

# UNDER THE SURFACE

DIANA URBAN

putnam

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Inspired by true events.



For those lost in darkness.  
Have hope.



UNDER THE  
SURFACE



## PROLOGUE

# Ruby

I never thought I'd die alone in the dark under the City of Light.

That's what they call Paris. The City of Light. Makes sense when you think of the Eiffel Tower glinting in the sun or sparkling at night over the Seine. Or the vibrant paintings bedecking the palatial Louvre Museum. Or the glittering fashionistas strolling the Champs-Élysées. Or the dazzling boulevards with whitewashed buildings gleaming like pearls against the blue sky.

God, I'd kill for some of that light right now.

As I hurtle through the dark, cramped corridor deep underground, my phone's flashlight makes elongated shadows bounce and bob across the craggy walls like a chaotic, ghostly dance, and I have to stoop to keep my skull from slamming into the low, jagged ceiling.

There's no sign of the others.

Terror claws up my chest, and I try not to think of the crunching noises under my boots, try not to think how it's only a matter of time

until my phone runs out of power, until my mouth parches, my stomach shrivels, and my legs give out beneath me. Then there'll be nothing to do but curl into a ball and wait for the darkness to become infinite.

Unless *they* get to me first.

No. That can't happen. I won't let it.

I turn a corner and slam my back against the wall, then toggle off my flashlight, plunging the corridor into pitch blackness. But hiding in the dark means my friends won't find me, either. I breathe hard, feeling like I could choke on the dank, humid air, and a sob scrapes my throat. I'm screwed. Undeniably, irrevocably screwed. But I can't spiral. Panicking got me into this mess to begin with.

Keeping my spirits up among six million corpses isn't exactly an easy feat. That's how many are entombed down here in the catacombs, their skeletal remains intricately arranged throughout this ancient labyrinth that stretches under the bustling streets of Paris like layers of rotted casserole squished under a decadent crust. My chest constricts, and it's like I can feel the crushing weight of all six million dead.

And that number's high enough, thank you very much.

A low, rasping growl echoes through the passageway. My heart jolts, and I clamp a shaking hand over my mouth to mask my heavy breathing.

But it's too late.

They found me.

Maybe there are worse things than dying alone.

# 1

## Ruby

### 2 DAYS EARLIER

“Now’s our chance,” I whisper to my best friends, Sean and Val, under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. “Let’s go.”

It’s only our first day in Paris—the culmination of studying my ass off in French class and fundraising to death to go on the best trip in the history of ever—and I’m already trying to sneak away from our class.

“Go where?” Sean frowns and glances at our teacher, Mr. LeBrecque, who for some bizarre reason scheduled us to take in the sweeping views atop the Eiffel Tower while delirious with jet lag. He’s gesturing wildly at the engraved names of French scientists and engineers under the first balcony while half the class is verging on a collective collapse and the other’s bursting with adrenaline-fueled giddiness.

“To find that bunker.” I look to Val for backup, but she’s stuck in a stupor.

“I don’t think we have time,” says Sean.

“But it’s literally *right there*.”

The secret military bunker I read about—a secret no other travel YouTuber has covered, as far as I know—is supposedly hidden beneath the south pillar. Which I can see from right here, at this very moment.

Not on my laptop screen. Not on my phone.

With my actual human eyeballs.

I asked Mr. LeBrecque earlier if we could scope out the bunker as a class, but he huffed, “I already squeezed the catacombs into our itinerary for you. This whole trip can’t be the Ruby show.” A jab at my channel, *Ruby’s Hidden Gems*. As much as I respect the snark, it shattered any illusion that my teachers knew nothing of my online endeavors.

And if my teachers know, Dad probably knows, too.

Dad’s not exactly sold on my jet-setting aspirations. But it’s kind of hard to make it as a travel YouTuber when you can’t, you know . . . travel. If it were up to him, he’d swaddle me for eternity—at least, whenever I’m not nursing his hangovers or waiting tables at his restaurant. He wants me to keep working there while I go to community college, and when I told him Val asked me to backpack across Europe with her after graduation, such a tormented expression crossed his round, bearded face that he looked gaunt. This week’s as much a trial run for him as it is for me and, for once, I’m not the one most likely to fail.

I can’t worry about that now. Not here at the Eiffel freaking Tower. I’ve daydreamed about this moment for too long to worry about anything except how quickly it will become a memory. I need to savor every minute. Film every nook. Explore every cranny. Even if it means sneaking away from our class for, like, 0.2 seconds.

I tug Sean’s jacket sleeve. “Come on.”

But Val’s still zoning out.

“Val.”

“Mm?”

“The bunker?”

“Oh, right, sorry.” Val blinks furiously and adjusts her purple horn-rimmed glasses under her black bangs, a sharp contrast to her alabaster skin and vibrant hazel eyes. “Extreme hottie at nine o’clock.” I look, but nobody stands out in the swarms of tourists.

Mr. LeBrecque’s facing us again. I groan. So much for that.

It’s not like Val to waste chances. She’s an adrenaline junkie who craves—no, *demand*s—attention at all times. Last year when she moved to Starborough, our sleepy suburb north of Boston, she burst into my life like the Tasmanian Devil, dragging me kicking and screaming from my comfort zone. Some of our exploits would give Dad an aneurysm, like breaking into the crypts under Old North Church, white water rafting in the Berkshires, and bribing this cute park ranger to let us camp overnight on Georges Island. But the more daring we got, the more my subscriber count jumped, so after a while I didn’t need much convincing.

And look at me now, instigating the sneakage.

“LeBrecque told us to stick together, anyway.” Sean motions to the twelve other seniors on this trip. We’ve distanced ourselves behind them in a futile attempt to keep them from videobombing my slow pans and zooms, oblivious as worms on wet pavement.

“But getting footage of that bunker would make my video pop,” I argue. “Everyone and their grandma has posted about the Eiffel Tower.”

“Not my grandma,” he says, deadpan.

I snort. “You know what I mean.”

“Well, we shouldn’t.”

Val rolls her eyes. “Way to have zero chill.”

Sean crosses his arms. Stick a rulebook in front of him, and he’ll have it memorized in an hour. He’s JROTC and plans to join the military after graduation like his dad, and his towering athletic stature,

broad shoulders, faded buzz cut, chiseled cheekbones, and perpetually furrowed brows sure make it easy to picture him in uniform.

And picture it I do. Often.

But getting that uniform will take him away from me.

"Now," Val whispers. "Now, now, now." Mr. LeBrecque's gesticulating at the tower again, and I nod, my fingertips buzzing with adrenaline as Val clasps them.

Sean shoots his hand into the air. "Sir?"

"What are you doing?" I squeak, swatting his cargo jacket's sleeve.

"Mr. LeBrecque, sir," he says, ignoring me as our teacher turns around. "Sorry to interrupt, but is it okay if the three of us head over there for a minute?" He motions vaguely toward the south pillar. "Ruby wants to grab some footage."

