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Gemma Turner

April 13, 1968

Paris, France

Already running late when the phone began to blare from the nightstand, Gemma ignored it, shutting the door behind her. Checking her watch, she realized that even the fastest Parisian taxi driver would be hard-pressed to get her to Montparnasse in ten minutes. She'd been warned that Thierry Valdon did not tolerate tardiness and was of the belief that all Americans were *vaches paresseuses*. Now she was in danger of being late. The faint metallic whir of the ringing phone continued until she reached the elevator at the end of the hall.

In the lobby of George V, with its graceful arches, elaborate marble floor, and accents of bunches of green and pink flowers in tall vases, she passed a mirror, taking one last look at her reflection. Gemma was pleased with her outfit, a white wool shift dress with a matching A-line double-breasted coat that came above the knee. Both were Ungaro creations, and the coat, trimmed with a faux-fur collar and matching horizontal fur stripes, made her look like a dessert. The designer had sent it last year when she was still an "it" girl. Back then, boxes and garment bags filled with samples were always appearing at her hotel room with the hope she'd be photographed in them. Now

those had thinned as well. As she turned the white enamel toggles to close the coat, the woman who stared back at her with long, soft strawberry-blond hair was a stranger donning last year's fashion.

"Don't mess this up," she said to her reflection with disdain, her lip curling.

Upstairs in her room, she knew her phone would still be ringing. The same person on the other end, Charlie Hicks, would begin another cycle of the same conversation.

"Jesus, Gems. I need you *here*. The fucking record is not going well. Wren is working with the label to dump all my songs." The label had promised Charlie Hicks that the Prince Charmings' fourth album would be focused on his songs, not those of Wren Atticus, the lead singer who had been the band's principal songwriter. Like a naive child or spoiled artist—they really were one and the same—Charlie had believed them. As a result of this promise, he'd been on a particularly prolific streak, writing eight songs that he thought took the band in an exciting new direction. Wren was always his foil, trying to grab control of the band's creative heart. "Seriously, Gemmy—"

"We talked about this last night," she'd cut him off early this morning, twirling the cord and hoping a firm parental tone would shut him up. He hated not remembering conversations with her when he was blotto. "I have a lunch today. It's important to *me*."

"That wanker perv? If the frog touches you . . ."

"Charlie—"

"I should be the most important thing to you."

"I need this, Charlie." Until she vocalized it, she hadn't even realized how true this was. Her entire career depended upon this lunch.

At one point, Gemma Turner had been the most talked-about young actress in Hollywood. She closed her eyes, trying to recall how easy it had all been. Playing an aloof surfer-girl love interest in

Thunder Beach, followed by a similar role in a beach-themed drag-racing film—*Beach Rally*—had made her famous. It was a jolt, going from a UCLA freshman majoring in English in the fall to a discovery, like there was something magic about her. She'd believed that, once. An athletic girl, she could actually surf, yet they made her use a stunt double. To hype her skills, her manager had her paddle out in the early morning in Venice Beach with press watching her, snapping stills of her on her longboard. The publicity had caught the eye of every studio, and the offers flooded in. At the height of her fame, she'd played veteran actor Stanley Taylor's daughter in *My Hawaiian Wedding*. In *It Comes in Waves*, she was paired in the press with her costar, Bryan Branch. And all she'd had to do was keep making herself available for these beach films, marry another studio actor, and buy a home in Beverly Hills. It would have been so easy.

"Oh, Gemma, you fool." She wiped away a tear and shook herself. Today, she couldn't doubt herself, and she didn't dare let thoughts of Charlie interfere with this lunch.

The hotel was bustling with midmorning activity, and she hurried outside, where she found her waiting car with an anxious-looking driver checking his watch. Her agent, Mick Fontaine, had hired the man with explicit instructions not to be late.

