

chapter 3.

My aunt was a ravishing woman, one of the most beautiful I have ever seen. Everyone said she looked very much like my mother had, and judging from the one miniature portrait I kept of Mother, they may as well have been twins. A lady with bright blue eyes, golden hair, the flushed apple cheeks of a girl and the wise smirk of a woman, Aunt Agnès had lived far too interesting a life to have ever had time to marry, and with the size of the fortune her parents had left her, she had never needed to. She was no longer quite young in 1828, but she still had the power—and the will—to seduce any man who caught her eye. A visit from flirty Courfeyrac, who was my father's sister's son and thus of absolutely no blood relation to Aunt Agnès, was plenty to get her excited.

When Courfeyrac presented himself at our home the next evening, my aunt went into raptures. Ardent kisses were showered upon the visitor, upon me, and even upon her maid Laetitia.

"Lexi!" my aunt exclaimed. "You wicked boy, you said you'd come last week, and you left this old woman waiting around!"

"Mm," said Courfeyrac, happily accepting another kiss. "I promise not to do it again, Auntie."

"Enough of your promises, you little liar!" she said, rapping him on the head. And, looping one arm around him and the other around me, she said, "How perfectly delightful! My favorite niece and my favorite nephew, all together with me for supper!"

"I'm not your nephew, madame," Courfeyrac reminded her with the flash of a charming grin.

"What a very impolite thing to say," she replied, her pout coquettish. "Mimi, doesn't it drive you mad to have to see this awful boy every day?"

"Indeed," I replied. "Just the first glimpse of his face drives me mad."

"Don't be so cold, *Mimi*," Courfeyrac taunted me mercilessly. "It's not very ladylike, *Mimi*."

"Shut up," I snapped.

"Children, children," Aunt Agnès soothed us. "Now, Mimi, you know you could be just a little more...hm...well-mannered? I know you like being a man now, but that's no excuse to be a boor."

"I think Enjolras dresses like a man just so she can indulge her foul temper," Courfeyrac laughed.

I opened my mouth to retort, but my aunt shushed me sweetly and said, "The table should be laid by now. We should get to it, or Élise will scold us."

As Agnès settled her skirts into her usual seat at the head of the table, she said, "Tell me, Lexi, how is Mimi doing out in the world lately? She isn't very talkative, as you know, so I'm left in the dark much of the time."

"What would you like, a scandalous tale?" Courfeyrac smirked.

"Are there any?" said my aunt, and she leaned forward eagerly.

"Alas, no," said Courfeyrac. And, gesturing at me with his fork: "Unless there's something juicy you're not sharing with me?"

"No men yet, Mimi?" Aunt Agnès asked, disappointed.

"Oh, plenty of men," Courfeyrac interrupted with a broad laugh. "But no lovers."

"What would you have me do, Agnès?" I said calmly. "I know a number of men, but unfortunately every single one of them thinks I am a man."

"Well," said Courfeyrac around a mouthful of food, "at least you've got a chance with the ones who're attracted to men."

"How crass," said my aunt, dabbing her lips primly with a napkin to hide her smile.

"You might try Prouvaire," Courfeyrac continued. "I know he's got a few gentlemen in his past already."

"Shame on you," I replied in the hardest tone I could manage.

Courfeyrac's laughter was gentle as he said, "I'm not condemning it. With all respect due to present feminine company"—with a chivalrous nod to Agnès—"even I have had my head turned by a boy or two in my time. And Combeferre's that sort too, I might add."

"I doubt that," I replied, "considering that he has a mistress."

"What does that prove?" Courfeyrac said innocently, taking a dainty sip of wine. "If a fellow has a mistress, does that mean he wouldn't have a man as well?"

"I don't think he's like that," I persisted, "and by this point, I daresay I know him better than you do."

"You may say what you please," said Courfeyrac with an insufferably smug smile, "but I know you're wrong."

"Children, please," said Aunt Agnès, "you ought to be able to keep from squabbling, at least at the supper table. You know how your old aunt hates it." She turned to me and asked politely, "How is your little doctor, then? Is he doing well at—which hospital did you say he worked at now?"

