

CHAPTER 1

Eric Foster gripped the vial of Balquees in his pocket. Watching the glitterati of Paris file into the Pantheon, he knew beyond doubt this was the perfect event for his test.

It was like the Oscars meets the Grammys, denizens of the society pages in low-cut gowns and tuxedos mixing with anorexics of indeterminate gender in fishnet tops, silver jeans, and knee-high boots. All pretended not to pose as they paraded through a double phalanx of flashing cameras into the floodlit sepulcher.

In keeping with their bad-boy image, the gurus of *couture* at Styx had chosen France's grandest mausoleum as the venue for launching their new perfume. Tomb and perfume, death and sex, a stroke of marketing genius Eric couldn't help but admire. On top of that lay the mystery of how they'd managed to rent the resting place of such national heroes as Voltaire, Victor Hugo, and Madame Curie. There were only two possible answers: someone high in the government got paid or laid. All told, it was a cocktail of licentiousness guaranteed to attract even the most jaded. And the jaded were key to Eric's experiment.

How would they react to Balquees? Would they react at all? Eric swallowed hard. If no one even noticed, then he could kiss off two months of work and a lot of money, not to mention faith in his own judgment. He'd set his sights on a tough audience. But his self-respect demanded nothing less.

From the edge of the crowd, he could smell them individually as they emerged from their limousines. Creed, Patou, some kind of Jordache shit. The few good ones he couldn't identify were almost certainly custom-made. A heady, almost dizzying array of—

Uh, oh. Not *almost* dizzying. Eric's vision went watery. Suddenly unbalanced, as though he'd lost his footing on the cobblestones, he recognized the onset of the "storm."

Normally he could cope with the thousands of smells most people never noticed in their daily lives. But anxiety sometimes crashed his mental defenses, plunging him into a maelstrom of olfactory overload. Quickly he buried his nose in the crook of his elbow, trying to shut down the squall by inhaling only the aroma of his cotton shirt. It helped. After a few moments, he felt less disoriented. His vision cleared. Still, his hands felt clammy.

"Are you okay?" Abby asked.

Eric put his arm down and took a cautious breath. Better. Myriad odors still came to him — a crusty baguette, someone who'd recently used spearmint toothpaste, a new book, pavement still damp from the late-afternoon rain — but he could lump them together now and tune them out like so much background noise. "I'm fine."

"Bullshit," she said with the accent and bluntness of her native New York City. "You're pale."

How she could tell in this light, Eric wasn't sure. Perhaps he was sufficiently illuminated by reflected glare from the flood lamps trained on the Pantheon's fortress-like walls and cross-topped rotunda. Or maybe those Chinese eyes were just sharper than his. Whichever, her

concern made him grateful for her friendship. In fact, Abby Han was his best friend. And occasional lover. Slim, pretty in a slightly angular way, with short black hair streaked red tonight, she came closer to the French concept of *félinité* than any other woman he'd ever met. Too bad she was, as she put it, "eighty-percent lesbian."

"Eric," Marie-Claire whined behind him, "we are not properly dressed. Look at those beautiful gowns."

He turned to the other woman who'd come in with him on the train this evening. Like Abby and himself, she wore black slacks and shirt, the "in" dress of twenty-somethings in Paris and, by extension, of the students at ISIPCA — the world's top perfume school — in Versailles. Chunky and rather plain, Marie-Claire was the most conservative of his friends. A faint scent of rust, her particular nuance of it, told him she had her period. It explained her limp hair and doughy complexion and made her even more of a long shot tonight than Eric had hoped.

"We'll be fine," he said, trying to assure himself as much as her. "Look, there's a girl in black leather pants and halter top." Eric glanced around. "Speaking of black leather, where's Diego?"

"Probably bonking some matron in a wheelchair." Abby's wisecrack about Diego's appetite for older women was obviously directed at Marie-Claire, who was saving herself for Mr. Right and, since giving up on Eric, prayed nightly Diego was the one.

Marie-Claire pulled a scowl, which on her cherub's face looked more like a pout. "At least Satan did not make him a pervert."

Couldn't they just drop it? Eric stepped back from the sparring women. It was several months since Marie-Claire had given up bombarding Abby with tracts on sins of the flesh. But Abby still retaliated with occasional gibes, and no truce between them seemed to last long. The sooner Diego got here, the sooner they could all go inside and get on with the business at hand.