He maneuvered the car quickly along the Seine, and Gemma realized the deep sense of connection she had to this city, as though it were an inherited memory through her mother. Although everyone thought of her as a bohemian child from California, she'd been born right here. Her French mother and her American army lieutenant father had met when the Fourth Army Infantry Division pushed into Paris in 1944. Gemma leaned forward to talk to the driver in perfect French. "Do you like the cinema?"

"Oui," said the driver, his face brightening.

“Do you know the director Thierry Valdon?”

The man made a face. “He makes strange films that they show at night. My wife and I are not fans of Nouvelle Vague. The camera is too choppy.” He took his hands off the steering wheel to make a gesture like he had a handheld video camera. “We like American musicals, *Singin’ in the Rain*.” The driver began humming the theme song.

Out the window she spied the small billboard of herself staring back at her. The poster for the perfume campaign, Joie de Jardin, hung on an untended part of the street, and her image had faded with the wind and rain so that she was a shadow, the paste that had affixed the poster now peeling off on the edges. While she had hoped they would choose her for another campaign, Joie de Jardin had never called again. Yet, it had been this very poster that had caught Valdon’s eye.

“That’s you.” The driver strained to look up at it.

“That *was* me,” she said softly, a wistful look on her face as she turned to see her own image staring back at her. She didn’t recognize that confident girl anymore.

At the sight of her on the billboard, Thierry Valdon had insisted he “had to have the Joie de Jardin girl in his next film.” Thinking she was a French model, the director balked when he found out she starred in American surf films, but Mick Fontaine had pressed the issue to get her this lunch. It was a long shot, but one she needed to take. Her heart quickened and she dabbed nervously at her lipstick. Was it too much? In a panic, she pulled out a compact and began to wipe off a layer with a tissue.

Thierry Valdon was directing a Nouvelle Vague horror film called *L’Étrange Lune*, or *The Strange Moon* in English. The director’s career was on a roll, his last three films opening to full theaters and glowing reviews even if they were, as the cab driver had indicated, of a

“cult” status that showed in the evenings at the theaters, rather than the matinees.

While Valdon’s career was on the rise, hers was on a different path. After four surf films, each script worse than the last, she’d landed a role in the western *The Horse Thief*. The film had been panned, but her performance had gotten mostly good reviews. This led to a role in Jacques de Poulignac’s *Through the Lens*, a thriller with Gemma playing the dead mistress. The film was quickly plagued by script and director changes, and the final cut had been so heavily edited that the film was unrecognizable. *Through the Lens* had been widely panned, and as the most recognizable star, she took most of the blame, with one reviewer claiming, “It is good that Gemma Turner spends most of her screen time unconscious.”

“It happens,” said Mick. “You were the biggest name attached to the film, so you get the brunt of it, but you’ll get more parts.”

Mick had been wrong.

The embarrassment of that review still stung. Even now, she could recite every line of the worst reviews. She wasn’t sure she’d ever been a good actress, but the risks she had taken with her career had backfired, and her self-doubt only managed to thrust her more deeply into Charlie’s world, where she could hide. And she did hide for more than a year. Her life was now chaotic, organized around Charlie; his band, the Prince Charmings; and their recording schedule, touring schedule, and partying schedule. She was photographed boarding airplanes and hanging out backstage. The band’s partying only made the press worse for her. Four months ago, Mick had warned her that Charlie made it “difficult” for her to be attached to a film. At twenty-two, she was already in danger of being washed up.

The car came to an abrupt stop in front of a café on Rue des Écoles in the Latin Quarter. At first glance, she thought the place was empty,

but then she spied a lone man sitting with his back to her behind a pillar. Checking her watch, she was three minutes late.

She took a deep breath and pushed through the doors.

“Pardon,” said Gemma.

“You are four minutes late.” A vein pulsed in Thierry Valdon’s temple.

Sliding into her chair, she looked at her watch and corrected him. “Non. Je suis arrivé trois minutes en retard. Trois.” She held up three fingers.