"Necker."

"Oh, the children's hospital," she said. "That's right. He likes children, your Monsieur Combeferre?"

"Oh, he's mad about them," said Courfeyrac. "Combeferre's a darling man, Auntie. Haven't you met him?"

"How can I bring him here?" I said flatly. "To meet this woman who insists on calling me 'Mimi' and 'she,' no matter the company?"

"He'd like that little pet name, that 'Mimi.'" Courfeyrac laughed aloud at the thought. "He'd take to calling you that, and you'd let him."

"I think you should have him over to supper," my aunt said, pursing her pretty lips. "He is your favorite, after all."

"Not you too, Agnès," I sighed.

"Maybe she's right," Courfeyrac suggested. "Maybe you should tell him the truth. He's a good man, he'd not betray you."

"The fewer the people who know the truth, the simpler," I replied. "Not that I don't trust him, but...Maybe one day, but not now." I stirred my soup pensively, and added, "Honestly, I wouldn't want to burden him with that secret."

"Hm." Courfeyrac shrugged. "Maybe you're right."

"Mimi," said Agnès, delicately changing the subject, "I forgot to tell you: your sister will be visiting us in a few weeks."

"Why?" I said.

"Why indeed!" said my aunt. "Naturally she wants to see Paris, darling. I suspect she's quite jealous that your father has allowed you to live here with me these past few years."

I remained silent. My sister was four years younger than I, a frail girl in appearance, at times almost consumptive, and quite childish in temperament. She and I had been closer as children than we were now, and our mutual harshness was probably to blame for that. I had little interest in meeting her here, where I had invented a new life for myself and where a few misplaced words would bring that life crashing down. My aunt interrupted my thoughts:

"Of course this means we'll have to go to the dressmaker and have a few new frocks done for you."

"Must we?" I replied. This was what I had feared. My sister would obviously be expecting to see Mademoiselle Marie-Anne-Claude Enjolras, and would be horrified to come face-to-face with Monsieur Marc-Aurélien-Claude Enjolras instead. My aunt was right—I would need more dresses.

"How long will she be here?" I asked, mentally adjusting my schedule.

"Close to a month, I should think."

"A month!" I exclaimed. "*Diable!*"

“Really, such cursing!” said my aunt sternly. “With that kind of mouth, it won’t take her long to figure out that something looks odd here.”

“How can I just leave my life for a month?” I said. “You realize that if I’m to be a woman for the entire time she’s here, that means I’ll be forced to stop going to classes, stop seeing my friends regularly, stop meeting with the—!” I caught myself before I uttered ‘A B C’ in front of Agnès. “For a whole month? Don’t you think people will wonder what’s become of me?”

“That is a problem,” Courfeyrac agreed. “I can help you establish an alibi, but what if someone should spot you out in your dresses? I always thought it was too risky for you to walk about like that.” He shuddered. “Every time I see you in a dress now, it’s just like seeing a man in a dress.”

“How flattering,” I said, a bit annoyed in spite of myself.

“Really, Lexi, your cousin is a very striking woman,” Agnès scolded him.

“‘Striking’ is very much the appropriate term for it,” said Courfeyrac, not unkindly. “I would never claim that Enjolras is not beautiful, only that now that I’ve had the opportunity to see her in trousers, I believe her beauty is much better suited to a man than to a girl.”

“How very unpleasant you are,” my aunt pronounced with a little frown. “I do so enjoy dressing up Mimi, so I would ask you to not make her any more reluctant to indulge me than she already is.”

“Never mind him, Agnès,” I said. “We still haven’t solved this problem. What on earth am I to tell Combeferre, at the very least? That I’ve decided to go on a month-long holiday, traveling across the continent?”

“Not a bad idea,” my aunt mused.

“Except that Enjolras doesn’t take holidays, and everybody knows that,” Courfeyrac objected. “If only you were a little more frivolous sometimes, this would be a much easier task.” He chewed his lip, deep in thought. “Perhaps if you said there was a family emergency back in Aurillac...and you may not be back for a while...”

