

CHAPTER 1

At his station, *Poste 9*, in the lab where students mixed ingredients for their perfumes, Eric Foster unstopped his latest reproduction of a lost fragrance. “What do you think of aphrodisiacs?”

“The unachievable goal of many perfumers.” Jacques Durand cocked a bushy white eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m trying to make one. A reconstruction of the fragrance the Queen of Sheba wore to seduce King Solomon. I call it Balquees.”

Durand frowned. “Why do you waste your time? Why do you waste *my* time, on a Sunday morning?”

Uh-oh. Apparently Durand was in one of his testy moods, perhaps because of the cold drizzle outside. For a seventy-year-old man accustomed to his villa on Cap d’Ail, Versailles in early April could be a dreary place.

It was dreary for Eric, too, but he didn’t have a choice. He was stuck here until graduation next month when, at age twenty-five, he could finally start working for a major perfume house.

At least he and Durand had the institute to themselves. Durand, who wasn't on the faculty but taught an occasional master class, hated the groveling of students, the way they foisted their creations on him whenever he showed up. But Sundays were safe — no students, no staff, the labs spotlessly clean, the air cleansed of experiments by the filtration system humming softly overhead — the ideal day for their fortnightly meetings.

Deciding Durand could smell Balquees when his mood improved, Eric replaced the stopper and attempted to justify his so-called waste of time. “I've finished all the requirements, except the final examination. So I have a free week or two to indulge in a little fun.”

“And this is how you indulge? Butterflying after fantasies?” Durand unbuttoned the jacket of his suit, Armani of course, which he wore over a thin turtleneck the same pigeon-gray color as his Mark Twain hair. Seating himself on the adjacent lab stool, he said, “Eric, you have an excellent mind and the finest nose of anybody I know. But more important, you have phenomenal talent. I would take no interest in you if you did not. You should be spending your time on serious creations.”

With a smile, Eric opened the bottom drawer at his station and withdrew a brown, screw-capped vial. “I finished this last week. For my graduation project.”

Durand gave him that skeptical squint that could crush reputations, then selected a *mouillette* from a beaker of them on the tiled countertop. He dipped the thin strip of white filter paper into Eric's offering, sniffed, and his eyes widened.

“This is excellent.” He waved the *mouillette* in the air, to evaporate some of the top note, and smelled again. “Truly superb. But you used real bergamot.”

“I know it can cause cancer.” *If you rub it on rats at full strength for a month or two.* “But there's such a tiny percentage, and it doesn't smell the same with a synthetic.”

“Synthetics never smell the same. Cheaper, more consistent quality. But none of the

nuances of the natural, I agree. Still, there is strong resistance to certain naturals, especially in Europe and America. You have a risk that this could never go to market without one of those infantile health warnings your government loves.”

Eric’s ego deflated. “Never go to market” from a man who’d made his fortune and reputation as a master perfumer was tantamount to the kiss of death.

“However,” Durand said, dropping the *mouillette* in the waste jar, “this is so good that the synthetic will not injure it. Congratulations.”

Relief swelled in Eric’s chest, a physical sensation that made him straighten his posture. Durand had a habit of doing that to you, crippling you one moment, then lifting you back up. A lot like Eric’s father, who could rip apart your sauce or grimace at your soufflé, then show you how to fix it. Eric loved them both. But his future lay in perfumery, not *haute cuisine*.

Ever since junior high school, when he discovered he could defeat a bully by stealing the guy’s girlfriend with a fragrance crafted specifically for her, he’d had one goal in life — to create perfumes. Fragrances that people noticed, that women loved, that created an atmosphere of romance.

And brought him respect and fortune like Durand’s.

So, synthetic bergamot. Eric’s station, like all the others in this lab, had an electronic balance for weighing fractions of grams and four shelves of deep-sided plastic trays, each tray filled with brown glass vials of extracts, essential oils, and cold-pressed tinctures. The vials were fitted with screw-cap eye droppers, one drop being one twentieth of a milliliter. He pulled down tray B from the top shelf and picked out *Bergamot synthétique*. “I’ll try it again.”

“More than try. You will succeed.”