It was well-known that Valdon didn’t care for American actresses, rejecting them for leads in most of his films despite some of the most popular being dangled in front of him. A long list of Hollywood ingenues before her had come away from a lunch like this one without a part. And they had all likely been early.

Gemma touched her brow and found, to her horror, that she was sweating, her face flushed from nerves. She tried to steady herself in the cane chair that felt woefully too wobbly. What was she thinking? Had she just corrected Thierry Valdon? Did she just say *trois*? Mick *should* just kill her and put her out of her misery now.

A long silence hung between them while he studied her, his hands folded in front of him and his eyes never blinking. It was unnerving. At one point, she looked away out onto the street, not sure what to do. No one had stared at her this rudely, ever.

The man sitting opposite her was not what she expected. He was younger—forty at most, with jet-black hair tamed by a smooth pomade, one errant lock defying him and heading toward his nose, which was currently flaring with anger. His hazel eyes were a sharp contrast to his thick black brows and dark lashes. She’d read somewhere that his mother had been Spanish and Moroccan, and his father French. Had he been an actor, he’d have played the role of the

handsome, swashbuckling, villainous competition to a bland studio actor like Bryan Branch. He was incredibly handsome.

“You have dark circles under your eyes,” he said finally, like a verdict, twirling a spoon and watching the rotation. His fingers were elegant and fine boned, like he played the piano.

“I...I was up late last night.” Gemma touched her face. She’d thought she’d applied enough pancake makeup to hide any imperfections, and now she regretted wiping off most of her lipstick. Did she look pale?

“Not surprising,” he said, catching her eye. “Pain becomes you. Makes you look hungry. Beautiful women can be dull.” He waited until the waiter dropped a single menu in front of Gemma and nodded to the man.

His comment felt like a punch in the gut, so she studied her menu intently. Had he just insulted her? Was he implying she was beautiful or dull? Or both? She hadn’t thought the inner turmoil inside her had begun to show on her face. Feeling self-conscious and a little dizzy, she looked up at him. Had she missed something in translation?

He tapped lightly on the window with the back of his finger and shifted his gaze to the street. “It was terrible here during the war and then after. While we were occupied, these streets were bare and melancholy. The Germans took from us and gave nothing in return. I came back to Paris in 1946 to find a city as shabby as your grandmother’s underwear drawer.” People, pulling their coats tight against a windy April day, walked by briskly with briefcases or clutching the hands of children. “The entire city was hungry, many starved to death and looking like walking skeletons. The streets themselves were black with soot, rotten shutters dangled on rusted nails, but look at them now. Everyone on their way to somewhere else. We French are certainly resilient.”

“I was born here,” she said, hoping that might surprise him, save the lunch, and challenge what was an obvious bias against hiring her. “My mother is French. My father was an American soldier.”

“Ah,” he said with a stoic nod. “Does your mother miss Paris?”

Gemma leaned forward and tugged at her collar. For more than a year now, she had tried to bring her mother to Europe—to London—for a visit, but her mother refused, likely due to her dislike of Charlie. “She claims not, but I think the idea that she would return to that bleak Paris is too much for her to bear. She’s afraid of what she’ll find.”

“Many people did not come back,” he said wistfully, settling in his chair. “They loaded everything and everyone up on trucks. My mother had put me on a train to the Amboise countryside, where I would be safe. I didn’t learn my father had been shot as part of the resistance until the war had ended. He died on August 24, 1944. My birthday. Just one more day and he’d have seen the liberation of Paris. Just one day.” He placed his hand down on the table, his eyes sharp, the memory gone. He turned his focus to her once again. “Your career is in . . .” He struggled for the word in English. “Shambles. *Oui?*”

Gemma was scratching at her neck, feeling it getting warm. If she’d thought the pleasantries would last just a bit longer, she was wrong. Once, she’d been able to charm any director with small talk, but now maybe it was just better to get to the point and bring on the inevitable. “I’m afraid so.”

“Why is that?” His head cocked, waiting for a reply.