Eric peered down Rue Soufflot toward the distant Eiffel Tower, lit up against an indigo sky. Police barriers at the intersection with Rue Saint Jacques blocked all traffic, except limousines, from entering the Pantheon's square. But pedestrians could get through. He scanned those approaching from the intersection. Where the hell was Diego? After all the help Eric had given him, late nights in the lab, adjustments to his perfume formulas, damn near writing some of the formulas for him, the least Diego might do was show up on time.

With renewed jitters, Eric again clutched the vial in his pocket. Although Balquees needed refining, the prime ingredient of its heart note was fixed. Oud of Socotra. Arguably the rarest wood in the world, an extract of its black resin was even rarer, and so costly that Eric had spent a good chunk of his savings for less than an ounce. But if it worked as well on these sophisticates as it did on him — and on King Solomon — he might actually have found the Holy Grail of perfumery. A true aphrodisiac.

What had started as a curiosity for him could end up short-circuiting years of post-graduate apprenticeship along the tradition-bound path to becoming a master perfumer.

“Diego,” Marie-Claire gushed.

Eric whipped around to see the tall, lean Spaniard grinning as though fresh from conquest. Reared on a horse farm outside Cadiz, Diego, uniquely among students at ISIPCA, shared Eric's appreciation of barnyard scents. But the devil-may-care attitude Eric often envied grated now like a wire brush. “You're late.”

“Not so late.” Diego cocked his head toward the beautiful people still promenading past shouting paparazzi.

No time to argue. Eric handed the vial to Abby and addressed them all. “This is water-based. So put a line of it down each side of your neck and wait a minute for it to dry.”

While they applied his fragrance, Eric dealt out the engraved invitations. They were a

gift from Jacques Durand, a legend of French perfumery, now retired, who taught masterclasses at ISIPCA and had taken on Eric as a protégé.

“I don’t know how you do it,” Diego said. “*Four* invitations. You must be sleeping with the old man.”

“I wish you will not talk like that,” Marie-Claire scolded gently.

Abby waved the tip of her index finger under her nose. “I like it already. What’s in it?”

“Is it one of your reconstructions?” Diego asked. “The fragrance Cleopatra put on her sails to meet Marcus Antonius?”

“I’ll tell you later.” The last of the celebrities were climbing the steps. Within the Pantheon’s chained forecourt, chauffeurs had parked their limos and were gathering in groups, lighting cigarettes. As police pulled back their barricades, the air filled with the acrid stink of diesel exhaust, the sound of accelerating engines, and the honks of drivers taking offense at one thing or another. April in Paris.

He led them up to the entrance where two buzz-cut bruisers, stuffed into tuxedos, scrutinized all four invitations before motioning them through.

Inside, the Pantheon glowed with palatial opulence, a surprising contrast to its blocky, almost windowless exterior. Despite his nervousness, Eric paused to absorb the setting. A forest of white Corinthian columns supported elaborate cornices beneath neoclassical vaults and arches. Monumental statuary and brilliant mosaics of angels and shepherds hinted at the building’s ecclesiastical role before becoming a tribute to intellectual reason. The floor, what he could see of it beneath the Prada and Bally heels, was a gleaming expanse of black and white marble in geometric patterns.

Even with his eyes closed, he would have known he was in France. The fragrance cloud bore all the floral notes characteristic of French preference. Except one. Eric sniffed again,

confirmed the “fresh, clean” notes favored by Americans, and turned to his left where, a few people away, a tall, gray-haired man in tuxedo and cowboy boots stood with his arm around a Botox blonde.

Other odors swirled in thin currents through the cloud. Hair spray, self-tanning lotion, leather, mink overprinted with cedar wood from the storage closet, marijuana smoke.

From somewhere came techno music, tactfully turned down to about the same level as the hubbub of voices. Beneath the central rotunda where Foucault first demonstrated his famous pendulum, the marketers at Styx had arrayed six women in negligees and six bare-chested Adonises, each with a spray bottle of Bête Noire, the star of tonight’s show.

“What now?” Abby asked.

Eric refocused. “The last train to Versailles is at midnight. Until then, just circulate.”

