

Everyone in Paris thinks I've got it all, but here in this drab law office, I just finished signing a piece of paper that says I've got nothing. Well, almost nothing. "Cheer up, brother," Julien says to me on our way out of his uncle's office. "I'm sure we can have you a nameplate made for your desk." It's the same joke he tells every time. Except, really, I don't think he's joking. He thinks he's so funny. What he doesn't know, or maybe he does, is how badly I'd like to land my fist between his eyes. Anyone that thinks I've got no problems should ask my father about my inheritance, about how the day Julien and I graduate, Julien will inherit most of the family wealth—the money, the land, the properties—and I'll get my mother's cottage on the outskirts of London. Julien's uncle claims it's because Julien is the firstborn son, born two months and four days before me. But I know the truth. I know it's really because I'm the child of a mistress. This is how Julien's mother wants it, and this is what my father agreed to, because he just can't stand up to her.

We have to sign the papers once a year, and I have to be reminded that no matter how much my father denies it, Julien and I will always be treated differently. I will always be the mistress's boy, the one who only gets to live in the main house in Paris because his mother fell ill and died when he was six.

Dre is waiting for us on the other side of the street, shielding his eyes from the sun, and pointing to the clock. "What took you so long? The girls left me here!"

"Had to take care of a few things," Julien says. He throws his arm around me. "Family business, right?" I nod. "Sure." Julien shakes me. "Loosen up, brother. Dre, where'd the girls go?"

"Not sure," Dre answers. He brushes a hand over his close-cropped Afro and grits his teeth before motioning farther up the street. "Wasn't paying much attention, but I think they went into one of those shops down there. Lola wanted to try on dresses for the ball."

"Well," Julien says, "are we going to find them, or what?" "And sit in a dress shop for hours?" I ask. "No way."

No one tells you how strange it is when your friend group involves your girlfriend and then that girlfriend breaks up with you and you're expected to still hang out with her. "Speak for yourself," says Julien, starting off down the street. "I'm a few good lines away from bedding Darcy. Or Diane. Both if I play it right."

I shake my head. He doesn't have a chance. Dre laughs into his hands. "Yeah, yeah, you keep telling yourself that." Julien turns his head to watch a passing girl. "Whatever, I'm going to find them."

Anyone who's anyone is on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré on a late weekday afternoon, after the clocks ring, after university lets out. The shops are bustling, the bread is warm, the café always has a quartet playing outside, and if you know to ask for Luis, Dre's cousin, like we did, you can get a little liquor slipped in your tea.

"Why don't we go to the café?" I propose. "They always end up there anyway." "I think someone doesn't want to see Rachelle," Dre teases. He and Lola have been obsessed with each other since we were ten. They've always known they would be together. Sometimes I wish I was that certain about anything.

I lie. "No, that's not it." "Oh, come on," Julien says, "get over it." He leads the way, though, and I follow because what am I going to do? Go sit at the café alone? Julien knows I don't have to get over it, not Rachelle at least. He knows why I was with her. He's still mad about it, about her not choosing him. I can see it in his eyes, the way he looks like he couldn't be happier that she's dumped me. He

tried with her once. It's why his nose is crooked. "There they are," Dre says. The Chastain twins are standing with Lola on the sidewalk, each one weighed down by an armful of shopping bags.

"Girls, girls, girls." Julien grins as he walks up to the twins. "What color am I wearing to escort you to the ball? Emerald? Plum? I've been told I look good in blue, but with this face, I can make anything work."

"You should ask Leo and Blaise," Lola teases with a raised eyebrow. "They've already got their dress coats." Julien scoffs. "Leo and Blaise? Why would I ask them?" I clear my throat. He's always the last to the party. "I think she's saying that the twins are being escorted by Leo and Blaise."

Julien straightens. "Those rapsCALLIONS? You're joking." "They aren't rapsCALLIONS," Diane snaps back at him. "Yes, they're our cousins," adds Darcy. Julien instantly cools down, clutching his chest to feign relief. "Oh, well, that changes everything. Don't go breaking my heart now, girls." Dre shoots me a look, and the two of us can't help ourselves, so we burst out laughing.

Julien turns to me. "Who is it you're escorting at the ball again, Beau?" "I don't know, Julien. Maybe we should just walk in together since it seems neither of us have someone to escort," I challenge. "Hmm," he says, looking me up and down. "Shouldn't be too hard for you to find a new date should it, little brother? You must have every girl in Paris knocking down your door. Oh, except, we live at the same house, and I haven't heard one knock."

Our eyes keep on each other for a second too long before he turns around to the girls to see their reaction, hoping they think he's as hilarious as he thinks he is. They've already stopped paying attention to him, though. Their focus is directed elsewhere. We really should've gone to the café, because the boutique door opens and out comes Rachelle arm in arm with a lanky, goofy-grinned brute who needs a haircut. I can only assume he is the famous baron. I don't have to assume for long because as soon as they get close, Rachelle takes a moment away from leaning her head on his shoulder and says, "Boys, this is Nicolas, Baron of Brittany. He's come into town to surprise me. Isn't that sweet?"