Encouraged by his mentor’s confidence, Eric returned to his original subject. “Why do you say an aphrodisiac is unachievable?”

“Because men have tried for centuries. Spanish fly, the crushed powder of a beetle that inflames sensitive tissue, is nothing more than an irritant. Vanilla, sweet amber. Perhaps they worked in an earlier age. But today’s woman is more sophisticated.”

“What about androsterone?”

“Male perspiration?” Durand blew out a dismissive breath in that manner unique to the French. “For some women, perhaps. For some women, the sight of a man in tight trousers is stimulus enough. Do you wish to cater to such women?”

Spoken with the unwitting arrogance of a man who’d spent his life creating specifically for sophisticates. “But it’s an intriguing concept,” Eric persisted. “Smells can generate so many emotions, so many physical reactions. Why not lust?”

“Eric, you do not strike me as a fellow who needs assistance attracting women.”

“I’m speaking in the general case, intellectually.”

With a resigned sigh, Durand stood from his stool. “Come with me.”

Curious what the man was up to, Eric followed him out of the lab and to the office of Jean Kerléo, founder and president of the Osmothèque. Billed as the “living perfume museum,” the Osmothèque shared quarters with ISIPCA, *l’Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l’Aromatique alimentaire*, the world’s top perfume school where, among the roughly two hundred students, Eric suffered the segregation of being best — and American.

Durand opened the door and knelt in front of the small safe behind Kerléo’s desk. With long, delicate fingers, he turned the combination dial.

Eric halted at the threshold. He could hardly believe it. Durand never missed a chance to extol the honor of perfumers. Yet here he was, opening the private safe of a man who dwelled among the gods of perfumery just as surely as Durand, himself, did.

When his mentor withdrew a set of keys from the safe, Eric felt creepy, like he shouldn’t

be seeing this. “*Monsieur*, are you sure this is okay?”

“Jean is a close friend. He would lend these to me if he were here.”

Hoping that was true, Eric again followed Durand, this time down the stairs and out of the laboratory wing into one of the two pink-and-white chateaux that were the public face of ISIPCA. Durand unlocked a door on their right, flipped on a light switch, and headed down the stairs into the basement. At a metal door labeled 27 and posted with a sign that read “ATTENTION A LA TETE,” he selected a four-sided, high-security key from Kerléo’s ring and opened the lock.

A chill ran up Eric’s back. This was the vault, the heart of the Osmothèque’s unique collection. He hadn’t been here since the orientation tour for new students, nearly two years ago. In fact, few people in the world even knew it existed, and fewer still ever got inside.

The temperature of the room matched Eric’s chill, a frigid fifty degrees Fahrenheit to counteract one of the three great enemies of perfume — heat. Of the other two enemies, light was easy to control. The room was dark, until Durand switched on the overhead lights.

A tile-topped table attached to the far wall provided the room’s only workplace. Aside from it and a small area around it, floor-to-ceiling metal shelves occupied nearly every available space, and bottles of perfume filled the shelves almost to capacity. Several thousand bottles, ranging in size from five milliliters to about two liters. Roughly half of the bottles were glass, the other half aluminum.

Eric dared not touch a single one of them.

Nobody except Jean Kerléo ever took a sample from any bottle, and Kerléo only did so after one hell of a good reason had been presented to him. When he did withdraw a sample, he topped off the headspace with argon from a gas cylinder in one corner, for the final great enemy of perfumes was oxygen. No bottle in this room contained any air. In all cases, what looked like

air above the liquid was argon.

“Eric, you are standing among the greatest perfumes ever created. Some of them no longer exist outside this room.” Durand leveled his gray eyes. “Not one of them is an aphrodisiac.”

“But that doesn’t mean an aphrodisiac couldn’t join them.”

“Never!”

Eric stepped back at the force of Durand’s outburst.

As though embarrassed at his loss of control, Durand ran a hand through his wavy hair. “I say never because an aphrodisiac, even if possible, would be dishonorable. Great perfumes like these create a mood, an impression. They do not drive a person to sexual liaison against that person’s will.”

“But something that arouses desire could augment that mood. It doesn’t have to be against the person’s will. A person might *want* it.”

“It would be dishonest.”