It was such a direct question that she was taken aback. In Hollywood, no one ever got to the point. Business was handled through intermediaries and bad news softened so much that you didn’t often realize your career was over. She’d seen it many times. “Excuse me?”

“Why is your career in shambles?” Valdón nailed the English on this try.

What could she say? That she'd obviously overreached her talent? That the parts offered to her in the surf films were so dull that she couldn't bear to read them anymore, so she'd taken a chance and tried a western and then a thriller? Could she admit to a director that the last film she'd signed up for ended up a mess after editing? You couldn't blame editing; it wasn't professional. The real answer was that she'd foolishly taken chances with her career and her choices had been poor, but she wasn't the sole reason for the failures, although they'd been pinned on her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm being rude."

She didn't disagree; perhaps she should have to be polite, but he wasn't sparing her feelings. "I have pushed myself, Monsieur Valdon, to do better with each film, taken risks. I am proud of the work that I did, but not everyone agrees that my performances were..." She paused with a crack in her voice. "Well, that they were any good." With that, she gazed down at the floor, hoping that he would just end this charade of a job interview and hire Jeanne Moreau instead. She felt herself deflate. It had all been a joke—this meeting, her fame, her entire career.

He leaned over the table toward her and placed his hand on his head. "You know what I think the problem is?"

She shook her head dully, biting her lip, dreading what shortcoming he was about to articulate to her.

"You have *never* had a brilliant director," he said, and his smile was so wide it showed the white teeth of a wolf. There was a hint of an overlap on his front teeth, just enough imperfection to make his entire face memorable.

She looked up, wide-eyed. This was an interesting development, indeed. Her eyebrow rose; she finished his thought. "But with a *brilliant* director..." She let the sentence linger, her chin lifting. Once

as a young girl in a dance class, Gemma had been unable to learn the waltz. “No . . . no . . . no . . .,” said the frustrated instructor, pointing to her hapless partner. “You are trying to lead; let *him* lead.” She’d never understood exactly what the instructor had meant by that observation until this moment.

“Oui,” Valdon said. “A *brilliant* director could get the performance of a lifetime from you.” His tone was serious now and he drummed his fingers on the table. “Tell me, who was the first director who inspired you? Make it interesting, please. Don’t make me regret this.”

“Jean Cocteau,” she said a little too quickly. What she wasn’t expecting was the look of disdain on his face that came next.

“Why on *earth* would you pick him?” He leaned back on the chair and folded his arms like a pensive professor. “Not John Ford or Hitchcock?”

As she sank in the cane chair, her face fell. Every time she felt she’d achieved a connection with this man, she blew it. This role was too important to lose, and the idea of not measuring up to someone worthwhile like Thierry Valdon was unbearable to her right now. She could feel her eyes welling up, and she blinked hard to clear them. She’d hoped this lunch would be a metamorphosis. There would be no returning to London—to Charlie—and becoming *that* Gemma Turner again. Searching Valdon’s face, she tried to read what it was that he wanted from her. As an actress—as a woman—she’d been good at this once.

“*La Belle et la Bête* made me want to be an actress. Look at what Cocteau did for Josette Day. He brought out a fabulous performance from her.”

His head nodded slowly in a reluctant agreement.

Gemma smiled demurely. “Can I confess something to you?” Mick would be furious at what she was about to say next. He always warned her that she overreached.

He cocked his head, intrigued. "Of course."

She leaned in like she was telling him a secret. "I wrote a little in college, nothing like what you've done, of course." She lowered her eyes at this, intentionally deferring to him. "But I wrote my own version of *La Belle et la Bête*. This time, Belle was the beast."

"You write?" His brow furrowed. "Belle as the beast. That's clever."

This was dangerous ground. She had to be interesting to him without being threatening. "Un peu." She held her fingers together. "It is hard to imagine someone would love a beastly woman, but I love stories that push against the grain. That's precisely what you do with your films, Monsieur Valdón."

