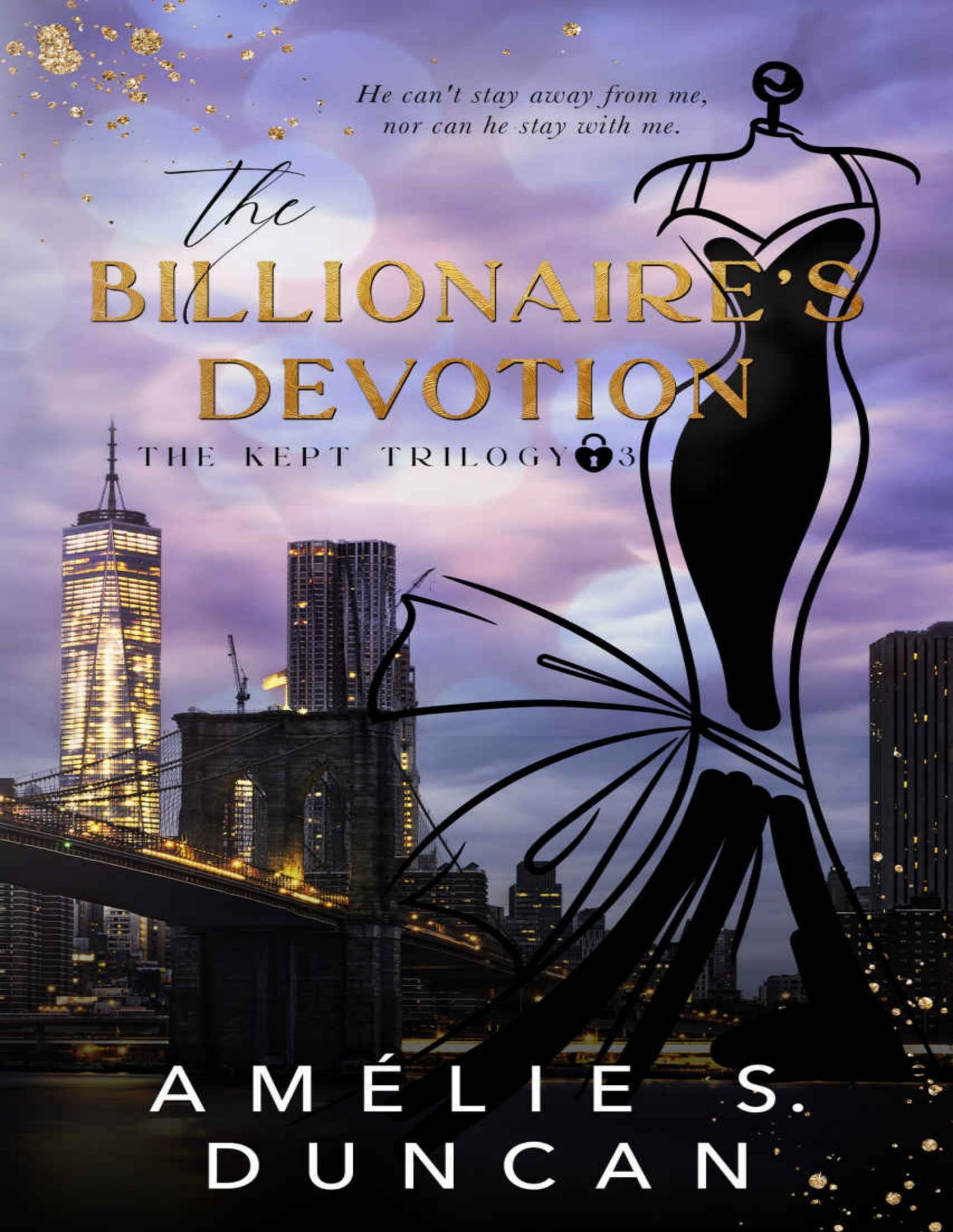


*He can't stay away from me,
nor can he stay with me.*

The
**BILLIONAIRE'S
DEVOTION**

THE KEPT TRILOGY  3

**A M É L I E S.
D U N C A N**



The
**BILLIONAIRE'S
DEVOTION**

THE KEPT TRILOGY  3



**A M É L I E S .
D U N C A N**

The Billionaire's DEVOTION
The Kept Trilogy
Book THREE
Amélie S. Duncan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