Mr. LeBrecque sighs, exasperated, and checks his watch. "Our tickets are for fifteen minutes from now. Be back here in ten."

"Thanks," Val calls back, already making a beeline for the south pillar.

Sean throws me a lopsided grin and steers me after her by the small of my back.

"Oh, shut up," I mutter.

His smile widens. "Didn't say a word."

He doesn't move his hand. I don't want him to. But I speed out of reach anyway.

The electricity between us has been amplifying for months, and now, in Paris, my blood seems to pulse with each fleeting glance, each time a smile curves his lips, like I'm perpetually tripping over a live wire. But I'm terrified to let him touch me, to let those sparks ignite. I can't risk letting him incinerate my soul.

Because that's how it'd end.

That's how everything ends.

So I have to keep myself grounded.

As the three of us search for the bunker's entrance, Sean keeps scouting our class's position.

"Will you stop?" I motion to the iconic wrought-iron lattice pillars surrounding us. "You don't get to see this every day."

His steel-gray eyes flick to mine. "Oh don't worry. I'm enjoying the view plenty." Our gaze holds a beat too long, and my cheeks warm despite the chill in the air.

Sometimes he almost makes it seem worth getting scorched.

It's wild to think Sean used to intimidate me. He's basically had biceps since birth, and if resting asshole face were a thing, he has it. I could never tell whether he was shy or thought he was the shit until senior year, day one, when Mr. LeBrecque partnered us to make a video in French touring Starborough. We trudged to the grocery store after school to get it over with, timid as deer, but when I hit record, Sean brandished his arms and screamed, "*Le boutique est grand et à des bananas*," and I snort-laughed so hard it hurt. We tried to outburst each other in French all afternoon and barely had any usable footage to splice into a cohesive narrative, but he managed anyway—an impressive feat, considering. He's been helping me edit my videos ever since.

"Hey look," Val calls out, pointing behind Sean. "I think that's it."

We hurry over. A cage of rusted green bars blocks a cement staircase descending underground.

"This is it," I say. "I've seen a picture of the door that's down there." It's not visible from our vantage point, but I stick my lens between the bars, against the glass barrier, and film what little I can.

Val slinks under the green railing before the metal door and gives the handle a frustrated shake.

Sean chuckles. "What'd you expect? If any rando could get in, it wouldn't exactly be a secret bunker."

I back up a few feet. "Lemme grab some B-roll, at least."

Val grimaces. “You sound like my mom. *Honey? Grab me some B-roll.*” She snaps and points, imitating her singsong voice. Her parents have their own HGTV show and cart Val around the country to film in different regions year after year. “*Honey? B-roll.*” Snap and point.

“Sorry. I’ll try to be less triggering,” I say. She laughs, and I kneel to get some of the lattice in the frame and pan across the gate. “Sean, either get out of the shot or look at the stairs.” He’s watching our class like a hawk.

Distracted, he trips over the edge of the gate’s frame and barely catches himself on the rail, then tugs down his jacket’s hem. “No one saw that.”

“Oh, they *will*.” I tap my camera.

He groans. “Please delete that.”

“Mm, I dunno. How much will you pay me?”

He laughs softly, his eyes glinting like the beams overhead until they float down to my lips and linger there.

My blood goes warm and tingly like I just downed a steaming café au lait. I slowly rise to my feet and lower my camera as he steps closer, studying my face like he wants to memorize every detail. Electricity sparks through me, and my breath shudders like the sky ran out of air.

“Can I . . .” he starts.

My nerve endings catch fire. This is it.

Our first kiss.

Under the Eiffel Tower.

It’s so cliché, I press my fingers to my lips to keep from giggling. Sean sweeps a hand over his buzz cut and averts his gaze, then shoves his hands into his pockets.

Just like that, the moment’s gone.

It’s for the best. Besides, I don’t want to make Val feel awkward—  
Wait.

Val's gone, too.

I scan the crowd of tourists swelling under the nearby pillar but don't see her anywhere. Sean sees my expression shift and whips his head toward our class. "It's fine. They're still there."

"Not that—where's Val?"

"Oh." His eyes bounce around, then land back on me. "I don't know."

"Maybe she's trying to find another way into the bunker." Or she spotted something shiny and wandered off, as usual.

"Is there another way in?"

"No idea."

He checks his watch. "Our ten minutes is almost up."

"I know."

"I'll tell LeBrecque—"

I catch his sleeve. "Hang on. She must be close." I spin and race to the right, but there's only an old-timey ticket booth under the pillar, and no other doors or stairs.

"Ruby, wait—" Sean tries.

I veer left, expecting to find a gift shop or something around the corner, but there's nothing but a tall plastic barrier. "Dammit." Frantic, I rush into the crowd, weaving through swarms of tourists. "Val!"

I don't see her anywhere.

By the time I spin around to backtrack, I realize I've lost Sean, too. Crap.

I heave a sigh, then spot those familiar purple glasses.

Val's talking to some stranger. He's maybe a couple of years older than us, with striking features and tousled chestnut hair that flops across his forehead, and hint of stubble darkens his sharp jaw. Maybe he's the hottie she spotted earlier.

"Val," I call out.

She finds me in the crowd. “There you are.” Like I’m the one who disappeared.

I grab her arm. “We have to go back.”

“Hang on.” She turns back to the young man. “Where should we meet later?”

My mouth falls open. Before he can answer, I shake my head. “Nuh-uh. Let’s go.”

“But—” Val tries.

“It’s okay,” the man says to Val, his accent clearly French. He brandishes his phone with a wink before disappearing into the throng. She bites back a grin, her cheeks rosy as a ripe apple.

“Did you already give him your number?” I ask.

She mashes her thin lips together, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

Oh geez. She should know better. But I don’t want to pick a fight over this. Confrontation’s my least favorite thing on the planet.

Besides spiders. Spiders suck.

“What?” she says, catching my judgmental expression. “I asked him for recommendations for any off-the-beaten-path sort of spots, and he promised to send me a list. And then—”

“*There* you are.” Sean appears, puffing like he was sprinting hundred-meter dashes through the crowd. He scowls at Val. “What gives?”

“Donors,” Val shoots back, then bounds back toward our class.

Sean furrows his brow, mouthing the word *donors* like it didn’t click.

I laugh. “There’s no point making sense of her, honestly.”

“I don’t know how you deal with it.”

My smile deflates. Sean and Val have never exactly been close—if anything, they’ve been sniping at each other more than usual this past month. I’d hoped they’d finally bond on this trip. That’s looking unlikely.

Mr. LeBrecque is lecturing our class in French as we reunite with

them, oblivious that our little excursion went awry. On the other hand, Mrs. Williams, our librarian who volunteered to chaperone, gives us exaggerated side-eye as she hands us our tickets. She's cool, but I'd consider ourselves warned. Oops.

"Thanks to the tourist traffic, this is a hot spot for pickpockets," says Mr. LeBrecque. Cool tidbit. I start filming. "Who remembers what I said on how to avoid becoming a pickpocket's mark?"

