

Sylvain Cassel stared across the crowded ballroom, his parents' voices fading into the background. A glass of champagne lingered forgotten in his hand, golden and glinting.

The music swirling around him had an almost physical force but he didn't hear it.

On the other side of the room, a flame-haired girl in a vintage blue dress threaded her way with unconscious grace through the well-dressed throng. He couldn't take his eyes off her. He'd never seen Allie look as beautiful as she did tonight.

'Sylvain, mon cher, have we lost you?'

His mother's amused voice dragged him out of his reverie.

He glanced up to find both his parents watching him with undisguised merriment. His mother, gorgeous as ever in a couture silk gown; his father suave and relaxed in a perfectly cut Hugo Boss tuxedo exactly like the one Sylvain wore.

He didn't like the way they were looking at him now, though. As if he was a child.

'I'm sorry,' he said stiffly. 'What were you saying?'

They resumed their conversation about his Uncle Henri's new yacht, and how absurd it was that he'd acquired another.

For a minute, Sylvain feigned interest, but his gaze was drawn towards Allie's retreating back.

He didn't want to be here right now, making polite conversation with his parents.

He wanted to be with her.

Turning abruptly, he set his half-empty glass down on a tray carried by a passing waiter, and leaned forward to interrupt his parents' conversation.

'Desole, Maman, Papa,' he said in his native French. 'Would you mind if I left you for just a moment?'

There was a brief pause, then his mother inclined her head, her gaze knowing.

His father's expression, though, was cautious. He reached for Sylvain's arm.

'Cherche ta fille,' he said in French, his voice low. Find your girl. 'But be careful. That is no ordinary girl.'

A frown creased Sylvain's brow. He pulled his arm free of his father's hand with careful deliberation. 'I'm always careful.'

He didn't linger to ask what his father meant but, as he walked into the crowd, he couldn't get his words out of his head.

No ordinary girl? What did that mean? Because she was Lucinda Meldrum's granddaughter? Or because she was Nathaniel's target?

Either way, it didn't matter – Sylvain was in love with Allie Sheridan. He had been for so long he could no longer remember a time when she wasn't the first thing he thought about in the morning. Or when hers wasn't the first face he sought in any room.

And yet she had never loved him.

But maybe now...

The possibility – the slight chance – that things had changed between them, made his heart stutter. He'd seen something in her eyes when she'd looked at him tonight – a new openness. A new warmth.

Had she finally forgiven him? Did he have a chance?

With easy smoothness, he weaved his way around clusters of men in tuxedos and women in expensive ball gowns, barely glancing at them. The crowded ballroom was stuffy, and he loosened his black tie just a little as he walked out the door of the great hall.

The elegant crowd had spilled out of the ballroom into the wide, formal hallway, and it was impossible to see beyond them. Sylvain climbed a few steps up the curved staircase to look for Allie, leaning over the heavy bannister to get a clear view.

There.

At the end of the wide, expanse of hallway – its polished oak panelling gleaming in the light of the chandelier – he spotted a flash of bright red.

Sylvain couldn't suppress a smile. What had she done to her hair? It had been its usual golden-brown the last time he'd seen her.

Jo must have had something to do with it – her hair was the most extraordinary shade of pink all of a sudden.

It was good to see the two of them being friends again. He knew their falling out had hurt them both

In the distance, Allie slowed her pace and looked around, as if deciding what to do. Then, with sudden determination, she pulled open the heavy front door and slipped out into the night.

Sylvain's frowned.

It was freezing out there. Snow was predicted. And she was wearing nothing more than a silk frock and a pair of fragile heels.

Something was up.

He didn't wait to consider what that something might be. Swinging over the bannister, he leaped from the staircase to the floor in a smooth balletic leap, landing lightly on the balls of his feet.

A nearby cluster of party goers murmured in disapproval, swaying away from him.

He shot them a rakish, unapologetic smile.

'Sorry,' he said, not really caring what they thought.

Then, he ran down the hallway, and followed Allie out through the school's front door.

The cold took Sylvain's breath away. It was the kind of deep, threatening chill that turned each breath into a cloud, and rendered his fingertips and cheeks instantly numb.

Pulling his tuxedo jacket more snugly across his shoulders, he looked around worriedly.

Allie must be freezing.

Standing on the top step, he peered into the darkness. The curved drive was lined with dark Bentleys and Rolls Royces parked bumper to bumper. In the faint light cast by the moon through clouds, they glistened like oil.

A group of drivers had gathered by one of them, drinking steaming tea from thermoses and talking quietly.

Acting on instinct, Sylvain turned to his left, staring intently at the dark edge of the woods.

Then he saw it. A flicker of movement. A low tree branch swaying, as if someone had just pushed it aside.

Excitement fluttered low in his stomach. He knew where Allie was headed.

The folly.

Leaping from the top step to the cold, hard ground, he ran after her, his calf-skin dress shoes skidding just a little on the icy rocks.

His heart beat out a cadence of hope as he turned onto the footpath.

The folly. Where he'd taught her to fight.

The folly. Where she'd first begun to doubt Carter.