[TITLE PAGE](#)

[ABOUT THIS BOOK](#)

[ALSO BY AMÉLIE S. DUNCAN](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

CHAPTER TWENTY
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE
CHAPTER THIRTY
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE
CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO
CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR
CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE
CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX
CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN
CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT
CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE
CHAPTER FORTY
CHAPTER FORTY-ONE
CHAPTER FORTY-TWO
EPILOGUE

When it comes to loving a Billionaire, be careful what you wish for...
If you've read the papers, you know my name. Nadia Sokol, sugar baby, kept
woman. Now, I'm something more. I'm the girlfriend of Billionaire Paul
Crane.

But no matter how much I love Paul, I'm still not sure I can live in his world.
Or if I can trust what we have is real.

That's why he's given me space, to think about what I really want.

And to pursue my career, a design internship in Paris.

Time to heal, after enduring the brutal attacks of the press, as well as those
who sought to tear us apart.

But now I'm starting to wonder if that's really what I need.

Because working with my new mentor, Hayden Madsen, feels less like
healing, and more like... temptation.

For once, all my dreams are about to come true.

But one look into Paul's eyes, and I'm ready to risk it all.

Is Paul ready to take the same chance on me?

ALSO BY AMÉLIE S. DUNCAN

More books on my [Amélie S. Duncan](#) website.
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TRILOGY:
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Billionaire romance

THE BILLIONAIRE'S COMPANION (THE TIGER LILY TRILOGY)
Lily takes on an impossible assignment that leads to sexy business mogul
Jonas Crane that has an intriguing proposal of his own. [Tiger Lily: The
Companion](#) is available free on all retailers.

"I'd give it ten stars if I could!"

DARK ROMANCE

[The Agency Dark Affairs Duet](#)

indiscreet AND DAUNTLESS

An innocent mistake plunges Gia right into the middle of secrets she was
never meant to discover. Can Gia recover in time, or lose everything?

"Steamy, sexy, and thrilling"

contemporary romance standalones

[MATCH FIT](#)

Notorious British Striker Dylan is pretending to be mine. Will this fake
relationship send us to stardom or end our careers?

*"A scorching Hot Winner of a Contemporary Romance"- Publisher Weekly
Book life*

Knox gave his number to the waitress on our first date. I left with another man before it ended.

Neither one of us could stand each other after that. But there he was with his hand out for me to take, right in the middle of a crisis.

“It will grip you, snuggle up and tease you.”

A world of passion burns inside me, hidden from view by my delicate ballet movements I will break free of my ballerina box and will have him—no matter what the cost.

“Phenomenal! Loved every word! I absolutely fell in love with Tyler and Scarlet!”

contemporary romance standalone

[Unfinished Sympathy](#)

Can these two artists unlock their hearts, and compose a symphony of passion or will their love song fade out before it even begins?

“Kept me on the edge from the very moment I started reading. I absolutely LOVED everything about this book.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alan, my best friend, and love of my life. Thank you and Rosco for being there every day. My life is full of love and happiness because of you both.

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Thank you, Lena for your encouragement.

Thank you to all of the blogs, advertisement companies, authors, friends for helping me promote the trilogy! I sincerely appreciate it!

Thank you to all the readers that read THE BILLIONAIRE'S DEVOTION. You asked for another billionaire story. I sincerely hope you enjoyed THE KEPT TRILOGY. If you are new to me, you can also read Lily and Jonas's story, starting with THE BILLIONAIRE'S COMPANION and the TIGER LILY TRILOGY.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amélie S. Duncan, an introvert and a passionate, creative writer, has published several enticing books and now runs her online bookstore. Although she considers herself uncool, her head is always brewing innovative ideas and plots to entrap and bewitch readers.

Her unique artistry of interlacing multiple themes in her books never fails to enrapture the reader's attention.

Duncan aims to take her readers on memorable journeys and immersive tales through her dynamic characters that will tug at one's heartstrings and leave readers breathless. Her knack for crafting spellbinding stories will make one believe in Happily-Ever-After's.

Currently, she is living with her doppelganger personality and an awesome golden retriever Rosco on the West Coast of the US.

Drop me a message on social media and/or join the steamy sexy romance newsletter. Every link is available on my [Amélie S. Duncan](#) website. Thank you very much for reading!