Not necessarily. Hoping to avoid another flash of anger, Eric adopted a humble tone.

“Don’t you think it depends on intent? If you know the person well, if you’re in a committed—”

“Eric, please.” Durand picked up a binder from the work table and started flipping through pages of computer printout. “Look at these. Jicky, Mitsouko, Number Five, Joy, Ma Griffe, L’ Air du Temps. Here, Sublime, by our own Kerléo. All masterpieces. These are the fragrances you should study.”

“I *have* studied them.” At the mention of their names, Eric could recall exactly what each one smelled like. He could summon the fragrance in his mind and discern the ingredients, even the relatively uncommon ones like the opopanax in Jicky and the styrax in Ma Griffe. For a moment, he was tempted to remind Durand that Jicky, Mitsouko, and L’ Air du Temps all

contained real bergamot. But he held his tongue.

“And if you wish to have fun, as you say, with re-creations ...” Durand flipped through a few more pages. “... consider something useful like this.” He tapped one of his manicured nails on an entry that read “Crêpe de chine (1925, Millot) par Jean de Pres.” “Of the original perfume, there is no more. We have it here only because Kerléo recreated it. We know it is perfect because the owner of the formula allowed him to copy it. That formula,” Durand continued, “and at least two hundred others, he keeps in a safety deposit box. People have given them to him because they trust him to keep them secret. They know he is honorable.”

Not much fun, Eric thought. The fun came from figuring out the ingredients yourself.

“Honor, Eric. You are about to enter the most honorable profession on earth. When you have gained the trust of your colleagues and proved your ability to create fine fragrances, then you will have the right to venture into the realm of recreating lost perfumes.”

As usual, Durand had taken the long way around to make a point, going so far as to bring him down here to the *sanctum sanctorum* to do it. Eric couldn't help but feel privileged that such an icon of the art would go to such lengths. But why couldn't a person pursue two passions at once? The ancient and the modern. Especially when the ancient might hold the key to what Durand had scorned as an “unachievable” goal.

To Eric, nothing in perfumery was unachievable. And Durand's saying it was felt like a gauntlet thrown down at his feet. He would rise to the challenge, perfect Balquees, and prove Durand wrong.

Eric smiled inwardly. Judging from the effects he'd experienced already, he was close. Close to resurrecting a true aphrodisiac.

CHAPTER 2

At the Palace of Versailles, an hour's walk from ISIPCA, Eric's favorite place was the Gallery of Mirrors. If he'd had his way, he and Abby would be up there right now. He liked the grandeur and sheer decadence, the long row of twenty-foot-high windows facing the formal garden, the duplicate row of equally large mirrors on the opposite wall, the gilded statues lining both walls, and the crystal chandeliers that must have weighed half a ton each. On a sunny day, the entire hall glittered like a chamber sculpted from pure gold.

But on bleak days, it seemed more a symbol of opulence in decline, of excess punished at the guillotine.

Which was one reason why he hadn't tried harder to drag her there this afternoon. The other reason was that Abby saw the gallery, with all its statues of women raising candelabras in honor of the Sun King, as a disgusting tribute to male narcissism and female servitude.

To her, the best part of the palace grounds was this phony little thatch-roofed village called the Hamlet, a folly built for the queen where she could make believe she was just plain folk.

At least the threat of more rain seemed to have kept most tourists inside the palace itself. Only a handful of bundled visitors dotted the Hamlet's winding pathways.

As he and Abby stood in front of the so-called Watermill Cottage, a cold wind rippled the nearby pond and wafted scents of rosemary, thyme, and dead lavender from last year's plantings. Eric turned up the collar of his leather jacket. "I bet I know why you like this place. You picture Marie Antoinette cavorting with all her serving maids. Pretending to be farm girls, milking cows, hoisting skirts and dancing jigs until they fall into the hay and have to loosen each others' bodices."

“Jealous?” Abby gave him a sly grin, her beautiful Chinese eyes laughing in that impish way that always charmed him. Slim and graceful, with chin-length black hair streaked red today, she came closer to the French concept of *félinité* than any other woman he’d ever met.

He returned the grin. “Only if there was a man-servant in there with them.”