“But wouldn’t they expect letters, at least? Post-marked from Aurillac?”

“Hm,” said Courfeyrac. “I could say that you sent me the letters instead, and then show them something you’d written...”

“But that would be suspicious as well,” I replied, “because if I were absent for several weeks, I would surely write to Combeferre before I wrote to you, even though you are my cousin.”

“Hm,” said Courfeyrac. “You may have to accept that you won’t get out of this situation without hurting some feelings along the way.”

"I don't know that he would be hurt," I said, "but he would certainly worry. I think he'd sense that something was wrong with the scenario, and not knowing exactly what it was, I think he'd drive himself mad worrying over it."

"That's certainly true," said Courfeyrac, rolling his eyes. "It is a problem, isn't it?"

"Give me some time, and I'll think of something," I said.

Later that evening when Courfeyrac was preparing to take his leave, he kissed Aunt Agnès and said, "Enjolras, have a word with me outside for just a moment, would you?"

I followed him out onto the stoop and closed the door behind us. The street lamps had been lit, casting his profile into shadow. My cousin was a plump, handsome man, the same age as Combeferre but otherwise quite different from him. He made it a point to be well-dressed for any occasion, be it a governor's ball or a street revolt, and he scrupulously trained his figure to suit the tight waistcoats and tailored coats of the latest style. Today it was a daring scarlet waistcoat, a cravat of stunning whiteness and a grin to match, and above it all, clever, restless black eyes and a perfectly coiffed and curled pile of dark hair. When I was a young girl and Courfeyrac used to visit my father back in Aurillac, I remember liking his taste in cologne but being repulsed by his wildness. He was wearing the same cologne today, to impress Agnès no doubt, but there was nothing but solemnity in his demeanor now, an odd departure for him. I waited for him to speak.

He took his time, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. He inhaled, released the smoke into a long sigh, and finally said, "I didn't say anything in front of Agnès about your misadventures from yesterday. You should thank me."

"You mean that little encounter at the printer's?" I said. "It was nothing, I told you."

"I don't think she would see it that way," he replied, and I knew he was right.

"If you're so worried, why didn't you expose me?" I asked.

"I suppose I should have," he said, puffing thoughtfully on his cigarette. "She still doesn't know anything at all about your politics?"

"Our politics, don't you mean," I said. "She knows how I feel about the world in general, that is, she knows my philosophy. She knows I meet friends in cafés and at classes and discuss that philosophy. Does she know I'm the leader of a republican secret society? Does she know I go proselytizing in the workshops and the slums? Does she know I make speeches at the Panthéon and Les Halles and Saint-Marceau and publish essays in *Le Globe*? Probably not, and it's probably better for her peace of mind that it remains that way. I take it you agree."

"Of course," said Courfeyrac. "But it'd be something of a shock if she were ever to read about your arrest in *Le Moniteur*."

"I'll think about that when it comes up," I said.

"You'd better start thinking," he warned, "because based on the trouble you've been attracting lately, it seems that you may be headed for a sobering lesson one of these days."

"It was only this latest episode, and then that problem a few weeks ago with the *Globe*, but other than that—"

"And don't forget the spy among the polytechniciens." He checked his watch in the light of the window and said, "Look, I'm not Combeferre—I don't enjoy lecturing you. All I want is for you to take a few more precautions."

"I'll be careful," I said gravely, and he seemed satisfied.

"I'd better be off," he said. "There's a chorus girl waiting patiently for me at the café across from the Théâtre-Italien. I'll go with you and Combeferre to Marrast's little party tomorrow. Nine o'clock, at the café Voltaire?"

I nodded. "Don't be late. Marrast appreciates punctuality in his associates."

"Of course, of course," he waved me off cheerfully.

I watched him go down the street, swinging his walking stick and whistling a little tavern song as if he hadn't a care in the world, and I thought that perhaps he was right. I promised myself that next week I would get a gun.