For Alan, my best friend and my cool dog Rosco. You both warm my soul.

For my readers. Thank you for supporting my writing. It has been a joy to do something I love.

“Be so happy that, when other people look at you, they become happy too.”—Anonymous



CHAPTER 1

“Want to hear a joke about construction—?”

“You’re still working on it,” I pointed at Dad and said the punchline before he could.

“You’ve caught onto me, kid.”

We laughed together far longer than the joke deserved. Then Dad’s expression turned serious. “It’s good to see you happy, princess.” My happiness surprised me, too. I’d thought my shattered heart wouldn’t ever know joy again. *But Paul surprised me.*

My love for Paul Crane was tangled in my soul. Rooted. Boundless. Even though it hurt that he wasn’t here with me now, he left me with his love.

His confession came as a light in my darkest hour. He was broken by our loss and exposed, and so was I. We were vulnerable. Powerless. No walls could rise in that despair. And he let me in and told me those words I so longed to hear from him. *I love you, Nadia.*

But Paul’s love profession hadn’t come as a new beginning for us. It had come as an end. Though he told me he couldn’t let me go, he wasn’t ready to stay. And after a couple of days, we fought.

“I can’t expect you to put your life on hold—”

I plea to him. “You didn’t and won’t—”

“I will, Nadia. Things have changed for us. Your life is just starting. I’m older, and I want things you are not ready for.”

I block his path and throw my hands up in frustration. “How do you know I don’t want the same? You don’t. You’re shutting me out because you’re afraid, and so am I, Paul. No one knows what will happen in the future. We love each other now.”

“We do, but we only just started a relationship. It’s too soon for more. And what if I’m never ready? I can’t expect you to wait for me forever.”

“No, you can’t.”

My hand touched my throat, remembering the anguish in my voice. In the heat of the moment, I said no, I wouldn’t wait, and I didn’t take those words back. Searching my conscience there was no regret. I never held back my love, and Paul would have to give me the same.

“I...I want you safe. I won’t let anyone hurt you...” His words died on his lips. Again.

Paul blamed himself. He believed he should have been able to prevent what happened to me on the boat. Still, I held on to what he said from his heart to mine. *I don’t think I can walk away.*

“Earth to Nadia,” Dad called me back from my thoughts.

I leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Let’s get some sun.”

“Sorry, Texas is fresh out of it,” he joked as I followed next to his power chair to reach the patio. My lips formed a smile, though my heart squeezed. Dad hadn’t lost the use of his legs, but he had an oxygen tank to help him breathe—a new change since his course of chemotherapy. He became tired quickly when walking.

Dad’s eyes still held that light, soft eggshell blue of a freshly dipped Easter egg. They were always paired with a smile on his lips from a joke he couldn’t wait to share. But there were physical changes from his round of chemo. He was thin, pale, and slept most hours, and that was enough to send my nerves into a wild panic. But the doctor told us he was better, and that was what Mom and I held on to. Hope.

“We play the hand we’re dealt, princess. Mine’s the best.” Dad told me. “The body always has an expiration date. You staying to watch the countdown isn’t an option.”

Dad also knew me better than anyone else. He knew I wanted to stay with him. He’d switched from his latest dad jokes to life affirmations—his way of gently pushing me to move forward. It was time to leave for Paris, and my

flight was set for tomorrow. The Givenchy internship wasn't only for me; I represented Professor Elan and the design school, as well as Tomas, who I had no doubt championed me more than he'd let on. I wouldn't let them or myself down. I had to be strong.

"So, tell me again where you're staying? Or should I say, *think* you're staying?" he mused.

I lowered my brows. "Where I *am* staying. It's the cutest little studio and only about a thirty-minute ride to Givenchy, or so the train schedule says online. I'm thinking of getting a cheap car or a motorbike while I'm there." I had sent trunks ahead of time, and with my little French, I know that they had arrived. There were movers set to bring them into my apartment over the next few days.

"There is no existence where Paul Crane is going to allow any of that for you."

I put my hands on my hips. "Paul no longer has a say in what I do. We're...we're not together." I lowered my head to hide the dread I was sure was there. It sent my nerves into a spin that I had to shut down. *Don't think about it.*

"Oh, the irony," Dad mused as he shook his head and gestured to the pool where Mom was doing laps with a couple of her new nurse friends.