“Dreamer.”

She had that right. He dreamed of *her*, a dream only partially fulfilled in reality. For besides being his best friend and the only other American at ISIPCA, Abby Han was his occasional lover. But unfortunately she was also, as she put it, “mostly lesbian.”

Taking her hand, he walked her up the path to the stone-and-timber cottage. “What’s wrong with dreaming?”

“Mental jacking off,” she said with the accent and bluntness of her native New York City.

“Gee, thanks for the lovely image.”

She leaned closer and pecked him on the cheek.

Just like her. Crude one moment, cuddly the next. Always toying with him, except when she wanted him in bed. Memories of which gave him an idea. At the front door of the cottage he jiggled the latch, knowing it would be locked. But once, when he’d misplaced his keys, she’d opened his apartment for him with the tweezers from her little Swiss Army knife. “Maybe you could pick the lock, and we could see if they’ve spread fresh hay.”

She cocked her head. “Durand must have put you in a frisky mood. So it went well with him this morning?”

Durand. That threw a damper on his friskiness. “*Comme çà, comme çà*. He liked the perfume I made for my graduation project. But I’ve also been trying to reconstruct an old aphrodisiac, and he dumped all over it. Not just my effort, but the whole concept of

aphrodisiacs.”

“You mean like rhino horn or tiger’s balls?” She squinched up her face. “Frankly, I’m with him. I’d rather see those parts still attached to the animal.”

“No. I’m talking about a perfume. The ingredients, at least the way I’m building it, are all plant materials. Except for civet.”

“My love, who needs it?” Turning to face him, she drifted a hand down one thigh of his jeans and back up the other. Then she cupped him through the denim and smiled. “See?”

Unfortunately, another couple chose just that time to come strolling up the path in their direction. But that didn’t stop Abby. She stepped closer and tugged at his zipper. He wanted to say, “You wouldn’t dare,” but knew she definitely would — which would leave him totally exposed and at her mercy.

To stop her hand, he wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her tightly. “Why don’t we continue this behind the cottage.”

“Because I’m only making a point.” She pushed away and shot a glance around his shoulder as crunching footsteps on the gravel path announced the arrival of the other couple.

“*Bonjour.*”

“*Bonjour,*” the couple sing-songed before turning to Eric’s left to peer into the cottage’s windows.

Eric pulled up his zipper and steered Abby to the right, down the steps to where an old wooden waterwheel stood motionless in the sluice that had once turned it. If anything, the breeze down here seemed colder, the scents it carried dominated by the odor of duck droppings and the chlorophyll smell of algae growing at the pond’s edge.

Returning to her comment about who needed an aphrodisiac, he said, “It doesn’t matter that some people get turned on easily. It’s about the whole idea of perfumes. Attraction and

romance. Only this would go a step further and create sensations that inspired passion.”

“Love Potion Number Nine?”

“I’m being serious.”

“Well, lighten up a little. Or I won’t pick that lock.”

Oh? He glanced around. The nearest door, visible from here through an archway in the stonework, lay part way back up the stairs they’d come down.

“Eric, I’m joking.” Abby took hold of his hand. “Look, you’re the best student ISIPCA ever had. Everyone knows it. So why waste your talent on something that’s purely mental?”

“Mental?”

Releasing his hand, she said, “All good sex is in the mind. Granted, perfumes are about sex, and granted, you can create a perfume that might enhance the mood. But if one person or the other doesn’t want to get laid, it ain’t gonna happen.”

“I’m not so sure.” He’d been thinking about that ever since his decision to prove Durand wrong. If the ancient texts Eric had found on the Internet were correct, King Solomon had been reluctant to lie with the Queen of Sheba until her fragrance enchanted him. “This thing I’m working on, it started partly as a whim and partly because the only specified ingredient was something I’d never smelled before. A wood called oud of Socotra. Turns out, ISIPCA has a sample, but they wouldn’t let me use any of it. Too rare. Which pissed me off. So I—”

“Now I see.” Abby flashed one of her “Ah, ha” smiles. “Someone said no, and you said, ‘Just watch me.’ That’s so typical of you.”

“Would you let me finish?”