She made a grand gesture with her hands, and she could see him preen, nearly expanding with pride right in front of her.

"When I was a boy, we did not get television as quickly as you Americans," he said, raising his finger to make a point. "My friends and I would drive to Tours to watch your filmmakers. Many here in France hate the American directors like Nicholas Ray or Orson Welles. But not me. I rather enjoyed *Citizen Kane*," he said, shrugging. "Funny that you should find inspiration in Cocteau and not one of your own." Without missing a beat, he nodded to the menu. "The duck confit is excellent."

She noticed small tufts of black hair peeking under the cuff of his sleeve. He was so unlike Charlie, who had no angles to his cherubic face and soft blond curls. There were thousands of little details about Thierry Valdón that she was noticing: the snag in his sweater, the perfect nose, the too-busy brows. He caught her eye, and she saw something unexpected in his expression. Thierry Valdón was *nervous*. As an actress, you did get used to jittery fans, but the idea that he seemed flummoxed by her came as a shock.

“You keep doing that.” She squeezed the lemon into her water with the newfound confidence of someone who felt the conversation tipping in their favor.

“What?”

“Looking at me.” Her eyes moved from the lemon to him.

“That’s hardly odd. I called you to lunch precisely to *look* at you, Made-moiselle Turner. I am a filmmaker, a visual artist, and your face was plastered on billboards throughout Paris. I would think you’d be used to it.”

The truth was that after all the years of acting and modeling, Gemma had gotten used to all kinds of looks from men, but his soft stare wasn’t base, like those of the men who whistled to her on the street or even the photographers who hoped to bed her after a shoot. Or even Charlie, whose hunger for her was almost animal-like. No, his was a gentle gaze, a cerebral hope to connect with her. “You make me nervous,” she said with a shrug, peering back at him with the same intensity, the honesty of what she’d just admitted to him being given like an offering to a god.

It was the silence that followed that caused Gemma’s stomach to flutter. She placed her hand behind her neck, feeling her cool palm and realizing that she was warm, despite the fresh air that accompanied every door opening in the drafty bistro.

“For the film, I was thinking your hair should be a copper color.”

Gemma touched her strawberry-blond hair. It was straight like her mother’s, and she was lucky that it was in fashion. As a child, her mother had made her sleep with pin curls and cut it short so she would resemble Shirley Temple. When Gemma had gotten old enough, she’d let it grow down past her shoulders in rebellion. It was thick and heavy, but the color had never been touched, even during the beach films where she thought she’d be asked to lighten it to a sunny blond. For a moment she tried to imagine herself with copper hair.

The waiter returned and cut an awkward silence. Gemma ordered the duck confit.

“I’m trying to get the most vivid color *directly* out of the camera, none of this post-production bullshit,” he said, continuing the conversation where they’d left off. “The costumes are sapphire blues and chartreuse greens. A copper color would look magnificent.”

No one had ever consulted with her about such matters prior to being offered a role. Directors tended to send orders through the agent, never dealing directly with an actor. From the sound of it, Thierry Valdon *was* offering the part to her. Gemma’s pulse quickened.

“I am doing something a little different with this film,” he said, leaning in toward her like he didn’t want anyone in the empty restaurant to overhear their conversation. “Like you suggested, I’m going against the grain. I’m trying my hand at a horror film—*L’Étrange Lune* it is called, working title. It is a vampire film, you could say. The vampires are metaphorical, of course, but the villagers don’t know that.”

“Metaphorical?”

“The vampire represents something else—their inner desires and darkness.” One loose piece of hair fell onto his cheek. It was long and sat against his cheek, like a rococo swirl.

Her laugh came out like a snort. “I am aware what a *metaphor* means, Monsieur Valdon.” He must think she was stupid, but she was used to directors thinking actresses were stupid. Yet, Gemma thought the concept of this film sounded strange. “I’m just wondering how it applies to a New Wave horror film. Do you have a script that I can see?”