As his three friends spread out into the crowd, Eric plucked a glass of champagne from the tray of a passing waiter. Veuve Cliquot, to judge from the underlying nutty flavor of black grapes. With the fizz soothing his stomach, he worked his way closer to the negligees and Adonises until he could definitely pick out the Bête Noire they were spraying. His first impression was of acid bubbling on metal. It didn’t quite sting the nose, but you wouldn’t want to wear too much. In a way, Eric liked it, the way he might like the smell of an arc welding shop. It could use some softening for this crowd, but the youth market would probably swarm all over it. He’d pick up a sample on his way out.

He retreated to higher ground, up a short flight of stairs at one side, and quickly spotted Diego surrounded by five women. With the dark eyes and erotic mystique of a matador, Diego hardly needed a fragrance to attract women he wanted. But five at once had to be a record. If Balquees was the reason, then it worked on women, as well as men. Eric felt his lips draw into a grin. That was one of the questions he’d hoped to answer.

But where was his real test? He surveyed the assembly for Marie-Claire. If Balquees attracted men to *her*, especially men from this crowd, he'd have an honest-to-God triumph. And Marie-Claire might gain the self-confidence to become more outgoing.

There she was, below him to the right, not thirty feet away. She was backing up slowly from a man and woman of the society set. The woman, in a black gown that plunged to her navel, had hold of Marie-Claire's wrist, apparently trying to dissuade her from leaving. Eric wondered if he should intervene. No, Marie-Claire could take care of herself.

She backed into another man, this one dressed like Slash in concert, minus the top hat. The guy glanced over his shoulder, returned his attention to the people he'd been talking with, then paused and broke off his conversation to offer Marie-Claire a handshake. After a nod to the couple who'd been pursuing her, he leaned close to Marie-Claire's ear. She stiffened, her mouth agape at whatever he'd said. Clutching the gold cross at her neck, she looked around like a trapped animal and scuttled off toward the entrance.

Shit. Eric hurried after her, ashamed that her obvious discomfort was most likely his fault. He caught up to her in the foyer and grabbed her arm. "Marie-Claire, stop."

She spun to face him, anger in her eyes. "What is this? Why did you make it?"

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to see if it would attract people. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

She rubbed her hands down the sides of her neck as though fire ants were attacking her. "It is of Satan."

"No, it's not. It comes from Solomon and Sheba."

"Blasphème!"

"Honestly. It's in the early Christian writings of Ethiopia. I can show you."

Marie-Claire gasped, her eyes wide at something behind him.

Eric turned to see the formally dressed couple who'd been pursuing her. The woman wore Angel, its saccharine sweetness somehow appropriate to the cloying way she'd hung onto Marie-Claire's wrist. Her escort, despite his suave demeanor, reeked of genital sweat.

"Excusez-moi," the man said, trying to shoulder Eric aside.

Eric blocked him. "You're excused."

The man stared blankly, evidently failing to translate "excused" as "dismissed."

Let me clarify. Eric put his hand in the small of Marie-Claire's back and steered her out into the chill night air. His experiment could wait until he'd made peace with her. From the top of the steps, he pointed at the cafés just the other side of Rue Saint Jacques. "Come on, I'll buy you some coffee."

"No. I am leaving."

"Please, can you just let me explain?"

"You explain nothing." She grabbed his hands, her eyes fierce. "Only you make a promise. Before God."

"What promise?"

"This perfume. You destroy it."

CHAPTER 2

Eric slumped in his seat on the rail car's upper level, waiting for the train to depart. Alone up here, he felt like the only person left on earth. The car's bright lights hurt his eyes. His reflection in the window, between hair and finger smudges, looked worn-out. Odors from earlier travelers — Polish sausage, tired feet — fouled his nostrils. He felt terrible about Marie-Claire, and despite searching for an hour in the Pantheon after she left, he'd been unable to locate Abby or Diego before it was time to return to Versailles. Had the experiment cost him all of his friends?

“Jesus Christ.” Abby flopped down in the window seat next to him. “You’ve gotta give me more of that stuff. It’s fantastic!”

Eric sat up straight, his heart suddenly pounding. “Tell me.”

Abby hugged herself.

“If you’re going to relive it, relive it for me,” he insisted.

She turned to him. “I’ll tell you only that you’ve seen her in films. She’s married and has a young daughter. But childbearing hasn’t hurt her figure. She’s absolutely stunning.”