Okay. Dad was right. Paul moved my parents to Texas. But he wanted space, so he would give me the same. "Paul knows, and I also told his assistant Nicole where I'm staying. I never chose to end things between us; Paul did."

"Please give the man a break. He feels like he should have stopped the world to protect you. He's angry."

"I am too, but he...he let me go." I cleared my throat. "So, I'm moving on."

"Who are you trying to convince?" Dad asked. "At least now we can help you."

Dad and Mom gave me money to help with my place and internship. The factory workers' settlement Paul had granted to the families that his grandfather, Matthias Crane, had swindled out of their pensions, came through. Paul had also given me money, but I promised myself I would never use any of it. Nothing was worth more than him. *But he's gone.*

A wave of emptiness and fear tugged at my conscience, threatening to pull me under, but I pushed back, forcing myself to remain in the present. I

was here with my parents in Texas. Dad responded well to chemotherapy. The doctors were confident he was on the mend. It was just going to take time for his body to get that memo. *Things can get better.*

Mom climbed out of the pool, and I went to her with a towel. She dried off, then went over and kissed Dad's forehead—a sneaky way of checking his temperature. “Time to go back in.” Dad groaned and Mom put on a robe. We all paused to gaze around the tropical-styled stone patio, complete with palm plants, a pool, and a jacuzzi that Mom and I had used a few times since I arrived a week ago.

Mom sighed. “I’m going to miss Texas.”

My brows knitted. “You’re going home?”

Mom nodded affirmatively. “We hadn’t wanted to worry you with all that you had on your plate, but yeah, we’re ready to go home.”

“Paul, who is no longer your boyfriend, had his lawyer move us temporarily into a larger place that has ramps and chair lifts,” Dad added.

My jaw unhinged. “Gunnar. Seriously?”

“Yes, Gunnar. He calls your mom all the time.”

Mom beamed. “He does. He’s the sweetest young man. He’s coming to visit us in Wisconsin, and we’re going trailing together. Oh, and he’s going to see The Diems with me at Summerfest if he can get the time off.”

I snorted. “No, he’s not.”

Mom frowned. “Why not? Gunnar told me everything, and he apologized. He talks to me about his late mom’s...cancer. He gave me so many tips and support.” Mom hid her eyes.

I hugged her side, and she squeezed my waist. “I’m fine, and Dad’s... getting better every day. Anyway, I’m going to set him up with Mandy.”

Me and Dad rolled our eyes. “Good thing we are going back home, Nadia. Your mom can use her energy on something other than me and Gunnar.”

“You love the attention, troublemaker.” Mom kissed Dad again, and my insides warmed. Their love only grew stronger after everything they had been through.

“So, when are you coming to Paris?” I asked them.

“When you actually get going. Time to go over your checklist,” Mom used her mom tone, which meant right now.

I groaned and kissed Dad before following her up the stairs to the bedroom I stayed in. On the way, we passed by Dad’s master suite on the

bottom floor. It was set up like a hospital, with additional amenities, including a whirlpool therapy tub and massage room. He had a chef prepare him healthy meals, and nurses and doctors to look after him around the clock. “Are you sure you’re ready to go home, Mom? Dad has a great routine here.”

“I know, honey. I want to bubble wrap him up here, too. But I agree with your dad. We want our home, family, and friends around. That’s living.”

Mom’s living was also the way I was raised. Trailing, farmers’ markets, Summerfest, that was what they wanted, and I couldn’t disagree.

We walked into the bedroom. My suitcase and carry-on were next to the wall, and a rush of excitement filled my veins. *Oh, my God. I’m going to Paris.* I had imagined Paul and I going together again....

“Are you okay, honey?” A question Mom asked a million times a day.

“I am. Seriously. I love Paul, but he made a choice. I have to respect that for him.”

“No, you don’t,” she huffed. “He’s a weird man. He’s taking care of us and he’s....”

“You can say it, Mom. He’s gone.” My voice graveled, and I cleared my throat. “It’s something I have to face.” I was giving her a brave face, but inside, I died that night. There was no longer the Nadia I used to be, but this new one. It was no longer enough to have part of a man. I would give him nothing short of everything, and I could only expect the same in return.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I smiled when I checked.

Xander: See you in a few weeks!

Nadia: Can’t wait!