“Please.” He lifted his hand up to stop her from speaking. “La Nouvelle Vague, not *New Wave*,” he said, mocking her American accent, making her sound like John Wayne. “The film depicts danger from invasion. It doesn’t take much to see the analogy between my vampires and the occupation. Filming begins in June in Amboise.”

Two dishes of duck confit came so quickly that Gemma felt sure they must have been ordered before she'd arrived. It was a small thing, but she felt manipulated. That Thierry Valdon had ordered for her did not sit well with her. "A *script*, Monsieur Valdon?"

He shook his head and began to cut his meat. "Given you write, I would *love* to have your feedback on the shooting script."

"You would?" Gemma's jaw went slack with surprise. No one. No writer, no director in Hollywood or Pinewood Studios had ever, once asked for her thoughts on anything creative. She was like a doll pulled from a shelf and placed in a scene, nothing more.

"Of course," he said. "We French are very collaborative. Mind you, the script is not final, mine never are, but I have notes that I'll send over to you. Where are you? George V?"

She nodded, speechless and unable to breathe. Was Thierry Valdon not only offering her the role, but suggesting that she give him feedback on his script? For a moment, she could see the credits rolling with her name attached to the film, not just as an actress, but as one of its *writers*. "Are you sure you mean it? You really want my ideas?"

His laugh was like a rumble, deep and thunderous. "That is exactly what Nouvelle Vague is all about. Not this Hollywood patriarchal nonsense with the studio bosses demanding those awful tropes. No, your ideas are welcome on my set. I warn you, though: François let me look at one of his scripts last year. I cannot work that way . . . everything done to the line and the detailed notes." He made a face. "It isn't creative. We have a daily script that we're working from, but I want to see the character of Gisele Dumas come from *you*. None of this faithful quoting of it, please. It isn't Ecclesiastes." Valdon cocked his head, awaiting her reply.

Gemma realized the François that he'd just casually mentioned was the director François Truffaut. She did, however, need a script,

especially if the film was to be done in French. But she was thrilled. This man *wanted* her for this film.

"I must address something uncomfortable. We have already established that you have not been working lately," he said between bites.

"I moved to Europe. I've been modeling. Dior." She was unsure where the conversation was going.

He waved his hand at her. "That's not quite true, is it? Everyone in Paris has seen the Dior ad, Mademoiselle Turner, but that was more than a year ago. The fact is that you have not worked because of the boyfriend," said Valdón, gravely looking down at his plate as he spoke as though he needed to gather the courage to say what came next. "Will he be a problem? His reputation precedes him."

"No," she said, irritated that Charlie had wormed his way into her professional conversation. "He won't be a problem."

"We'll be filming at my house. I want to make it clear that you will be staying there but *he* will not." His eyes met hers for affirmation.

"Understood."

He took two more bites and pointed his fork at her. "I won't have you being late, either. American actresses think the clock suits them. I won't have it. You were *four* minutes late today." He held up his fingers. "Quatre."

Before she could reply, Valdón suddenly stood, almost shaking himself, his mood darkening. "This has been a most surprising lunch, Mademoiselle Turner, but I'm sorry to say that I have a previous engagement that I fear requires my attention. It cannot be helped."

So jarring was the abrupt shift in conversation that she stared at him slack-jawed, holding his gaze for a beat too long. The air was thick between them. To her surprise, she found that she had been holding her breath. From the look of shock registering on his face, she could see that he felt this connection, too, like static. Somewhere in

the distance a clanging metal sound of silverware could be heard from the kitchen.

Valdon struggled feverishly to put his coat on, never once taking his eyes off her. He pushed his hair back and there was a sheen of sweat and the moment was charged. Once the garment was on his shoulders, he seemed out of breath, like it was agony to be in her presence for one moment longer, and yet he did not turn to leave.