Olivia Clarkson, as always, is first to shoot her hand into the air.

Mr. LeBrecque, as always, picks someone else. Even our teachers don't think she needs any more validation that she already knows everything.

But my gut curdles when he calls on Selena Rodriguez instead.

Salutatorian. Future astronaut. Queen bee. Girlfriend of the queenier drama club star.

And my nemesis.

She wasn't always, though. Until last spring, we were brooding besties, preferring stargazing over parties and NPCs over real people. We joined the swim team to pad her resume for college apps and chose swimming because you don't have to talk to anyone while holding your breath. I'm pretty sure she's faking her entire personality at this point, because you can't suddenly become an extrovert.

"Don't be loud, rowdy Americans," Selena recites in perfect French. "Don't keep your wallet in your back pocket. Keep your bag . . ." Good, she forgot the word for *zipped*. "Er . . . be vigilant in crowds and on escalators."

Sean scoffs, muttering to me, "Our class is toast."

Kyle drifts into my shot, staring at his phone, eyes shadowed by his Red Sox hat, proving Sean's point. We exchange a muffled laugh.

As Mr. LeBrecque herds us in line for the glass elevator that'll take us to the first level, Val loops her arm through mine. "God, that guy

was hot,” she whispers so Sean can’t hear. Olivia’s jabbering his ear off, anyway.

“I’ll give you that,” I whisper back.

She smirks. “He invited me to a party tonight.”

“That was fast.”

She releases my arm to brush back her glossy, shoulder-length hair and sets a hand on her hip. “Can you blame him?”

“Oh, get over yourself.” I shove her, laughing. “You’d never be allowed to go.”

“Obviously. We’ll have to sneak out.”

I gape at her. “No way.”

She quirks her brow. “I snuck to that bunker with you.”

“We didn’t— That’s different.”

Her smile dissolves. “Why?” Even if Sean hadn’t asked permission, slinking a few feet to the south pillar wouldn’t put us on an early flight home.

“You know why.” My voice rises. “If we get caught sneaking out at night—”

“Shh.” She glances around, but nobody’s paying us any mind.

Except for Selena.

Her eyes bounce away, but they’ve already plunged daggers into my chest. Twelve years of friendship down the drain over one fight. One mistake.

*My mistake.*

Guilt sours my stomach. It’s my fault the girl I’d considered a sister is now my archenemy. I can’t let that happen with Val, too.

I sling my arm through hers again and force a bright smile onto my face. “Let’s talk about this later, okay? I can’t believe we’re really *here*,” I squeak for good measure, and a genuine shiver of glee rushes through me.

Val's demeanor shifts, too, and she gives my arm a giddy squeeze.

Hopefully we won't have to talk about this later. Hopefully she'll forget that French guy altogether.

Otherwise I'll have to put up a fight, because there's no way I'll let either of us screw ourselves out of a week in Paris over one night of partying.

## 2

# Sean

Val's hiding something.

As our class trickles into the lobby to head to Saint-Michel for dinner, she, Ruby, and I wait in line for the maître d' so I can report my hotel room feels like a furnace, and she's been texting someone non-stop. That's not weird on its own—it's how she keeps angling her screen away from Ruby whenever she gets close.

A small thing, maybe.

But after the crap she pulled at Olivia Clarkson's birthday party a few weeks ago, I don't trust her.

She wasn't so bad when she first moved to town. She's spunky and has a zany sense of humor, but then she put her daredevil antics on full display, and I'm not a fan. Then, the party. I don't know what the hell she was thinking.

Val notices me watching and dims her screen. "Maybe there's someone else who can help?"

"Chill." Ruby shifts her focus back from the drama club kids con-

gregating near the door: Aliyah, Lisa, Alex, and Kyle. Selena's there, too, holding Aliyah's hand. "There's only one person ahead of us."

"Yeah, but we're leaving soon," Val whines, bouncing on her toes.

"Says the one who hogged the bathroom for an hour," Ruby teases, running her fingers through her damp blond waves to shake out the moisture.

Val chuckles. "Sorry. There was, like, no counter space."

"Don't worry," I assure Ruby. "Your hair looks great."

"Yeah, the *drowned squirrel* look is super in right now." But her cheeks go pink. I notice that happens whenever I compliment her, or whenever I so much as look her in the eye lately. It makes my heart go bananas.

I point at my buzz cut. "Hey, better than bald squirrel."

"Ha!" Ruby runs her fingers over the shortest strands near my nape. "More like fuzzy squirrel." She yanks her hand back and blushes harder.

Yeah. At this point, I'm 99.999 percent sure she likes me back. But whenever I try to hint at taking things further, she scurries away. Like earlier at the Eiffel Tower—God, I thought that was gonna be it. I could practically see the sparks sizzling between us. But I don't want to push it or do anything to mess up our friendship. I'll wait however long until she's ready.

Finally, the maître d' waves me forward. "Bonjour, comment allez-vous?"

"Je vais bien—"

"Vous avez déjà votre clé, non?" she interrupts, crinkling her forehead. *You already have your key, no?*

"Oui, madame. Je suis allé dans ma chambre mais j'étais trop chaud." *Yes, ma'am. I went to my room, but it was too hot.*

Her eyebrows arch as she stifles a snicker. I throw the others a look.

Val seems nonplussed, but Ruby covers her mouth like she's suppressing a laugh.

"What?" I ask.

"Uh . . ." Ruby lowers her hand, revealing her rosy cheeks. "I think you told her you went to your room but you were too horny."

Val lets out a loud crow.

Blood drains from my face so fast I'm shocked it's not pooling at my feet. The last thing I want is to make Ruby or this woman or anyone else feel uncomfortable.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," I tell the maître d', mortified. "I mean, désolé . . ."

The maître d' smiles kindly. "You meant *mais il faisait trop chaud*, yes?"

"Yeah," I croak. French has never come easily to me. I'm not one of those people like Olivia who can absorb information like a sponge. I had to study real hard to make the cut for this trip. Only the fifteen seniors with the highest French GPAs got to go, and I couldn't miss out on a chance to see Paris with Ruby.

"The look . . . on . . . your face!" Val howls.

I pretend to laugh along, but inside I'm dying of death.

Ruby flicks Val's arm. "Get over it. You're one to talk, anyway. You totally cheated on the French midterm—"

"Shhh." Val clasps Ruby's wrist, but instead of denying it, she succumbs into a fresh fit of giggles.

"I'll have maintenance take a look," the maître d' assures me. "What is your room number?"

After she picks up the phone to place the call, Olivia wanders over from the group of drama kids. I bet she heard everything. I noticed her trying to catch my eye earlier, but I've felt awkward around her ever since that damn party. "At least you didn't say *je suis bon* instead of *je vais bien*," she says cheerfully. "That means *I'm good in bed*."

I cringe. "Is that really much worse?"

"No." Val wipes her eyes. "No, it's not."

