

Chapter One

The Memorial

His mother's memorial was all wrong. Nine-year-old Syrus Royal couldn't understand why his father played lifeless classical music while the black-clad guests meandered from room to room, canapes cradled in one hand, a glass of champagne in the other. Were they at the opera? A ballet? His mother would have wanted everyone dripping in colors, spicy fried chicken piled high in baskets, and Zydeco blasting from every speaker forcing guests to shake their drumsticks in the air like Cajun maracas. If his mother, Jane Thibodeaux Royal, were there, she'd say "Even though I'm gone, Laissez les bons temps rouler." Let the good times roll.

Syrus sat guard on the stair landing while potential trespassers crossed his threshold. He wouldn't let anyone ascend the stairs, invade his privacy, or see the room where his mother spent the last weeks and days of her life. That was for him. For Syrus.

On the lapel of a heavy black suit, insisted upon by his father, he wore a small button, bearing his initials done with his mother's hand. S.R. in brilliant painted colors. Like jewels. Emerald greens, sapphire blues, ruby reds, and topaz yellows. Because they were the first colors Syrus ever truly saw, there was a time when he thought his mother invented them.

All the guests wore kerchiefs and pins adorned with his mother's art. Before she became sick, she'd wrap gifts for friends and family, finishing them off with a ribbon, a button, or even a dog collar she hand painted. Now those vivid trinkets were featured on the boring black ensembles of every mourner.

Countless times, Syrus visited his mother in her studio or in their wild English Garden where he'd marvel at her manipulation of color and form. She was a magician with a paintbrush, starting with nothing—a blank canvas, an old door, a block of wood—and turn it into something that appeared as if it fell from the sky.

Occasionally, someone would stop, look up at Syrus on the stairs with sadness in their eyes, and place their hand over their heart, or offer a small smile. One gentleman bowed as though Syrus were royalty. Syrus could barely make the man out as he wore a black wide-brimmed hat tipped low over his face. He was tall and rather large with broad shoulders. An ascot, bearing one of his mother's designs, snuggled his thick neck. His black shoes shined like the ones Syrus once saw on the men taking tickets on a Swiss train. A black cape flowed down his back which was as peculiar as the tight gloves he wore on his hands. Thin black leather molded every crease and wrinkle like a fine layer of dark inky wax had been poured onto them.

Syrus had trouble looking away from those hands.

Monsieur Frisée, The Royal's butler and Syrus' best friend, interrupted Syrus' trance. "Mastair Royale," Frisée said with a thick French accent. "Let us make our way to zee keetchen. Chef has prepared you a deelish snack." Syrus wasn't interested in eating the canapés offered to the guests. To him, this was a time for comfort food, not an occasion for tiny piles of caviar congregating on baby-sized blinis and prosciutto-wrapped asparagus resembling spikey-haired creatures swaddled in meat blankets.

The minute Frisée appeared, the caped man fled with a sweep of his cape, faster than Syrus thought both necessary and possible given his bulk. With all the visitors that day, Monsieur Frisée paid the man no mind.

Syrus followed Frisée to the kitchen on the lower level where Chef Neeshka prepared all their meals. Syrus' mother encouraged her to use the contemporary kitchen on the main floor, but Neeshka preferred the kitchen below. She said it reminded her of her home in Moldova—small, underground, and smelling of borscht, a purple soup consisting of cabbage and beets. In this kitchen, Monsieur Frisée, Chef Neeshka and Syrus solved the world's problems over stuffed cabbage rolls and slices of olive cake.

Syrus' father, Montgomery Royal, sat upstairs in the parlor on his favorite Moroccan chair, the one his mother insisted they purchase at a flea market in Marrakesh. Pâté on toast points and fennel salad spoiled on a plate beside him as he stared off, until the next bereaved guest placed their hand on his shoulder, bringing him briefly back to life.

Prior to the guests arrival, Syrus attempted to lift his father's spirits.

“Papa, would you like to sneak a slice of “Guguta's Hat” before everyone gets here?”

Guguta's Hat or Cusma Lui Guguta was a favorite Moldovan dessert in the Royal House. Not only for its sour cherry cakiness but its nickname since it resembled the hat of Moldovan folk character Guguta. In the past, Montgomery Royal's eyes would gleam at the suggestion. Then he'd tip-toe to the cake cutter like an old-timey burglar breaking some sort of sugar law. On this day, however, his father looked away, shaking his head “no” as though offended by Syrus' proposal.

Syrus, on the other hand, could eat under almost any condition, save for the food poisoning he received in Prague after eating a foul oyster. He spent the night on the hotel's cold marbled bathroom floor, his mother beside him rubbing his back, as he retched what felt like everything he'd ever eaten since he was five into a ceramic toilet decorated with gold salamanders. To this day, he couldn't see a salamander—gold or otherwise—without throwing up a little in his mouth. Despite the oyster (and the

salamanders), food remained his friend. Even during his mother's memorial, eating Neeshka's white beans on Pumpernickel toast almost soothed him into forgetting the day's dour purpose. Almost.

Monsieur Frisée went upstairs to see if Syrus' father or the guests needed anything while Syrus ate his snack. Well into Syrus' fifth bite and deep in conversation with Neeshka about the questionable choice of music upstairs, Monsieur Frisée returned, shaken. This was unusual since Frisée always comported himself under the direst of circumstances.

"You look as though you've seen a ghost," Syrus said, wiping wet bean juice from his chin.

"Oh, um, no, no ghost. I am très bon, Garçon. Très bon."

Frisée and Neeshka exchanged concerned looks, but instead of questioning either of them, Syrus, drowsy and full, retired to his room. When he ascended the stairs, the guests had thinned out. The caped man, however, stood at the rear French doors gazing over the English garden, one black-gloved hand held up against the glass as if waving goodbye.