"So, so sweet," Julien exaggerates before looking back at me, eating this up. "Don't you think so, Beau?" I sigh. "Oh, yes, I can't believe he had a second to step away from all of his baron duties. What are those again?"

Rachelle's lip curls up. "If you must know, Beau, Nicolas here is very busy. Tell him how busy you are, darling." The baron shakes his hair out of his face. "Uh, busy? Sure." His eyebrows crinkle like he's confused, but then he lets out a dopey chuckle, like he was only trying to remember what he did mere hours ago. "Fed the cows, took some letters to my sister. Oh! I got to take a boat out with a real fisherman today. He even let me steer."

"Well, would you look at that," I say to Rachelle. My dimples press in as I try to maintain a straight face. "He even got to steer."

"Shut up, Beau," she jeers back at me. "Nicolas just bought my dress for the Court Ball. Even picked up a gilded mask to match. He's escorting me."

There's nothing Rachelle hates more than not having the upper hand. "Congratulations," I say. Nothing surprising about that. What will be a surprise is if the baron actually makes it to the ball before Rachelle trades him in for a newer, better model.

Julien can't help himself. "We were actually just discussing who Beau is going to be escorting at the ball." Rachelle folds her arms and glares at me sourly. "Well? Who's the lucky lady, Beau?"

"There isn't one," I tell her. "Some of us have the ability to be alone for more than a week."

Rachelle wrinkles her mouth and nudges the baron. "I think it's time to go, darling. Didn't you say you've got something special planned for us?"

"I— Well," Nicolas starts, but Rachelle quickly cuts him off. "Can't wait to see what it is," she says. "Ugh, I just can't get enough of you." She shoves her hand through his hair and presses her lips to his. We all stand there awkwardly looking at each other while their tongues get acquainted. Once they finally break apart, Rachelle stares straight at me. She flashes a wink over her shoulder as she saunters away.

"Well, well, well," Julian says to me, walking in proud strides. "Looks like it didn't take Rachelle long to move on. How are you feeling now that you won't be escorting the girl that's going to take home the title of the Bellegarde Bloom?"

We cross over the street and walk along the sidewalk. Ivy blooms scatter the pavement and creep up the storefronts. Up ahead, two girls from the university in tight embroidered bodices and shorter-than-usual petticoats walk in step with each other. I think I have a class with them, or at least one of them. They're quite pretty, but I've never noticed them until today.

"It's my last name on the title!" I blurt out before correcting myself, hoping my nonchalant attitude is convincing. "Our last name. So why would I care? Besides, Rachelle isn't necessarily going to be Bloom. It could go to any girl. She hasn't won yet."

Even Dre laughs at the thought. "I don't know. Isn't she destined to win or something? Isn't it practically in the LeBlanc blood?" It might not be in their blood, but the women in Rachelle's family have won Bellegarde Bloom for generations. Her mother, her mother's mother, and her mother's mother's mother. They've all won Bloom, and then they've all found the most prestigious suitor at the Ball, pinned their boutonniere on his lapel, and later went on to marry him. Only her aunt Geneviève didn't marry the suitor she pinned, and that's because she found an old marquis foolish enough to fall for her tricks. I don't think there's a drop of love in that family. Just money and status.

"Now I know you're losing it," Julien says. "Any girl could become Bloom? Any girl could beat Rachelle? Tell me, Beau, how in this fantasy land of yours, would that ever be possible?" I shrug. "Firstly, no one knows the baron. Part of Rachelle's appeal was that she was dating a Bellegarde."

Julien smiles. "Oh, right, yes, so you're the only reason she would've won?" "I'm not the only reason," I say, "but I don't need Rachelle. Rachelle was relying on my name just as much as her own to stand out. Without me she's just another rich socialite made up of hair and rouge and couture."

"Don't forget the jewels," Julien says with a sly grin, "particularly the necklace the baron gave her." I shake my head. "Doesn't matter. I'm telling you, I could make any girl at the university into the Bloom."

This seems to pique Julien's interest because he stops in his tracks and turns to me. "You sure about that?"

"Of course I am," I say. I'm not, but he's been acting so high and mighty today that I double down. "Any one of them." Julien looks at me like he's sizing me up. "Want to bet?"

"Bet?" I ask. "Yes," he says, "if you're so sure that you, Beau Bellegarde, King of the School, can make any girl at the university into the Bloom, then let's bet on it." "I don't know, I don't think—" Dre starts, but I step in. "Sure," I say, "when I find out what's in it for me."

Julien scratches his chin. "In it for you?"

"If I win," I say, "which I will—what do I get? I'm not doing this for nothing."

"Hmm," says Julien, thinking on it. He hesitates but then gets a look in his eye, and his mouth spreads into a smirk. "How about if you win, you get my inheritance."

I don't know what to say. I can't tell if he's playing me for a fool or not, so I let him keep talking. "Right. I'll pick the girl," he continues. "Any girl I want. And you have less than four weeks to turn her into the Bellegarde Bloom. If your girl wins, you can have it all, instead of just your mother's little shack in London." Her shack. His words make my blood boil, but I can tell he's serious. He's just foolish enough to be serious. "And if you lose," Julien says, "I'll tell father about your big career aspirations, about how you've no intention to go into finance, about how you've been searching for any way out of it. You lose and I tell him everything. And when I do, he'll be so furious that he'll take the little shack in London away from you and add it to my pile."