Ruby throws me an apologetic look, still blushing, which ups my humiliation tenfold. I take a calming breath, trying not to let Val get under my skin.

But in this moment, I wish she never moved to Starborough at all.

# 3

## Ruby

It's been over an hour since we got back to the hotel from dinner, and I only just noticed my wallet and camera are gone.

*Gone.*

I may or may not be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

The camera cost me six months' worth of tips, but it's the wallet that has me breathing in short bursts as I paw at the bottom of my purse with shaking fingers. Nothing. I flip the bag upside down and shake its contents onto my bed: lip gloss, a stretchy headband, a hair tie, a pocket-sized notebook, a packet of almonds, and a few Métro tickets. All useless items that should be banished from existence for committing the atrocity of not being my wallet.

The worst part isn't losing the wallet itself. Credit cards can be canceled. A driver's license can be replaced. The worst part is Dad will murder me and drag me home, in that order.

Not that he's the murderous type. But he barely conceded to let me come to Paris and only caved after I made him a PowerPoint on how my first trip abroad would teach me independence and responsibility.

So far, I've been independently responsible for losing his credit card.

The thought of disappointing him makes my throat constrict, but knowing he'll rebook me to an early flight home makes me feel like I'm drowning. Paris is my shot to prove to him that I can do this whole traveling thing. That he can be okay on his own. That we can do this *together*, even though we're thousands of miles apart. I'm not just letting him down. I'm letting myself down.

"Ruby?" Sean edges open my hotel room door, which I hadn't bothered shutting all the way. We'd been editing in his room, and I'd dashed back here to grab my camera so we could add footage from dinner in Saint-Michel. "Everything okay?"

My heart usually leaps whenever he enters a room, but it's already plummeted into my belly. "I can't find my wallet. Or my camera."

His thick brows shoot up. "What?"

"I'm pretty sure I said that in English." I instantly regret the jab.

Sean chuckles, though, and steps inside. "It'll be okay." He sets a comforting hand on my arm. Warmth spreads through me, but I lurch back, avoiding his touch as usual. He frowns.

"I'm sorry . . ." My voice wavers, and I press a palm to my forehead as I scan my side of the room I'm sharing with Val. She'd gotten bored while Sean and I edited and left to get hammered with the drama crew. I'd teasingly called her a traitor, though deep down I worry she's getting bored of *me*.

"Maybe Val borrowed your camera?" Sean suggests.

I tut. "For what? She's with Alex and Kyle for their booze, not their company."

Sean shrugs. "Maybe she wants to blackmail them for having it."

"Nah," I say. "She'd use her phone's camera." He laughs, but my smile fades. "Either way, she wouldn't have taken my wallet."

Sean drops to his hands and knees like he's about to give me twenty and scours the narrow space under my bed. "What does it look like?"

“A wallet.”

“Helpful.”

“Well, you know. A regular black wallet.”

“Maybe you dropped it?”

I sink onto the edge of the bed, staring at my sad, empty purse. “No, it’s obvious what happened. I got pickpocketed.”

He stands and tilts his head. “When, though? When did you last use your camera?”

“At dinner.” Before hopping into the shower earlier, I plugged my camera into my laptop to upload footage and charge it, then filmed with it during dinner, but only used my phone to take pictures on the walk home. That, at least, is charging on the nightstand. “It must’ve happened on the way back here.”

“But your purse was zipped the whole time, right?”

I cringe. I’d been so intent on nabbing the perfect selfie with the Eiffel Tower glittering across the inky Seine behind me, I hadn’t been paying attention. “I’m not sure . . .”

“Ruby. LeBrecque *just* went over this.”

“I know.” I sweep my hair back.

“He specifically said to keep your purse—”

“I *know*. But this isn’t my fault. Some creep stuck their grubby hand into my purse, right under my arm, and stole my stuff.” The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I feel so *violated*.

Sean wipes a hand down his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“To blame the victim?” I finish for him, then clamp my lips. Panic is making me word vomit. “Oh God, Sean, I’m sorry. I’m being a total jerk.”

“It’s okay. You’re upset. I get it.” He steps closer and raises his hand, and I can swear he’s about to cup my cheek. My breath catches, and I hold his gaze, wanting him to close the distance, even though I know

I'll pull away, anyway. But he rubs the back of his neck instead. "Do you need to call your dad?"

My stomach clenches. "I can't . . ."

"You have to," he says gently. "Did you have a credit card in there? A debit card? He has to cancel them—"

"I know. But he'll make me come home early. You know how he is."

Sean understands what it's like to have an overbearing father. But his mother is alive and well, so I don't know what *his* father's excuse is. I sigh.

"No, you're right. I have to call him." I shoo Sean to the door. "Let me get it over with, okay? I'll see you in the morning."

"I can let Mr. LeBrecque know what's up."

"No. Let's wait till tomorrow. I don't need any more lectures tonight."

He winces.

"I meant my dad, not you."

"Oh, right. Obviously." He hesitates, gripping the edge of the door as he gives me one last look, like there's something on the tip of his tongue. But all he says is, "Well . . . text me if you need anything."

Then he's gone.

I grab my cell to call Dad, but a series of WhatsApp messages from Val distracts me.

Where are youuu?

She sent this while Sean and I were raiding the vending machine down the hall, examining all the French candy options.

I left Alex and Kyle's room, they ran out of booze. What a drag.

???

Listen, I'm going to that French boy's party after all.  
This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing, and I don't want to miss out. Don't wait up. LOVE YOU.

My heart jolts. She sent the last message fifteen minutes ago. Losing my valuables is one thing, but losing my best friend is another.

Frantic, I call her. No answer. I shoot back a WhatsApp message: Where are you? Come back!!

Still on the train. Getting off at Luxembourg.

I wait a moment, and when she's clearly ignored my request, I say: COME BACK!!!

No way! And DON'T TELL.

I let out a huff and pace the length of our tiny hotel room, biting my thumb nail. She could lose a whole week in Paris over this. Or something much worse could happen while she's out there alone with a group of strangers. I could kick myself for so adamantly avoiding an argument earlier. I should've shut this down right then and there.

Someone has to stop her.

If I tattle and tell Mr. LeBrecque, he'll send Val home early, and she'll never forgive me. But if something horrible happens to her, I'll never forgive *myself*. I eye the Métro tickets on my bed. Oh, hell.

I shoot off a message: I'm coming, too. Wait for me at Luxembourg?

YAYAYAY. But hurry! My phone's almost dead. And wear boots and something warm.

I change into jeans and slip on my faux leather booties and puffer jacket. My hair's a tangled mess of blond waves and my jet-lagged eyes are bloodshot against my pale skin, but it doesn't matter—I'm going to grab Val and come straight back.

I scoop my banished belongings back into my purse, shoot off a quick email to Dad explaining someone stole my wallet and camera, then sling my purse onto my shoulder, take a deep breath, and crack open the door to peek into the hall.

The coast is clear.