There was something about that domed marble gazebo hidden in the trees that drew them to each other. It was their place.

And no matter how much she might have wanted to deny that fact, he knew Allie was aware of it, too.

Overhead, the sky was soft, grey velvet. Clouds, heavy with snow, absorbed all sound. The school grounds were silent and empty.

A huge party was taking place five minutes' walk away but, as he followed Allie's footsteps, Sylvain felt as if the two of them had the world all to themselves.

She was close now – he could almost feel her presence.

His heart thudding painfully, he pushed a low, overhanging branch aside and stepped into the clearing.

She was standing near the foot of the marble steps leading up to the folly, her back to him. She showed no sign of having heard his arrival.

He watched as she reached out one tentative hand and rested it against the structure's cold Italian stone.

He could see the side of her face, the curve of her pale cheek beneath that torrent of glossy red hair. Her skin was luminescent against the midnight backdrop of her dress. She looked like a statue.

A goddess.

Suddenly, he couldn't breathe.

Had he ever wanted anyone as much as he wanted her now?

Never.

He took a slow steadying breath. He had to play this right. He needed her to know she could trust him.

He needed her to come to him.

'You're not wearing a coat, you know.'

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to take them back.

Everyone thought he was so sophisticated. He'd had the entire night to think of what to say, and that was what he'd come up with?

For a moment she didn't react. Then, with aching slowness, she turned to face him.

Her expression was serious – almost sad – as her eyes met his. Those eyes.

They were exactly the same colour as the storm clouds above them.

'Neither are you.' Her voice was low. Disturbingly steady.

At that moment, it took everything in Sylvain not to run to her and crush her in his arms.

Instead, he unbuttoned his jacket, affecting absolute cool.

'True. But a tuxedo comes with a jacket, so I at least have this.' He shrugged the black, silk-lined jacket off and held it out to her.

Her eyes flickered to the coat and then back to his face. For the first time, the hint of a smile curved the corners of her lips.

'But now you'll be cold,' she said.

'I'll live.'

For a brief second, he thought she might refuse. But then she reached out and took the coat from his hand, before stepping back again. Keeping the distance between them.

Still. With his coat draped across her shoulders, and looking at him with those eyes, he could fool himself that she was his.

'Thank you,' she said.

'You've changed your hair.' His gaze traced the vivid curls over her shoulders. 'It suits you.'

Her hand rose self-consciously to touch one curl. 'It wasn't my idea. Jo can be . . . convincing.'

Sylvain, who could imagine the scenes that lead up to Allie reluctantly dying her hair, had to smile.

'So I've heard.'

An awkward silence fell, and he tried to think of safe subjects to discuss.

I love you. Please love me....

'I'm sorry about my parents,' he said. 'They really wanted to meet you.'

Her responding shrug was expressive. She knew all about parents.

'Your mum is gorgeous,' she said. 'Like a movie star.'

Fully aware of how much his mother would like knowing she thought that, Sylvain gave a wry smile. 'I'll tell her you said so.'

Then the silence returned again, so heavy with unspoken words it seemed to weigh them both down.

Allie shifted her weight on to one delicate sandal, digging the toe of the other into the dirt. He could sense her nervous anticipation.

She was waiting for something.

He leaned against a stone pillar, eyes never leaving her. His throat was so tight, when he spoke his voice was barely above a whisper.

'What are you doing out in the cold, Allie?'

He saw her draw a quick nervous breath.

'I don't know . . .' she said after a second. 'I guess I just needed some air.' Her eyes challenged him. 'What are you doing out here?'

There were so many things he could have said. So many lies he could have told. But he would never lie to her. So he told her the truth.

'I followed you.'

All the colour left her face. She was as pale as the marble folly next to her. As white as the statue of the dancing girl inside.

Why?' She breathed the word.

Again, a thousand lies hung just out of his reach. But the time for pretending was over.

'Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.' He recited the French phrase he'd learned only a few weeks ago, knowing she wouldn't know what it meant. Knowing it would upset her not to know. But never had a sentence summed up how he felt so completely.

The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.

Allie flushed. 'I don't understand. What does that mean?'

He took a deep, icy cold breath. 'It means that I want to be with you. That I can't get you out of my head. I have tried everything I know...' He pounded his fist with restrained violence against the pillar next to him. 'And you're still there.'

His head felt light. He was exhilarated by his own bravery. It was freeing. And

terrifying.

Her lips parted in surprise. But she didn't say anything.

In the long silence, Sylvain's joy began to drain away.

He'd gone too far. His honesty had frightened her. Maybe he was wrong and she didn't feel anything for him after all. She was trying to decide how to get away from him.

This had been a mistake.

He considered fleeing. But his feet wouldn't cooperate. He stayed right where he was. Willing her to say something.

Allie was visibly trembling now. She lifted one shaking hand as if to touch her forehead and then dropped it again.

Finally she spoke. He could barely hear her whispered words over the thudding of his heart.

'I . . . I think about you, too. But . . .'

His heart leapt.

Then her voice trailed off. And he saw the look in her eyes. The doubt.

