

Chapter 1



Christian Fontaine cradled his chin in his left hand and tapped his forefinger against his lip.

‘It’s breathtaking,’ his assistant Adele sighed. ‘I think it’s the most beautiful gown you have ever created.’

Christian said nothing. He reached forward to stroke the buttercup-coloured silk of the dress’s skirt. He hadn’t used that colour for years. When Adele had suggested that it would be perfect for the final gown in the show, he’d agreed. Now, he didn’t know if he

could bring himself to include the gown, fabulous as it was. It was *her* colour. It always would be.

Christian turned and stared through the window across the rooftops of Paris. They seemed to go on forever. He wondered where on earth she could possibly be.

Pain gripped his chest. He closed his eyes and tried to remember. Her laugh, her smile, the way she would call him *mon amour*. It was hard to believe how many years had passed. He could almost smell her perfume, the memory seemed so real. *Why did you do it?* He thought to himself. *Why, when I loved you so much?*

‘What’s wrong, monsieur?’ said Adele. She had been worried about her boss for weeks. This gown seemed to have caused him more angst than anything else in the collection.

‘Nothing is wrong, Adele. I am just . . . surprised.’ He looked at her and smiled. Over the years, Christian had employed many assistants but Adele was by far his favourite, despite knowing almost nothing about fashion when she started. At the time, he’d wondered if she would last a week. She had confused bolts of fabric with metal bolts used for construction; it had not been a promising start. But she was

a fast learner and she made him laugh, which no one else had managed in years.

‘Surprised? Why?’

‘I did not think I had the capacity for anything as lovely as this.’ He stared at the gown once more.

Adele wondered what he was talking about. All of Christian’s gowns were stunning.

‘Do you have a pencil?’ Christian asked. ‘I seem to have misplaced mine.’

Adele fished around in her apron pocket. She found a pencil, along with the envelope she’d forgotten to pass on to him earlier. She held both items out in front of her.

‘Oops,’ she said, biting her lip.

‘What is this?’ Christian frowned at the fancy script that spelled out his name.

‘An invitation to Madame Rochford’s townhouse tomorrow evening. She’s hosting a dinner party and everyone will be there.’ Adele smiled at him expectantly.

Christian shook his head. ‘Please telephone Madame Rochford and let her know that I am unable to attend. And send her something from the collection as a thank you for her kindness.’

Adele did nothing to hide her disappointment.

‘But monsieur, Madame Rochford is so lovely. And so . . . single.’

‘Yes, she is,’ Christian replied. ‘But I am far too busy.’

Adele sighed. ‘You will never find love if you spend all your time here, monsieur.’

‘Thank you for your concern, Adele,’ Christian said sharply.

The young woman rolled her eyes. ‘Don’t blame me when you’re old and lonely.’ She glanced at the clock on the wall. ‘Oh dear, is that the time? I must run some errands before I meet Jacques for lunch. He said he has a surprise for me.’ Adele winked at her boss. ‘Is there anything else you need?’

Christian shook his head. ‘No, thank you, Adele. I’m going to cut the cape, but you can go.’

There was one piece left to finish the collection. It was the most expensive by far and Christian hadn’t wanted to start it until the last of the gowns was done. Hand-dyed in the same buttercup shade as the gown, it would be a simple cape, made from the finest yarn in the world. He’d been warned that the fabric was so delicate it could be damaged when dyed, but he’d been willing to take the risk. He would work through the night to get it done – it wouldn’t

be the first time and surely wouldn't be the last either.

Christian was famed for the breadth of his talents. He not only designed but cut and sewed his creations, particularly the show-stopper gowns. He preferred to work alone on the fourth floor, while the seamstresses' sewing machines hummed like beehives on the floors below. It hadn't always been this way.

Adele gathered her handbag and a small pile of letters for the post.

'Are you nervous?' she asked. Adele would have been petrified. The bolt of fabric was worth more than her year's wages.

Christian shook his head again. 'I must treat this piece like any other.'

'Except that it's not, really,' Adele reminded him.

'Are you trying to make me anxious?' Christian scolded. 'Why don't you run along and get your jobs done.'

He walked towards the climate-controlled store-room and opened the door.

'Adele,' he called. 'Has anyone been in here today?'

His assistant scurried back across the warehouse floor and stood in the doorway.

‘No, monsieur,’ she replied.

Christian looked at the shelf.

‘It’s not here,’ he said. ‘And there are other bolts missing too.’

Adele’s eyes widened. ‘Perhaps someone has been tidying up?’ she suggested hopefully as she scanned the immaculately kept shelves.

Christian Fontaine prided himself on having the neatest storeroom and workroom in the business. His staff knew that they moved things at their peril.

‘Get everyone up here now,’ he growled. ‘If someone has moved that fabric, they will be moving too – straight to the unemployment line.’

Adele scampered away to round up the staff. Her mouth was dry and her heart was thumping.

Christian knew that the next few minutes were really just a formality. He’d been robbed and whoever had done it had known exactly where to look.