My pulse races as I slink down the hall and scurry around the corner to the elevator. I press the down button and cross my arms, plucking my lower lip. There's only one tiny elevator in this hotel. I should take the stairs.

Before I can move, a nearby door opens and laughter and music flood the hall, then quiet with a *slam*. Someone rounds the corner.

She sees me and freezes.

Selena freaking Rodriguez.

We haven't exchanged two words since the incident last spring, glaring whenever we pass each other at school, like each of us can't believe the other has the audacity to exist. It's hard to believe that beforehand, she was like family. I'd go to her house whenever Dad worked nights, and the longest we'd ever been apart was her stint at Space Camp before freshman year. She was the one who got what it was like to grow up without a mom, the one with whom I spent countless hours watching movies and playing video games, the one I always texted good night to before bed.

Then we started to crack, and in my attempt to seal the fissures, I blew everything up.

She stares back with wide, russet eyes, her lashes so thick it always looks like she's wearing eyeliner. Her damp black tresses drape over her shoulders, and her agape mouth elongates her pointed chin. The

memory of our last terrible encounter hovers between us like toxic fumes, and I almost can't breathe.

When the elevator opens with a friendly *ding*, her expression hardens and she sets a hand on her hip. Sneaking out yields a harsher penalty than partying, and she's sure to rat me out.

Holding grudges is kind of her jam.

"Where the hell are you going?" Her words slur a bit, and hint of pink blushes across her tawny cheeks. She must've downed booze before Alex and Kyle ran out.

"I could ask you the same." I mirror Selena's hand-on-hip pose, trying to look blasé. "Isn't your room next to mine?" She's rooming with Aliyah, who I thought replaced me as her best friend until I found out they were dating.

Selena shakes her head. "Aliyah's sick. They moved me in case it's contagious—"

The elevator starts to close, but I whip my arm out, holding it open.

Selena narrows her eyes. "Where *are* you going, anyway?"

I let the door close. This is bad. As much as I suck at confrontation, I'm a downright miserable liar. Maybe if I'm honest about my rescue mission, she won't tell on me. "Val went out, and I think she might get into trouble," I say. "I'm going to bring her back."

Selena arches her brows. "Seriously?"

The elevator slides open, and Olivia tiptoes out wearing a long pink puffer coat, her springy golden-brown curls piled atop her head. I gasp. "Liv!"

If there's anyone less likely to break the rules than Sean, it's Olivia. She's like a walking encyclopedia that spews rainbows and sunshine, and her claim to fame—besides being our class valedictorian—is winning *Teen Jeopardy!* four times. We're not super close, but our social circles cross a lot. If you can call mine a circle. More like a straight line from point A to B, and I'm a dot chilling in the middle.

Her heart-shaped face instantly reddens, and she jumps so hard she fumbles a bulging bag from Monoprix, the French grocery store chain, then sees it's me and lets out a relieved chuckle.

"I forgot toothpaste," she explains, scooping up the bag. I notice the wary look she throws Selena. She doesn't know why we fell out, but she's clearly caught some disloyal vibes. "Nobody had the kind for sensitive teeth, so I went to buy some—"

A nearby door opens. We all go still.

A moment later, a loud knock.

"Turn that music down, would you?" Oh, no. It's Mr. LeBrecque. "Some of us need to sleep to educate you all tomorrow."

"Crap," Selena whispers, lunging into the tiny elevator. I follow, but Olivia lingers in the hall, eyes like saucers. I reach out and snare her coat sleeve.

"No—" she starts to protest, but I yank her inside. Her plastic bag rustles between us.

"Someone there?" asks Mr. LeBrecque.

Olivia blanches, and Selena pounds the ground floor button. I back against the wall and squeeze my eyes shut as if that'll make me invisible. I can't let him send me back to my room. I have to get Val.

The door slides shut.

"Did he see us?" I ask.

"Only if he has X-ray vision," says Selena.

"That man wouldn't have a superpower if it bit him in the ass."

Selena laughs with a mini-snort like she always used to at my jokes. A flicker of remorse crosses her face, and she looks away, clearing her throat. "What now?"

"We should book it," I say, "in case he checks the lobby."

"What's even happening right now?" says Olivia.

I sigh. "I'm going to grab Val before she goes to some French boy's party. And unless you want to get busted, you're coming, too."

# 4

## Ruby

I'm going to kill Val. Assuming that French boy hasn't already murdered her.

"Where the hell is she?" I scan the crowds at the Luxembourg Métro stop as late-night revelers pass through the turnstiles and swarm the stairs leading to the platforms. Cold air bursts into the station each time the doors open, and I stuff my hands into my pockets. "She was supposed to meet me here."

"Do you think she went to meet that guy already?" Olivia asks. I feel bad for dragging her into this, but I'm glad she's here as a buffer between me and my nemesis.

"She better not have," Selena slurs, hugging her loose baby-blue cardigan closed. She didn't have a chance to grab a jacket. I'm surprised she didn't hang back near the hotel. Heck, I'm surprised she came to Paris at all. She'd drag her feet whenever she came to historical Boston sites with me to film, bored out of her skull. Paris must be shiny enough to have tempted her.

I navigate to Val's WhatsApp messages. "Dammit. She did go meet him."

She sent an address, so I tap the link. All we have to do is get her back to the hotel before anyone notices we're gone.

"All right," I say. "She's a few blocks away. Let's go."

We leave the station and cross the street toward the iron-barred fence lining the Luxembourg Gardens, which slash across a moonless sky hazily aglow from light pollution. A few stars peek through like ghostly speckles above the bone-white buildings.

I hate how I automatically look for them, how the night sky always reminds me of Selena and her obsession with space and sci-fi. I quit the swim team to avoid her, but I can't exactly shut off the stars. Now here she is, all chattering teeth beside me.

"Is the party in someone's apartment?" Olivia's practically jogging to keep up, a head shorter than me.

"I'm not sure. Val said it's a 'once-in-a-lifetime thing,' whatever that means."

"You don't think it's in the gardens, do you? Or the *palace*?" It almost sounds like Olivia would be down to party. She's living proof that being a nerd and an introvert aren't mutually exclusive. I've been to some of her game nights and themed birthday parties over the years and always need a day to recover afterward. Two people is my social threshold before my brain wants to explode.

Selena snorts. "Right. And at midnight, your clothes'll turn into rags, and these cars'll turn into pumpkins."

I glance at my map. "We're heading away from there, so probably not."

The farther we get from Luxembourg, the more the crowds thin, and once we cross another street and turn right, the sidewalks are nearly deserted. Our red-eye flight has made the last two days feel like one

endless stretch, and the only thing keeping exhaustion from slamming into me like a pile of bricks is worry for Val.

“Rube!”

Speak of the devil.

Val’s on the next corner, waving frantically under a red awning. Someone’s leaning against the looming building next to her, his face obscured in shadow.

“What were you thinking?” I throw my arms out as she jogs over.