“Oh,” she said aloud as the revelation hit her that with this film, this man was about to become the most important man in her life. Thoughts like these were silly. The man sharing lunch with her was a known womanizer. Four years ago, he’d even left his first wife with two children for the actress Manon Marquise, now Manon Valdon. She’d heard rumors about him and yet somehow never thought they would pertain to her. In her naivete, Gemma believed that she would be immune to his charms. This had been a dire miscalculation. The pull of him was so strong it shocked her completely. This man wanted her ideas. He wanted to collaborate with her. No other director in Hollywood had ever treated her like this—like a peer. It was intoxicating, and she found herself breathless and dizzy, the room moving. She could barely breathe.

“I find myself speechless,” he said with a nervous laugh. “I really must go. I’m sorry. It cannot be avoided.”

“Of course,” she said, a sad smile forming in the corners of her lips.

He walked away but turned and placed his hands on the back of the chair. “I don’t agree with the critics. You were marvelous in that thriller. The film was an editing nightmare. Anyone with any knowledge of film can see that.” He bowed quickly as though he were a man from another time when formality was the fashion, then he turned back toward the door. “I’ll send the version of the shooting script I have finished to your hotel room.” He pointed to the table. “The bill is settled, so please, stay and enjoy yourself.”

And then he was gone, the scent of his soap lingering as a wave of cold air rushed into the room.

Gemma's face flushed. She felt like she'd just been abandoned by a lover, and the empty chair across from her made her ache for his presence again. She reached over and touched his dirty plate, anything that still had his mark. Within minutes, the waiter came by and removed the abandoned dish and scraped the nonexistent crumbs from Valdon's place setting as though he'd never been there at all. Except the director had left some indelible feeling with her, like an imprint.

In the distance, she heard a phone ringing. Returning to the table, the waiter looked stricken. "I'm sorry, mademoiselle, but there is a rather angry man from London on the phone for you. He claims to have called every restaurant in Montparnasse looking for Monsieur Valdon and his lunch guest."

Gemma closed her eyes, feeling fury well up inside her. How dare Charlie call around looking for her like some errant teenager? Had Thierry Valdon stayed a moment longer, he would have heard "the boyfriend" was on phone, and it would have ruined everything. She could imagine what Valdon would have done had he heard this news. Certainly, that would have ended her talks with him for the role. She exhaled and gripped the table, her heart pounding.

But luck—or fate—had intervened.

At this point, Gemma didn't care if the script that Valdon sent over was rubbish, although she doubted it would be. She was going to Amboise to star in this film.

She followed the waiter to a wall phone like a prisoner to the gallows. Wearily, she put the receiver to her ear, no doubt who was on the other line. "Charlie?"

His voice quavered with anger. "You get your ass on that airplane and get back here right now, or I swear I'll jump. Do you hear me?"

She pictured him on a ledge in the Savoy hotel back in London, leaping from the Monet Suite—oh, the poor Monet Suite—the hotel’s most famous room, which had resembled a junkyard when she’d left for Paris. Yet, she doubted that he’d ever jump from the hotel balcony onto the Embankment below. Charlie was never alone, and he wasn’t alone now. Being his girlfriend meant tolerating the women that he claimed “never mattered.” All the girls—so many of them—had no idea what it was like to be day in, day out with Charlie. In the end, she thought that he was correct: None of them mattered, including her. She’d just deluded herself that she was different. Beyond himself, no one else mattered to Charlie Hicks.

“I told you. I will be back in the morning.”

“Now,” he barked. “I want you here, now.”

“Tomorrow,” she said, holding on to the word for dear life. She knew there were flights back to London in the afternoon, and the old Gemma would have taken one just to quell this man’s tantrum.

“Now,” he said, slamming down the phone.

When she got back to her hotel, there was an envelope waiting for her at the front desk. Inside were seventy pages of *L’Étrange Lune* with an address and date. Thumbing through the pages, she wondered what on earth shooting a film with someone like Valdón would be like. She closed the door to her room and removed the receiver from the phone.

Throwing herself on the bed, she kicked off her shoes and opened the script to the first page.