She backed a pace and flipped up her palms in a gesture that said, “I’m waiting.”

For some reason, he focused on the teardrop-shaped birthmark below her left earlobe, the only “blemish” on her otherwise perfect skin. Usually she concealed it with makeup. But he’d

told her he thought of it as nature's earring. And often, when she knew they were going to spend time together away from other people, she didn't bother hiding it.

"Anyway," he said, shifting his gaze to her eyes, "I started building this old fragrance. Which isn't easy because I only know one ingredient for sure and, if I want to be true to the times, everything I add has to be water-based."

"And?"

He lowered his voice. "What I have so far really works. At least on me."

"Eric, I think you're succumbing to the power of your own suggestion." In a mocking tone, she taunted, "I want this stuff to turn me on. Oh my, look, it's turning me on."

He struggled to check his temper, then decided to switch to *her* specialty. Abby was, after all, the star pupil in ISIPCA's flavor curriculum. "What about oysters, dark chocolate, saffron?"

"Give me a break. Have you ever gotten a hard-on eating oysters?"

"Okay, forget it." Score one backfire for him. "How 'bout we cash out of here and go to that bistro you like?"

"You didn't have lunch with Durand?"

"He said he needed to hit the road for a hunting trip in the Pyrenees."

"Long drive."

"That car of his will make it before nightfall."

Abby squeezed Eric's arm. "I prefer someone who takes his time."

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"I want to blindfold you," Eric said.

“Ooh, kinky.” Abby gave him a soft kiss, then went to her dresser and removed a black silk scarf from the second drawer. “Will this do?”

“Nicely.” He set down the package they’d stopped to collect at his apartment after deciding to punt on lunch and take a taxi from the palace to her place. The package was about the size and weight of an encyclopedia volume, and when he’d said it was for her, she’d spent the two blocks between his place and hers trying to guess what lay inside the brown paper wrapping.

If she wanted kinky, his gift wouldn’t exactly fill the bill. But maybe he could steer things in that direction. Certainly her apartment lent itself to dark, almost Gothic fantasies — two rooms in a 19th-century mansion with wooden shutters, plank floors, and bare stone showing through the plasterwork. Her furnishings were all black, right down to the sheets and bedspread. “Matches my personality,” she’d told him. As did the bed itself, a four-poster in heavy oak, positioned like an altar in the center of the room.

Eric shed his jacket, then unbuttoned her wool coat and slid it from her shoulders. Beneath the coat she wore a cashmere sweater the same blood-red as a Ferrari. Her nipples stood out against the soft fabric. “God, you’re beautiful.”

She closed her eyes. “Say it again.”

Gladly. Abby, reared by a father who’d treated her like trash, didn’t consider herself pretty. Eric never tired of trying to convince her otherwise. “You’re beautiful.”

As though the words were magic, she opened her eyes and smiled. “And now you’ll have your way with me?”

“In time.” He turned her and tied the scarf firmly around her head.

“Don’t I get to open the package first?”

“No. I do.” From behind her, he nuzzled her neck, inhaling the fragrance of her skin,

like cream laced with a hint of violet, the uniquely Abby fragrance that always excited him. “In bed.”

“Mmm.”

He removed her boots and his own shoes and socks, leaving them both otherwise clothed. Then he climbed onto the bed with his back to the headboard and guided her into a position so that she sat between his legs with her back against his chest.

“Unless you’re a contortionist,” she said, “I don’t know how we can do it like this.”

“Ever hear of foreplay?”

“Highly overrated.”

“Shhh. It’s time for your present.” Praying this wouldn’t be a let-down, he tore the paper off the package and slid out a red box inscribed in gold lettering with *Le Nez du Vin*. The nose of wine. Inside were fifty-four small bottles of scents common to wines. The collection, overpriced but attractively presented, was intended for connoisseurs who wanted to hone their appreciation of these subtleties — or impress their friends with how many they could detect.

The gift would still serve his original purpose of illustrating one of the connections between her specialty and his, namely the host of scents that wines shared with perfumes. But now, if his skill were up to the task, he’d prove to her that scents could arouse. Maybe not quite as well as Balquees did for him, but close.