“You didn’t come to ream me out, did you?” she teases, but her face falls when she spots Selena and Olivia. She pulls me in for a hug and whispers, “Why’d you bring *them*?”

I release her. “Because— Wait, is that my camera?” I point to the DSLR camera dangling from her neck.

She cradles it. “Yeah. I knew you’d want footage of this.” Her eyes dance behind her glasses as she slips off the strap and hands it over. “Now you can get it yourself.”

“Val, I thought someone *stole* it.” I stuff it into my purse. “Did you take my wallet, too?”

She frowns. “No. Why would I?”

“Oh. So someone *did* pickpocket me—” I freeze as the boy in the shadows approaches.

He’s as handsome as I remember. Strands of tousled chestnut hair flit across his forehead, stubble shadows his sturdy jaw, and his eyes glimmer under the streetlamps like sand under the midday sun. Weird outfit choice, though: he’s geared up for a mountain trek in his taupe military jacket, black cargo pants, and muddied hiking boots.

His warm smile falters as he scans us over. Then he says to Val, “It seems your friend has multiplied!” in a French accent as his gaze settles on me.

I stay quiet.

Val slings her arm through mine. "The more the merrier, right?"

"We're not going with you," Selena says. Val pulls me in tighter.

I take a deep breath, steeling my nerve. "Yeah, we're not here to crash your party. We're going home. Now."

"*What?*" says Val.

"We're not getting expelled over some party," I whisper to her. The boy's gripping his backpack straps over his chest with a furrowed brow, looking low-key stressed.

"We won't get expelled," says Val.

"From this trip, we will."

She releases my arm and gives me a little shove toward the others. "You go back, then. I'm staying."

"I'm not letting you go alone." I grab her hand and tug her toward the Métro. She groans but lets me drag her away, and Selena and Olivia trail close behind.

"No, wait." The boy chases after us, a note of dismay in his voice.

I ignore him.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You just did," I call over my shoulder.

"Don't you want to party somewhere most *Parisians* never even get to see?"

"No thanks—" I still with a sharp breath. I know I should keep moving. I know I should ignore him. But capturing the little-seen corners of Paris for my channel is exactly what I want. The intrigue is too fierce, too tempting. A puff of steam escapes my mouth, dispersing in the cold air, and I slowly turn.

His lips twitch, his warm eyes glimmering with the prospect of adventure.

My pulse thrums. "What do you mean?"

"Let me show you." The corners of his eyes crinkle.

“Why would we go anywhere with you?” Selena asks.

“Yeah,” says Olivia. “We don’t even know you.”

“How rude of me.” The boy releases his backpack straps to offer a hand to Olivia, flashing a smile that clearly belongs on some billboard somewhere. “I’m Julien.”

She turns beet red as she shakes it. “Olivia. But my friends call me Liv.”

Selena warily extends a hand, but Val pulls me closer. “This is Ruby,” she says giddily, like she’s excited to show me off.

“Ruby.” Julien repeats my name like he’s savoring it on his tongue. “And what do your friends call you?”

Val calls me Rube, like life’s too short for the extra syllable. “Just . . . Ruby.”

“Just Ruby.” Dimples crease Julien’s sharp jawline as he grins, then shifts his gaze to Selena. “And you are . . . ?”

“Selena.”

“There.” He shakes her hand. “Now we are better acquainted, yes?” With a tip of his head, he beckons us to follow.

I want to, but the longer we stay out, the more likely someone back at the hotel will notice we’re gone. I cross my arms, torn.

Julien claps his hands together as though in prayer. “I promise, you’ll never forget this for as long as you live.”

Val shakes my arm. “C’mon. You’ll get so many subscribers from this. And it’ll be way cooler than some old bunker under the Eiffel Tower.”

“I’m going back,” says Selena.

“Cool, bye.” Val strides back to Julien.

Selena huffs, then says to me, “Are you seriously going to let her talk you into this?”

I narrow my eyes. “No. I *want* to see what he’s talking about.”

"You shouldn't do this, Ruby."

"You're not the boss of me, either."

"Yeah. We've established I'm nothing to you."

My mouth drops open. Like *I'm* the one who ended our friendship. Selena purses her lips, and Olivia's eyes ping-pong between us.

I take a steadying breath and turn to Val. "If anything seems off, we're leaving."

She nods. "Absolutely."

"See ya," I mutter to Selena.

"No, I . . ." She hesitates. "I'll come."

I'd rather she left but don't want to fight anymore. "Whatever. Liv?"

Olivia shrugs. "We're already out. Might as well." I'm surprised she'd want to risk smearing her record when I know she's gunning for Harvard. Then again, she was willing to risk it for toothpaste. Maybe being so far from home makes her throw caution to the wind.

We follow Julien down a narrow street nestled between a tall, archaic cobblestone wall and six-story Gothic apartment buildings. Thick iron bars cage the first-story windows, a deterrent to thieves. If only my own purse had such security features. Maybe then I'd still have my wallet, and my phone wouldn't be trilling with texts from Dad. My heart sinks each time it buzzes. Hopefully he'll think I fell asleep and give up until tomorrow.

Val leans over to whisper, "He's so hot, right?"

I muffle a laugh. Julien's close enough to hear. "How old is he?" I whisper.

"He said he's a sophomore at university."

He leads us past a graffitied mural of a toad dressed in pastels, fishing in a tiny pond while squatting on an upturned bucket. It's such a stark contrast to the ancient cobblestone wall across the street, I pause to snap a quick photo with my phone.

A bit further down, Julien sets a hand on Val's shoulder. "One moment."

"Of course." Her voice is all silk and honey, somehow making those two words flirty. He smirks. I snicker, and she mouths *Shut up* with a sly grin. Maybe Julien's the one who needs protecting.

He slides off his bulging backpack and stoops to dig for something. "Here we go." After retrieving a small hook, he stands and slots it into a rusted drainage grate in the sidewalk.

"What're you doing?" I ask.

Ignoring me, he straddles the grate and lifts it with a grunt.

"What on earth . . . ?" says Olivia. We exchange a baffled look, and Selena seems ready to bolt back toward the Métro. But Val's grinning, bouncing on her toes.

Julien shuffles over and sets the rectangular grate onto the pavement with a soft thud. "All right, let's go." He kneels next to the gaping void and extends a hand to me as though to help me climb down.

He can't be serious.

Selena peers into the hole, then jerks back. "Whoa, that goes *really* far down."

Julien waves us closer. "We must hurry, yes?"

I scoff. "After you!"

"I have to go last to put that back," he says, motioning to the grate, as though I meant that literally.

I shake my head.

"*Attends un peu.*" He clasps his hands, pleading. "Please. I'm sorry, we should have explained. I asked Val not to tell anyone she was going to a party in the catacombs—it *has* to be a secret—but we're so late—"

I gasp. "The *catacombs*? Like, the actual Paris catacombs."

His mouth curves into a smile.