Julien knows. How does he always know everything? Somehow, he knows about me wanting to write, about how hard I'm trying to conjure up a plan to get out of working at Father's office. And he's right. I hate that he's right. If I don't fall in line with Father's plans for me, I'll lose the cottage, the only thing that's mine. It's cruel, but I know Julien all too well. All he wants is to have everything I've ever called my own. He's taken every single thing from me over the years, and now he wants to take my father from me, and what little I have left of my mother. But he's going to lose.

Dre tries to intervene, but I stick my hand out and clasp Julien's before he can get a word in. "Deal." We shake on it. Dre slaps a hand to his forehead. "Did that really just happen? You two are actually doing this?" Julien looks triumphant already, like he can't believe I've agreed to it. My chest is puffed, but my stomach begins to sink because I don't know what I've done. Did I really say I could make any girl into the Bloom? I can't let Julien see me sweat, so I hold my shoulders back and ask, "So, who's it going to be?"

Julien rubs his hands together excitedly and starts walking. "Let's check out the menu, gentlemen." He takes us into the apothecary first, and I'm hit with a barrage of scents all at once: citrus, mint, coriander. My head starts to spin. Julien points over to a particularly odd-looking girl standing by a shelf full of tiny glass jars.

"What about her?" he says. I know she goes to our school, but I've no clue what her name is. Her dark hair is wiry and frizzed, and she's wearing two different socks. She opens one of the jars and gives it a sniff. I think that's all she's going to do, but then she dabs a little onto her palm and gives it a taste. All three of us lurch back in disgust.

"Now, Julien, you can't do that to him," says Dre. I've got my fingers crossed he won't, but when she turns around, looking over her shoulder to see if anyone spotted her, she's actually kind of cute. Odd-looking, sure, but with a comb and a different outfit, I might be okay. Julien seems to notice the same thing I do, too, because he quickly says, "She's not the one," and drags us back onto the street.

The next girl he eyes is a girl whose name I know, Madeleine. She's only been at the university a few years. "She could work," Julien says. Madeleine is outside the café standing around a small gathering of musicians. Her hair is much shorter than most of the girls at school, pinned into rolls that stop at the base of her chin, and barely adorned. She's always dressed in something plain, and she never wears a stitch of rouge. Today is no different. "She's got potential," I say, lying, hoping Julien might take the bait.

She might have potential, but it would be a complete overhaul, and plus, Madeleine is a bit wicked. She has a tongue sharp as thorns and already scares most everyone, so improving her likability in a month's time would be near impossible. We watch her for a moment, and Julien decides, "No, not her."

"Oh, there's one," Dre says, motioning on down the street. I elbow him when I see her. "Really? You're getting involved now?"

Julien turns around and spots her. "Caroline Dupree," he says gleefully. "Now that would be a fair bet." Caroline is walking her enormous poodle down the sidewalk. The dog is snow white and comes up to her ribs. She's dressed the thing exactly to match her, both with glittering pink choker necklaces and a bouffant over-powdered hairdo, the weight of which could send her toppling over any moment. I'm already imagining having to spend time with her the next few weeks, having to listen to her high-pitched shrill of a voice, and having to act interested in her poodle's pedigree. I hang my head in my hands. "Looks like we might have found her, eh, Beau," Julien mocks.

The shop door next to us flies open, the bells clanging and chiming against each other as it does. We all turn to see the person who's bursting from the bakery, hacking and coughing, covered from head to toe in flour. She shakes and shakes, a white dust cloud forming around her. Caroline Dupree yelps, jumping out of the way, before turning to head in a different direction with a disgusted look on her face. "Violette!" the flour-coated girl yells back into the bakery. "What did I tell you about mixing by yourself?"

"Oooh," Dre says, laughing, "that's brutal." "Oh, would you look at that," Julien says, staring at her. He glances back to us. "Looks like a Bellegarde Bloom to me!"

"Evie Clément?" I gulp. "No. No way. Not her. Find someone else. What about Caroline? I thought we were going with Caroline." I look back to her. She's yelling something I can't make out to a young girl who's just inside the shop, looking particularly mischievous. Evie whips her hair to the side and gives it one last rattle before heading back in, her flour footprints following behind.

Julien cocks his head smiling. "Oh, what's that, brother? Something wrong with Evie?"

"Are you kidding?" I thrust my hand out. "Look at her! Beyond the fact that she's always got icing in her hair or flour on her dress, or the fact that she fell flat on her face in front of most of the school today, she's completely unapproachable and she despises me! She's never going to speak to me, let alone say yes to going to the ball with me. No. Pick again." And I instantly know I should've never opened my mouth about Evie because Julien has smelled the blood in the water.

"Evie Clément it is, then," he says. "Can't wait to see how father takes it when you lose." "Julien, please," I say. "I'm serious. She hates me." He couldn't be happier. "I guess that means you better get going, brother. You've got less than a month to turn that weed into a rose."