To start, he selected peach, a fragrance some Asians associated with sex because of the fruit’s resemblance to labia. He passed the bottle under her nose. “What do you smell?”

“Peaches. What are you doing?”

He drew a fingertip across her mouth. “Peaches and lips.”

“Oh, you’re a bad boy. Is that supposed to be innuendo?”

Instead of answering, he opened the bottle of apricot. “And this?”

“Apricots. Same innuendo. You want me to think of pussy?”

“Think of whatever you want.” Having started with lighter fruits, equivalent to top notes in perfumery, he decided to try something darker and heavier, closer to a heart note. Ah, prune and blackcurrant.

He held the two bottles together and passed them under her nose. “How about this?”

She sniffed, then sniffed again. “Prunes in armagnac.”

Interesting. He sniffed them, himself, and saw how she could make that association. But food wasn't the imagery he was shooting for. He wanted something lower in the abdomen. After scanning the bottles, he chose a combination of three: mushroom, peppercorns, and cut hay.

“Ooh.” She tilted her head up toward him. “Now you're being naughty again. Where did you get that boy-girl smell?”

“Boy-girl?”

“Don't play coy with me.”

At last, he was getting somewhere. He kept the cut hay, for its slight similarity to the smell of semen. In place of the other two, he chose butter and leather, olfactory impressions he'd received a few times while snuggling her between the legs. Holding the three bottles together, he waved them in front of her.

Abby's toes curled. “How do you do that?”

Innocently he said, “I'm just trying to conjure images in your head.”

“You're doing a pretty good job of it.”

She didn't have to tell him. He could smell her arousal in the sharp scent of apocrine perspiration coming from her pubic hair. But he could do better. Diving into the realm of perfume base notes, he chose yeast, musk, and dark chocolate. He held them together under her

nose.

“Eric, would you stop?” She untied the cord that laced the front of her slacks. “You’re torturing me.”

And her reaction was doing the same to him. Shifting position a little so she wouldn’t notice the bulge rising against her back, he decided to go for broke. From the collection, he selected the bottle labeled urine. He’d been saving it for last because the closest thing to a pheromone for men and lesbians was the smell of female urine. This stuff smelled fairly generic, but it would have to do. He added it to the three bottles already in hand.

One whiff of the combination and Abby ripped off her blindfold. She twisted to face him, her eyes on fire.

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As evening darkened her bedroom, Eric cradled Abby in his arms, her soft breath feathering his wrist. It had been a long time, maybe two months, since they’d lain like this. He wished it could be every night, every morning.

With a contented, “Mmm,” she uncoiled from his embrace and stretched like a cat. “That was nice.”

More like fantastic. All of her flavors still lingered on his tongue, her textures on his fingertips. The aromas of her body were so firmly embedded in his memory that he could recapture every moment of their lovemaking. And the events leading up to it.

Propping himself on an elbow, he said, “What’s your opinion of aphrodisiacs now?”

“They’re in the mind.”

“What?” He sat upright. “How can you say that? I took you through a whole

progression of fragrances and never touched you. And pretty soon you're practically tearing my clothes off. With no stimulation other than your nose."

She smiled benevolently. "And my mind. I got hot for you at the palace. You blindfolded me. Nice touch, by the way. Then you put me between your legs. What was a girl to do?"

"You're saying the fragrances had no effect on you?" That was clearly bullshit.

Abby pushed herself up and sat back against the headboard. "You want me to say they helped, don't you? Okay, they helped. But they wouldn't have made me want you if I didn't already."

Balquees would. Which jogged his memory. "I forgot to mention earlier, Durand gave me four passes to a perfume launch in Paris this Friday. He can't attend and wouldn't, anyway. I'd like you to come with me."

Her eyes widened. "Which house?"

"Styx."

"Wow. They're big time. A new perfume from them should be sensational." Then her brow furrowed. "Who are you giving the other passes to?"

"I'm thinking Diego and Marie-Claire." The only other students he considered friends. "I'd like all of you to help me test this new perfume I'm working on."

"Your aphrodisiac, so-called?"

"Just wait." He now had two Doubting Thomases to prove wrong. And the Pantheon was where he would do it.