No wonder Val's so excited. We've been dying to see the catacombs—

the intricate web of tunnels beneath the city where the skeletal remains of six million long-dead Parisians line miles and miles of passageways in artistic arrangements. It has to be one of the creepiest things you can see on the entire planet, which obviously means I *have* to see it. Mr. LeBrecque added it to our itinerary after I begged and pleaded, but we'd be visiting the small touristy section—the only bit open to the public. Most of the other entrances scattered throughout Paris have been sealed for ages, and the only accessible ones are secret from everyone except for—

“You’re a cataphile, aren’t you?” I ask, breathless.

Suddenly his outfit makes sense.

Selena sputters a laugh. “Did you just call him a pedophile?”

“A *cataphile*,” Olivia pipes up. “It’s what they call the explorers who meet up in the catacombs.” Of course she’d know about them, too. “*Illegally*, I might add. Isn’t it dangerous down there?”

“How’s it dangerous?” Selena asks.

“It’s not if you know what you’re doing,” says Julien, “and where you’re going. And I do.”

I’ve read up on the cataphiles’ secret parties. Not many outsiders get to attend, so a video like “10 Secrets of the Paris Catacombs (Rare Cataphile Party!)” is exactly what could catapult *Ruby’s Hidden Gems* into the stratosphere. I can wait to upload it till after graduation so we won’t get in trouble, and if I manage to land a sponsorship? Holy crap. It could turn my channel into a bona fide moneymaker. Dad would *have* to see the opportunity there. Maybe then he wouldn’t guilt-trip me so hard about traveling with Val. Maybe then Sean and I would have more videos to edit together. Maybe he’d even defer cadet training to travel with us.

“Come.” Julien peers over his shoulder down the empty street. “We need to go before anyone sees us.”

I dare a glance into the hole. Metal ladder rungs stretch down a narrow shaft toward an eerie orange glow below. I hadn't noticed the light peeking through the grate's narrow slats. That's how deep it goes. A chill sweeps through me, but Val's clasping her fingers under her chin, her shining eyes pleading with me.

"Listen," Julien says, "this will be the most unique experience you'll ever have. It's like an entire underground city. The history, the artwork—there's nothing else like it on Earth, I promise you."

He's speaking to my soul. I might not be great at existing around other humans, but seeing the feats they've achieved, the architecture they've built, what makes cultures tick . . . I crave it like a thirst I can never quench, stuck in one state my whole life. It's why I started my YouTube channel: to soak in as much of the world as I could and earn my way to exploring more of it.

And if Dad flies me home early because of the stolen wallet, at least I'll have *this*.

Excitement bubbles in my belly, and I nod. "Okay."

"Yes!" Val fist-pumps.

"You can't be serious," says Selena.

"You coming?" I ask Olivia.

"Uh, I don't think"—she clamps her lips and lets out a long breath—"No, you know what? I always do everything right, and it's never"—she closes her eyes briefly, then nods, resolved—"Yeah. Yes. I want to see it."

"Hell yeah." Val gives her a high five.

"But we're not wearing the right clothes. Or shoes," Selena tries, motioning to her wedges. "And we don't have the right equipment."

"There are lamps waiting for us down there." Julien pats his backpack. "And I've got extra flashlights—"

"I'll tell Mr. LeBrecque," Selena threatens, balling her hands into fists.

My stomach dips. “You’ll get in trouble, too.”

“Honestly,” says Val, “if you’re that scared, leave.” Selena clenches her jaw, making her pointed chin even more pronounced. “Seriously, go back to the hotel. We won’t judge.”

“No. She should come.” Julien puts an arm around Selena’s shoulders. “You’ll have fun, I promise.” He quickly releases her.

Selena glances at me, conflict plain on her face. I don’t understand why she won’t just leave. She had no problem ditching me last year.

“The Métro’s pretty close,” I say. “You won’t get lost—”

“No. It’s fine,” she says. “I’ll come.”

“Très bon.” Julien motions for Olivia’s Monoprix bag. “Give me that?”

“Uh . . .” Olivia hands it over, and he holds it over the opening. “Wait—” She tries to snatch it back, but her fingers catch air. A faint rustling noise reaches us as plastic hits stone.

“Trust me.” He smiles. “It will be easier to climb down.” Kneeling next to the grate, he waves me forward.

I extend my purse strap to wear it cross-body so he won’t chuck it, and as I approach, he takes my trembling hand to help me down. His hand’s calloused, like Dad’s are from handling hot skillet, and I grip it tight as I turn, kneel, and lower one leg into the hole, feeling for the lowest rung I can reach with the tip of my boot while pressing my left palm into the gravelly sidewalk.

*I can’t believe I’m doing this, I can’t believe I’m doing this.*

My other foot finds the next rung down as I release his hand, and pebbles prick my palms. Whoa, this shaft is narrow. I glance up at the smattering of stars glimmering through the haze and take a deep breath. This’ll all be worth it once we’re down there—once I get to film a party in the catacombs with actual cataphiles.

Steeling myself, I reach down, clasp the top rung, and begin my descent. Step down, grab a rung. Step down, grab a rung. I got this.

The cramped shaft darkens as Selena follows, cutting off the street lamps' glow, and the metallic rungs clang with each of our steps, getting slicker with dew the deeper we climb. I pause to wipe my hand on my jacket and angle my head to peer between my arms at the ground, still so far away. My toes tingle like I've stuck them in an electric socket.

Maybe this is a mistake.

*Obviously* this is a mistake.

I look up in time to see Selena's shoe nearly pummel my face. "Wait!" I shout.

She freezes. "Can you not stop right now?"

"You okay, Rube?" Val says somewhere overhead.

"I'm just—" I swallow hard as fear clenches my chest and grip the rung so tightly my fingernails dig painfully into the undersides of my thumbs.

"Come on, Ruby, go!" Selena yells.

"You're almost there," Val calls down. "You got this."

"I regret all my life choices," I call back.

Suddenly Julien shouts, "Go, go, go! Now!"

Selena scrambles down, forcing me to move. I pry my fingers from the rung to continue down, down, down toward the eerie glow below as the grate clatters back into place.

# 5

## Ruby

When my feet finally touch solid ground, I fling myself back against the cool stone wall and clutch my chest as my heart tries to eject itself and scramble back up the ladder.

“Did someone see us?” I call up.

Julien hushes me.

Two gas lamps dangle from a rusted iron sconce next to the ladder, illuminating a narrow corridor so long it fades to pitch blackness in either direction. I’d half expected to see a pile of skeletons right away, but no one’s here to greet us—dead or alive.

Stones jutting from the ceiling cast elongated shadows on the misshapen walls, some mix of limestone, cobblestone, and concrete. They’re covered in graffiti—a jumbled mass of cartoon rats and mushrooms, of bubble letters and cursive scrawl. Cracks and crevasses slice the stone, forming a design of their own, like the earth has been warring its intruders for attention.

I wipe condensation from my hands onto my jeans. The cool air is

so moist it presses against my cheeks, and goose bumps prickle my arms even though it's warmer down here than on the street. A peculiar smell makes me wrinkle my nose; not quite moldy or musty, but like the tangy odor of neglected books when they've been accumulating dust for too long.