Xander understood my need to start my internship on my own, but he agreed to come hang out with me after I had settled into a routine.

I was about to put my phone away when a text came in from Tomas.

Tomas: Tell me you’re flying now.

Nadia: Tomorrow morning. Can’t wait to start. But I’m nervous. What about my French?

Tomas: You’re beautiful. People will forgive you of most things. Use it. Just get here.

I laughed and my mom scoffed when I showed her Tomas’s message. “Keep practicing your French.”

“I will every day.”

Mom and I reopened the suitcase and my carry-on. I had stacks of clothes, my passport, and exchanged money, all organized into separate bags. And it all hit me again. *I'm going to Paris.*

A timer went off on Mom's watch on her wrist. She had set up her own scheduled checks for Dad. "Do you want me to come back?"

I zipped my toiletry bag and put it back inside the suitcase. "No, Mom, I'm fine. I'll finish up."

"Okay. Come have dinner later." She closed the door.

A sliver of sunlight peeked through the heavy curtains on the three large windows across from the bed. I took a deep breath, went over, and eased them back. My focus was pulled toward the front gates, where paparazzi and news vans were lined up along the sidewalk. My breathing sped, and I gulped air to calm myself. *I'm safe. I'm strong. Nothing can harm me now.* I repeated the words Doctor Casey had taught me in one of our sessions until I steadied my breath and mind. My internship had finally arrived. And I had a chance at a fresh start, even if the world wasn't ready for me to do so.



CHAPTER 2

Mom hugged me tight early the next morning. “Call me when you land.”

“Thanks, Mom, I will.” She fanned her eyes to stop her tears when we parted. I gave her waist another squeeze. “I love you.”

I kissed Dad’s cheeks, and I noticed his hand trembling as he clasped mine. “Please be careful.”

“I’ll be fine. I promise.”

I gave them one last wave before walking through the back of the property to a private road. One of the security guards closed the trunk with my bag, and we headed for the airport.

My mind went over the last-minute checks. *Dictionary, check. Map, check.* When I finished my list, I moved on to common French phrases and practiced during the ride there. “*Merci, bonjour, excusez-moi, c’est combien.*” *Yep. Totally ready.*

I left the driver after checking in and headed towards security. The wall clock above displayed ten in the morning. *Two hours to wait.* Sighing, I stopped outside of an airport convenience shop. *Do I have enough books to read if I can’t fall asleep?* I scanned the selections and settled on a romance comedy book and a couple of fashion mags.

“O.m.g., I got the same things.” A woman stepped next to me, holding up her items to show me.

I politely smiled and nodded. “Oh, I see. Have a great day.”

“Wait. Aren’t you Nadia Sokol?” Her voice rose like she asked a

question, but it was clear from her expression she recognized me.

My smile tightened. “Yes. I have a flight if you’ll excuse me.”

“I’m Emily with New Style News. First, let me express my condolences for your loss.” She spoke rapidly as she followed me outside the store. “Can I please ask you a couple of questions?”

“No comment,” I mumbled and walked faster.

“But I haven’t even asked the question yet,” she quipped, her voice elevated.

My skin warmed as my eyes darted ahead. The security checkpoint had a long line, and I wouldn’t be able to avoid her there. I’d thought bringing security would bring attention to me. *How did the press know I would be here today? Why did I underestimate them? I’m such an idiot.*

“Look, I’m on your side. You had a miscarriage, and Paul Crane left you. Were you his sugar baby on Lollipop?”

“I wasn’t a sugar baby, and Paul wasn’t my sugar daddy,” I kept my tone even. “Now, would you please leave me alone?”

I turned to walk in the opposite direction, but she still followed, calling to me, “Your ex-dormmate, Sophie Wilks, shared in a recent interview that you started seeing Paul Crane after a Lollipop event in Manhattan. She claims you were seeking a sugar daddy to help you out financially.”

Bile rose in my throat. Sophie doing an interview hadn’t surprised me—she would do whatever she could to save herself. *But she wasn’t lying.*

I had gone to that Lollipop mixer to find someone to help my family. The public wouldn’t care about my desperation and reasons, only that I was searching for a rich guy to sponsor me. It had been one of my biggest regrets. But I couldn’t allow Emily to continue to push for a reaction. *But what can I do?*

I put on my sunglasses and joined the line as I tightened my hand on my bag. A photographer joined Emily, and even some of the passengers started to record me on their phones in case they were witnessing something useful. *How can I get away?* Sweat broke across my skin, and my pulse accelerated. I covered my mouth and pressed a fist to my chest.

