, and suddenly found more to be falling from the skies, drifting hazily down on them. It was snowing. It was snowing, and the music beneath their feet roared even louder, not fit for the slow sort of dancing,

but Juliette didn't care. She took Roma's hand and let him draw her close.

"You may confess now," Juliette said. "How long have you been planning this?"

Roma's grin only grew, letting them sway utterly off-beat with the string tunes and rapid tapping rhythm.

"I missed your October birthday."

"We hadn't met yet."

"Nevertheless. It was inexcusable to let that slide."

"Meaning . . . ?"

"A while, dear Juliette," Roma finally answered, his eyes crinkling. "I have been planning a while."

Juliette felt her breath catch in her throat. She didn't know how to express the emotion that swept through her. It was only that she looked up at Roma and could feel time shudder to a halt around them. It was only that every time she looked at Roma, she didn't want to stop looking; she wanted to sit down beside him and bid him never to leave her, to listen to him talk forever and ever and ever.

The music suddenly hit a lull below, the instruments falling quiet. The two of them followed suit, their swaying paused, but Juliette did not step away. Roma brought his hand up from her waist. While Juliette watched him, he brushed a finger along her cheek—slowly, so slowly that Juliette's heart started to pound before he showed her the eyelash that he had retrieved, and Juliette sighed a soft "oh," not sure why she was disappointed.

He had been so close. She had thought . . .

"Make a wish," Roma said.

Juliette smiled, trying to cover her momentary dejection. "A birthday wish or an eyelash wish?"

"Both. Why not?"

"Okay." Juliette inclined her head up at the skies. She couldn't see any part of the blue afternoon under the heavy cover of the clouds,

but she imagined the falling snow to be falling stars instead, burning white-hot onto the world. “I wish—”

She didn’t finish her sentence. Because then Roma was kissing her, his lips softly captured over hers, his hands to either side of her face. Juliette rose up on her toes immediately, her eyes closing and her arms twining around his neck. She could feel the snow landing between them, falling in little cold droplets on her hair, on her hands, on her coat. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered in that moment except the feeling of Roma’s mouth on hers, keeping her warm from her very soul.

They broke apart slowly. A breath passed between them, a secret missive that revealed everything left unsaid, though there was hardly anything to be said when a kiss fulfilled it all.

“Are *you* cold?” Juliette whispered, her eyes fluttering open again. Roma was already looking at her, his gaze wide and reverent.

“Why do you ask?” he replied. A snowflake landed on the bridge of his nose, melting as delicately as artwork.

Juliette touched her fingers to his, to the soft grip he had upon her. She couldn’t hold back her quiet laugh. “You’re trembling.”

He tried to still his hands. It did not work. It only delighted Juliette more when he could not stop trembling, so Roma gave up pretending to be dignified, wrapping his arms around her instead and spinning her around until they were both dizzy and delirious and giggling.

They came to a stop. Juliette cupped a palm to his face, right on the red flush that had risen.

“I’m sorry,” Roma said breathlessly. “I interrupted your wish before.”

“No, you didn’t,” Juliette replied. She gave a pleased sigh, then leaned in again. “You finished it perfectly.”