Selena drops down and steps aside, clutching her knees. "Way to wimp out."

I can't tell if she's serious or teasing.

Val steps off the lowest rung and hugs me. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "It was a long way down."

She chuckles, squinting as the humidity fogs her glasses. "How'd you survive when we jumped the fence at Six Flags?"

Selena's mouth falls open. Yeah, she's missed a lot. But so have I.

"You not taking *no* for an answer might've had something to do with it," I say.

Val grins as she takes off her glasses to wipe the lenses. "Hey, we had a blast that day."

Olivia hops off the ladder and scoops up her bag, the curls poking out of her bun already frizzing.

Selena raises her phone. "No signal." She's usually my height but seems taller now thanks to her wedges.

"Bad shoes for this," I say.

She tuts. "Told you." Val's Converse sneakers, my black booties, and Olivia's beige faux sheepskin boots make us only slightly better equipped.

Julien touches down and slaps dew from his hands.

"Did someone see us?" I ask again.

"A car turned down the street. But I don't think they saw." He un-hooks the lamps from the sconces and gives them a little flourish. "Well, then. Welcome to the catacombs."

Val whoops, and the rest of us titter with nervous anticipation. He hands her one of the lamps. “Oh, they’re electric,” I notice. The designs only imitate old-school gas lamps.

Julien nods. “Easier to deal with. Sorry I don’t have more—I wasn’t expecting four of you. But these light the way plenty, yes?”

“Yeah.” Val raises her lamp to eye level. “Wow. Feels like we’re Indiana Jones.”

“But without the treasure,” Selena mutters, inspecting graffiti of a skull with keyholes painted where the eye sockets should be, encased in frenetic mass of black swirls. An adjacent etching reads 1782.

“No,” I breathe. “This place *is* the treasure.”

“Absolutely.” Olivia opens a bottle of water and takes a sip.

“Watch it.” Julien points at the plastic seal she accidentally dropped. “What comes down must go up.”

“Sorry, sorry.” She picks it up, harried, not used to getting things wrong.

“These are sacred halls. Let’s not disrespect the dead by leaving our trash down here with them.”

*The dead.* I peer down the corridor. They’re down here somewhere.

“Shall we?” says Julien. As we set off, he scrolls through his phone until a Taylor Swift song blares from the tiny speaker.

I smile on reflex—I’m a total Swiftie—but Val says, “Way to kill the ambiance.”

“Cataphiles play music so you know they’re coming.” But he turns the volume down, stooping slightly to keep his head from grazing the jagged ceiling. “Anyway, we got a good turnout tonight. There’s plenty of food, and, of course, it wouldn’t be a party without wine.”

But I’m not here for the wine.

I dig my camera from my purse and linger behind, adjusting the aperture for the darkness. The light from the lamps is fading fast. I take

a quick video, then snap a photo, the flash illuminating the narrow, craggy passageway.

“Stop!” Julien shouts.

I gasp and back into the bumpy wall as he rushes toward me.

“Sorry, I’m a horrible guide, I’m not taking any time to explain. But I can’t let you take photos here.”

“For real? I can’t come down here and *not* get it on camera.”

“That grate used to be sealed. We don’t want the police to realize it has been *unsealed*.” He points to a blue plaque on the wall reading RUE MICHEL-ENTENDU, which wound up in my shot. That must be the street overhead.

“Oh. Sorry.” I flush and power off the camera.

“I forgive you, Justruby. This time.”

“No, it’s just Ruby—” I stop short, realizing.

He winks, which only makes me blush harder.

I stuff my camera back into my purse and catch up to the others as he leads us ahead. Val flicks my arm. “Troublemaker.”

I flick her arm back. “You’re one to talk.”

Selena puffs air between her lips.

“What?” Val asks. Selena only shakes her head. “Come on. Out with it.”

The way Selena’s eyes bounce between us, I can tell she’s coming up with a lie. We’re both crap liars. “Aliyah’s gonna freak when she hears about this,” she finally says.

“Who’s Aliyah?” Julien asks.

“My girlfriend.”

“I thought you were with Tyler what’s-his-face?” says Val.

I tense. Tyler Russell. And quite the face he has, with his angled jaw tapering to a sharp chin and sky-blue eyes that pierce your soul. He’s tall and lithe as a Tolkien elf and the star of each year’s school play, and he’s not on this trip since he takes Spanish, thank God.

Selena's expression tightens. "Why would you think that?"

"Because—" Val starts, but I make a slicing motion at my throat. I told her how Selena used Aliyah to get close to Tyler. How she thirsted over him from a distance until junior year when she joined Gavel Club, an extracurricular Aliyah started for practicing public speaking. Afterwards, she and Aliyah hung out constantly—during lunch, after swim practice, at parties—and I would've admired her commitment to barging into Tyler's field of view if I hadn't been so crushed she barely had time for me anymore. After we fell out, she and Aliyah must've bonded for real, because they started dating in the fall.

"Oh—sorry, Selena," Val says instead. "I must've had the wrong impression."

"It's fine," Selena mutters.

*Sorry, Val mouths to me, cringing.*

I shake off the awkward moment and focus on our surroundings, skimming my fingers over the ancient wall flecked with sediments and shells—at least, I think those bone-white specks are shells. Graffiti coats most of the others with artwork and cartoons—familiar ones like SpongeBob and Darth Vader and foreign ones I don't recognize—and dates and words I can't understand, not because they're in French but because they've been scrawled over too many times. It's like the walls are oozing history, time, and the abstraction of the human mind. I wish we had more time. There's so much to see, and we're so lucky to see it. All thanks to a stranger.

"Do you come down here a lot?" I ask him.

"All the time." Julien grins at me over his shoulder. "You feel more alive here, yes?"

"More alive down here with the dead?" Val teases.

"There's more to this place than death," he says. "No internet to distract you from your thoughts, from conversations with friends. Here, your mind is free."

After several turns down similar passageways, Selena says, “I didn’t think there’d be all this graffiti. Kind of sullies it.”

“I think it’s incredible,” says Val, admiring a nonsensical mural, a riot of multicolored shapes and whorls that seem to dance across the serrated stone. “I’m surprised enough people have been down here to leave all this.”

“Right?” I say. “So much for seeing an unseen corner of the world—”

My foot catches on something. I stumble and gasp sharply, then glare at the ground like I always do when I trip for no reason. But this time, there’s a culprit.

A chill tiptoes down my spine. “Is that a . . .”

*Bone.*

A human bone, its narrow length knobbed at either end, browned with filth and age. A femur, I think.

“Whoa,” says Val, “you just tripped over someone’s *leg*.”

Selena shakes my shoulder and points ahead where the corridor spills into a large chamber. I follow her finger to see dozens of eyes staring straight back.

No, not dozens. *Hundreds.*

The blank, vacant eyes of the dead.