

Le Chapitre Un

1

Julia looked at Rhodes Academy as if she were looking at an old friend. She'd been dropping her daughter off at the elite school since kindergarten, and three months ago, she dropped her off for her final day of senior year. On that day, Julia hid in her car, watching Lily climb the stairs of the prestigious school one final time, stuffing her lunch inside of her backpack. It was a lunch Julia packed not an hour before, knowing it would be the last one she'd ever have to make. There was a time Julia hated making school lunches, such a tedious and thankless chore, but during Lily's final year, she savored every one, her eyes welling up as she cut this last turkey and cheese into the shape of a heart just like she did on her first day of Kindergarten. Now with summer over and Lily settled into college, Julia was back at Rhodes Academy, only now, she was the student.

She walked down the main hallway and accidentally caught a glimpse of her reflection in the school trophy case. God, she hated when that happened, cringing at the sight. She was short, "Oompa Loompa short" she would say, with her hair pulled back in its signature ponytail, ideal for concealing the grays that suddenly sprouted when she hit forty a few years back. At first she plucked them, but soon others would pop up like a cruel game of old lady whack-a-mole.

Julia stood outside the classroom, taking a deep breath to gain courage. She hated trying new things but with Lily gone, leaving a gaping hole in her heart as well as her schedule, Julia knew she had to rebuild her life. Cautiously she peeked inside, scanning the dozen or so students who had already taken their seats. For a night class, there were less people than she would have expected. One woman, presumably the teacher, had her back towards the class as she wrote on the board. Julia walked to the very last row of desks, her preferred section when she was a student, trying to fade in.

There was an open desk next to a woman who appeared to be about Julia's age, maybe a few years younger. She was texting away at a lightning fast clip, a skill Julia wished she could master. Unlike Julia,

this woman was put together beautifully. Her blond hair flowed like a contestant on Dancing With The Stars and she wore a chic fitted suit with adorable red shoes, a color Julia wished she were brave enough to pull off. Julia felt embarrassed next to her in her ugly black yoga pants. It's not like she even took classes anymore. She just liked the way the spandex sucked in her belly that she could never seem to lose after pregnancy. She blamed Mother Nature. Here she was, doing her part to procreate and assure the survival of mankind, and all she got as a thank you was a permanent muffin top.

With a whoosh, the woman sent her email off to cyberspace and noticed Julia standing over her.

"Beginning French, right? Julia asked, neurotically confirming she was in the right place.

"I certainly hope so," the blond said with a smile, her teeth gleaming against her red lipstick, the same shade as her shoes.

Julia hesitantly sat down, scanning the classroom. It felt cold and sterile, with harsh fluorescent lighting embedded in the drop-ceiling tiles. It even smelled like high school, a recognizable mix of disinfectant and teen angst.

"God, I hate these classrooms. They give me such PTSD," Julia said.

"I know what you mean. High school wasn't my favorite time either."

"I was that kid with the scoliosis brace and cystic acne," Julia confessed.

"Ouch...and a hymen too I presume," she teased.

Julia was taken aback by the ease this woman used such a startling word. She'd been avoiding harsh language ever since Lily was a toddler, the books all saying kids mirror the behavior of their parents. But Julia smiled at the comment anyway, not only because it was funny, but because it was true. A back brace and pimples didn't exactly scream hot girl on campus.

"I was that kid with a stutter and wandering eye," the woman admitted.

"Wow," Julia exclaimed, jealous she didn't make the transition

from ugly duckling to glamorous swan quite as successfully.

“I wish I knew you back then. I sure could have used a friend at my lunch table.” Kathy smiled nostalgically, remembering how she’d sit all alone, pretending to act busy so the other kids wouldn’t feel sorry for her.

“I’m Kathy,” she said, introducing herself.

“Julia.” Then in a butchered French accent, “Enchanté de vous rencontre.”

“Impressive, you sure you want the beginner class?”

“It’s the only thing I know. I learned it on an episode of Sex and the City.”

“Well then...,” Kathy said, trying to one-up her, “...eau de toilette.”

“Impressive as well!” she smiled. “So, why do you want to learn French?”

“I’m an intellectual property attorney. My firm just took on a Parisian client so I thought I’d earn some points at the office. You?”

“Same,” Julia said, casually.

“Really?!”

“Heck no, I just wanted to pretend I had such an important job.” Kathy smiled. She liked this woman. For so long she’d been surrounded by professionals, all bragging to make themselves sound more successful than they actually were. Humility wasn’t a characteristic she’d see very often. “I’m an empty nester with way too much time on my hands” Julia continued.

Kathy couldn’t imagine what it must be like to have free time. She averaged sixty hours a week, more if she factored in the weekend assignments and late night emails.

“Wow, what a concept,” Kathy said. “The last chunk of time I had for myself was when I went to my mother’s funeral back in law school.” She thought back to that horrible time, her mother dying of cancer, she helpless to do anything to stop it. Before Julia could react, the teacher turned around. She was older, deep into her seventies with a tiny bun atop her head cobbled together from her thinning hair. Her eyebrows however were thick, drawn in with a heavy hand and a charcoal pencil, and her frosted lipstick seeped into the deep wrinkles along her lipline as

if it were overflowing.

“Bonjour étudiants. My name is Madame Bergeron,” she announced to the class with a heavy French accent.

Kathy leaned closer, whispering to Julia, “She’d be a good fit at our lunch table too,” and the two women giggled like schoolgirls.