“And...?”

Abby cracked a smile. “We desecrated that church next to the Pantheon.”

St. Etienne-du-Mont, one of Eric’s favorites in the Latin Quarter. Famous for the elaborately carved spiral staircases of its choir screen. Was that where they’d gone, the balcony of the choir? Eric couldn’t help picturing them, Abby probably naked, the actress with the bodice and hem of her gown both bunched at her waist, the cold stone floor they lay on, the thrilling fear of getting caught. A tingle stirred him. Was it the sexual image or the Balquees still clinging to Abby?

“I was her first woman. But you never would have known it. And get this. Between orgasms, when we were kissing, she couldn’t keep her nose out of my neck.” Abby drilled her eyes into his. “Eric, whatever you gave me, it’s a goldmine.”

With a jolt, the train pulled out of Montparnasse station.

So, one negative response and one positive. What about the third? Eric looked behind him, saw nobody else, and asked, “Any idea what became of Diego?”

“You kidding? I was in church.” She closed her eyes. “Worshipping at the altar of a goddess.”

That imagery again. And Abby. The smell of her skin, especially after lovemaking, always enchanted him. Add Balquees and ...

Eric heard a hollow thunk and saw an empty Fanta can had rolled into a seat leg across the aisle. He concentrated on it, trying to clear his mind. As the train accelerated, the can rotated on the floor, chose which way to go, and rolled past.

“Marie-Claire’s experience wasn’t so religious.” He related what happened.

“She’s a virgin. By choice, for God’s sake. What did you expect?”

“I feel like I used her.”

“We all volunteered. That’s what friends are for. We were there to help you test a new formula.”

A formula that Eric was having real trouble ignoring. He crossed his legs to hide the evidence of his arousal. “But I didn’t tell you what it was supposed to do.”

“Oh, give me a break. Perfume is about sex. It’s always been about sex. You know that as well as I do. And so does Marie-Claire.”

“Yeah, but this hits you pretty hard.” Harder than he’d expected, before tonight.

“Like a freight train,” Abby said with a grin. “And maybe that’s what a frustrated virgin

needs. Hell, she bombed out with you, and now she's bombing out with Diego. The poor girl needs to get laid. She should be thanking God you gave her this."

But she'd called it satanic. Satyric was probably a better word. That was certainly the way *he* was feeling with Abby sitting so close.

"What's in it, anyway?" Abby leaned back against the window, thankfully adding some distance between them. A few lights raced past behind her, pinpricks of civilization within the midnight blackness of French countryside.

"The main ingredient is oud from Socotra, that Yemeni island in the Gulf of Aden."

Her eyes popped. "They gave you some, after all?"

Eric shook his head. ISIPCA's collection of raw materials included a forearm-sized piece of the wood, but the chairman of the school board considered it too rare to allow Eric even a few shavings. "I found a dealer in Aden who had not only the wood, but also a few grams of steam extract. I bought the extract."

"Fabulous!" She sat up straight and took hold of his arm. "You've got to get more."

Damn. Balquees had never affected him this strongly when he was building it. Was it the circumstances? A need to celebrate tonight's success? The fact that he and Abby were up here alone, in a place as taboo for lovemaking as any church?

The train swayed into a curve, then righted, jostling him from carrying that last thought any further.

Inching back from her, he swallowed to moisten his throat. "I can't get more. I bought all he had. And the area where the tree grows is now occupied by Somali pirates."

"Then buy up the dealer's supply of wood and extract it yourself. Believe me, go commercial with this and you can write your own ticket."

"I can't afford it at the moment. Besides, Balquees isn't ready. It needs refinement."

Too concentrated, for one thing. And a longer lasting top note would add subtlety to the initial impression, the sort of romantic foreplay he considered a mark of all great fragrances. Marie-Claire's experience might have been more pleasant if her suitors hadn't come on to her like sex-starved teenagers.

"Balquees?"

"That's what I call the perfume. It was the name of the Queen of Sheba, and it's her perfume I've tried to recreate. The one she wore to seduce King Solomon."

Abby leaned closer, her arm across the tops of their seatbacks, the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra now painfully obvious. "I thought all that Old Testament stuff was just a bunch of fairytales."