Heat rose to his face. It was just as he'd feared. She couldn't forgive him.

That night. That awful, horrible, stupid night.

In a flash, he remembered the last Cimmeria Ball. The fear in her eyes. The way she'd struggled against him. The confusion and hurt in her face as he goaded her.

Say you want me, he'd whispered to her. Wanting to humiliate her. To punish her for the power she held over him. Intending to push her away from him forever.

And he had succeeded. She had never forgiven him.

God, he loathed himself for that night. That single minute in time. For the awful, selfish bastard he'd been then.

He had to stop himself from doubling over, his heart ached that much for all that could have been.

Could they never put it behind them? Would she never forgive him for who he used to be?

And worst of all: should she forgive him? Were some things simply unforgiveable?

But he had to try. He had to at least do that. He had to make her understand that he wasn't that person any more. That he hated the person he'd been.

And that he loved her.

For a moment he closed his eyes, willing the pain away. Then he opened them again.

'I know I did a bad thing. A stupid, awful thing. But people change, Allie.' His voice was passionate, almost desperate. 'People learn. If they didn't, what would be the point of this?' His arm swept towards the school building they could just make out through the trees. 'What would be the point of life? You've changed while you've been here – I've watched you change. Well, I've changed too. And I'm sorry about what I did that night. If there was some way to take it all back . . . I would give anything.'

His voice broke and he turned away, a hand covering his eyes.

It was pointless. She'd never forgive him. And that was as it should be. It was all he deserved.

He took a step away, intending to escape. To leave this moment behind.

That was when he heard her step towards him.

Surprised, he looked up to find her extraordinary grey eyes ablaze with determination.

'You can take it back,' she said fervently. 'You can.'

Sylvain froze as she ran across the space that divided them. He watched as his jacket slid from her shoulders, pooling forgotten on the frosty ground.

Then she was in front of him, hands reaching up to touch his face. Cold fingers stroking his skin. 'Let's just take it all back.'

Still, he didn't dare move. He'd dreamed of this moment for months, but he couldn't believe it was really happening.

She was so close now. He could feel the warmth of her breath. Smell the faint, sweet scent of her shampoo.

But he kept his hands at his sides.

Finally, standing on her toes, she pressed her lips against his.

Her lips were soft and warm. He could taste the salt of her tears on his tongue.

She was real. This was really happening.

As if he waking from a dream, Sylvain slid his hands slowly across the silk of her dress and pulled her into the warmth of his arms.

With a gasping breath that sounded like relief, she leaned into him and the kiss grew more confident, more assured.

With his tongue, he brushed the edge of her lips. When her mouth parted for him instantly, eagerly, he groaned softly at the back of his throat and pulled her closer.

After so long, she was finally his.

The last time they'd kissed, she'd been timid. Almost cautious. This time everything was different. Her kisses were gentle but insistent. Demanding.

He knew where she'd learned to kiss - who'd taught her - but it didn't matter.

She wasn't with Carter now. She was with him. Here.

His bones seemed to soften as he pulled her closer; clinging to her, as if for

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Part Two

maggiori informazioni

Legacy Reverse POV: The

Night Of the Winter Ball From

Sylvain's POV

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Jun 06, 2014

Allie and Sylvain have been

draw n to each other for MONTHS,

but have resisted their attraction. On this one night, though, anything seems possible. When Allie walks out into the woods to get away from the festive dance on a frozen night, Sylvain follows her. In the book we see this scene from...

Part 3 of 4

1,183

lettura

44

voti

25

commenti

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strength. He'd never felt weaker. But she seemed strong enough for both of them.

Her breasts were soft against his chest. Everything about her was soft and warm. If it were possible to drown in a person he was drowning in her now. She kissed him with a pent up passion that reflected his own, reaching up to tangle her fingers in his hair. Demanding more of him.

He knew as well as he knew anything that she was forgiving him. Accepting him.

Choosing him.

Murmuring words in French, Sylvain brushed kisses on her cold cheeks, and the delicate skin of her eyes, the soft hair that framed her face. He breathed in her scent like oxygen.

Then their lips met again, hungrily.

He could feel the heat of her body through the thin silk of her dress as she pressed herself against him, pulling him so close he was afraid he would hurt her. He couldn't breathe but he didn't care. He never wanted to breathe again.

He wanted to die right here. Right now. Breathless and in love.

His lips moved down the side of her face to her ear then on to her neck and, breathing in short gasps, she dropped her head back.

Then, with a small cry that startled him, she straightened in his arms. For a second he thought she'd changed her mind. Then she pointed up.

'Sylvain, look! It's snowing!'

Reluctant to let her out of his reach, he held her close and looked where she gestured, up into the infinity of snow falling from a night sky before glancing

back at her. Snowflakes had settled on her red hair where they glistened like diamonds. Her eyes were filled with wonder.

God, he loved her.

'It's a sign,' he whispered into her hair. 'That we belong together.'

The snow fell around them, thick and fast; Sylvain's blood sang with exhilaration.

And he didn't notice that she didn't reply.