Forcing his gaze to her face, he said, "Not for Ethiopians. They have a rich literature about her." He summarized the legend of "Balquis," whose empire centered in southern Yemen and extended well into Ethiopia, how she anointed herself with the essence of Socotran oud on the night she enchanted the reluctant king and conceived their son, Menelik. Solomon burned with desire for this "black but comely" woman whom "the sun hath scorched" and who, in turn, had enflamed the wise man. "It's a big deal for them because Menelik became the first emperor of Ethiopia."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, ancestry bullshit is important to some people. So what else is in it? That base note is deadly."

"You think so?"

"I smelled civet, but there's something even more fecal than that."

Eric couldn't help grinning. All good perfumes had animalic base notes — ambergris from whale vomit, civet from the anal glands of an African cat, castoreum from digestive glands of beavers, musk from the scent-marking glands of a Himalayan deer — all designed to emerge

late in the evaporative sequence, as the evening culminated in sex. The great master, Jacques Guerlain, had famously said perfumes should smell of the “underside” of his mistress.

But Eric had found an animalic note not derived from an animal. “Dried shiitake mushroom.”

“No. I should have caught that.”

“You didn’t taste it,” he joked, referring to Abby’s status as the star pupil in ISIPCA’s flavor curriculum.

“How did you come up with mushroom?”

“I wanted something down and dirty, something besides civet that would have been available to the queen. But the only earthy thing I could think of was Arabian desert morels. I didn’t have any, so I tried powdered shiitake.”

“You made the right choice. I’ll tell you, when that note comes out, it’s like your nose has just nuzzled in between her legs.”

Jesus, don’t do that to me.

The car buffeted as a darkened station whooshed past.

“Eric, this is great juice.”

He re-crossed his legs. “It’ll be better after I fix it.”

“Screw fixing it. It’s perfect, as is.”

“I can improve it.”

Sitting back, she folded her arms across her stomach. “Well, it’s your baby. But if you need an endorsement, I’m your girl.”

To hell with endorsement. What he needed was her. To taste her skin, kiss every inch of her writhing body, feel her hands in his hair as he kissed inside her.

The train jerked then slowed to a crawl.

Eric blew out a breath and, with it, the candle of his reverie. Outside Abby's window, the station sign read "Versailles Rive Gauche." End of the line, a non-stop ride at this hour.

They descended to the platform where Eric searched both directions for Diego, in case he'd ridden in a different car.

"He's probably feasting at the altar of his own goddess," Abby said.

More like three or four, if what Eric saw in the Pantheon was any indication.

The platform emptied quickly, leaving Abby and him standing alone. Just them and the silvery train, on a vacant platform in the middle of the night. From somewhere in the distance, two crickets called. He and Abby stood there. A cool breeze caressed them, lifting the fragrances of her body and swirling them around his face. Her skin, the musky richness of her hair, the marine scent of her recent lovemaking. All enhanced by Balquees, the way a fine wine enhanced *haute cuisine*.

As they walked slowly out of the station, he felt no embarrassment at his erection. In fact, he hoped she'd notice. But if she did, she gave no sign. "How about a glass of wine?" he suggested.

"The bars are closed."

"I have a good Margaux at my place."

She seemed to consider a moment. "Okay."

Their trek up the narrow sidewalk of Rue du Parc de Cagny took them past ISIPCA, *l'Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l'Aromatique alimentaire*. Its two pink-and-white chateaux blended perfectly with the surrounding homes of the wealthy, unlike its glass-and-concrete laboratory wing at the rear. Eric slowed, tugged by an urge to head for the labs where he could start modifying Balquees. But a stronger, deeper urge drew him to Abby.

He took her hand and stopped her. She'd never looked so beautiful. The light of a distant streetlamp picked out her high cheekbones, the curve of her jaw, her full lips. Yet her eyes revealed nothing.

His heart pounded. His mouth felt dry. Fear of rejection, the humiliation, almost made him turn away. But he wanted her so badly. In a near whisper, he said, "Stay tonight."

Her lips curved slowly into the faintest smile. She stepped closer, so close he could feel the tips of her breasts against his chest. She kissed him. Softly at first, then harder. Much harder, her fingernails digging into his shoulder blades, her mouth devouring his.

When she pulled back, her eyes blazed with desire.