“Nadia, I want your side of the story. Hey, are you okay?” Emily asked.

I’m fine. I’m strong.

“Nadia,” a familiar, deep voice called from behind me. I turned to find Laurence with two security guards. “Step back.” He motioned for security to surround me, and I swallowed hard. My hand shook as he clasped and

squeezed it.

“Sorry, I’m late. My flight from Germany had a delay.”

So, *Paul’s not in New York anymore*. “I...I didn’t know you were coming.” My eyes glimpsed Emily keeping pace to our right. I held up one of the magazines in front of my mouth. “How did you find out?”

“Your mom gave Gunnar your itinerary.”

Mom was cautious. I wasn’t upset, but that meant I wasn’t taking the flight I booked. “What about my flight? My bags?”

“I already have Nicole working to move your bags. If it’s not possible, André will pick them up in Paris. Don’t worry.”

Laurence and all of Paul’s teams all worked together to make his movements seamless, and now they were doing the same for me. “Thank you.”

We walked the rest of the way out of the airport in silence and into an SUV that another security guard held open for us.

“Paul sent me because—”

“I’d never turn you down if you offered to help. Thank you.”

There were times when I didn’t enjoy Paul’s lifestyle; however, I appreciated him sending Laurence to help me. He’d become my favorite uncle and friend. Still, I’d thought I wouldn’t need security anymore. “Will my life ever return to normal?”

“Probably not anytime soon, I’m afraid. It’s the lawsuit. The defense lawyers are trying to get the trial televised.”

My nerves spiked. “Is that possible?”

“Paul and his team of lawyers are fighting it. Don’t worry.”

I nodded, but my mind raced. *Television? It would be a circus. Maybe we should drop the lawsuit*. But I knew Paul wouldn’t. He’d never allow anyone to get away with hurting him.

“Is Paul on the plane?” I asked, even though I knew the answer.

“No, Nadia. I’m sorry. He’s working night and day to make sure you and his family are safe.”

My heart panged at the mention of his care and concern. But he hadn’t called me or I, him. He wanted space to think, but I worried about him. “How is he doing?”

“Paul’s sad, like you.”

“He doesn’t have to be,” I whispered and stared out the window.

“That, I agree with,” Laurence replied, and took a phone call.

We were still at the airport but heading down a path that I rode when I landed in Paul's private plane over a week ago. It bothered me that I wasted money on a flight I couldn't take. "I feel bad about the cost—"

"There's no price on your safety. Please put it out of your mind. You tried, Nadia, but there's too much going on here."

I bobbed my head and sighed. "I know, and I should have asked for help."

It was a costly lesson, and one I'd not soon forget.

The plane wasn't one I recognized, and I was relieved by that. Still, I couldn't help but think of us lost in each other, holding each other, making love....

"Can I suspect you're not just riding with me?" I asked Laurence as we boarded the plane. It was another Gulfstream jet with an interior that looked more like a comfortable living room with built-in L-shaped couches with pillows and reclining leather seats. I sat across from Laurence on one of the leather recliners.

"No, Nadia. I'm here for you."

"Do I still have my apartment?"

Laurence grinned. "You know us well. Yes, but I'm here to assess how secure it is for your safety. As you see, the press is still around. I'd need to be nearby to make sure you're safe."

"Very diplomatic. But how do I look, having a chaperone? Sorry, Laurence."

He shrugged. "Hey, I lived in Paris, know my way around most of the continent, and speak seven languages. And my wife says I'm a lot of fun."

I grinned and poked his arm. "You are, and I'm grateful you're here, but...."

"You want Paul, I know, and he should be here." He sighed. "Loving you has him scared stiff. Just...give him time."

My chest fluttered. *Paul loves me...but on the other hand, Laurence wants to fill me with hope.* "Well, if you're here, Laurence, then you're here for me, not him. No reports on anything I do, and I won't fight with you."

He grinned. "What do you mean, *anything*?"

"Maybe, I might...go out on a...a date," I stammered.

Dating wasn't something I was interested in doing, but if Paul was gone, he couldn't manage whatever I chose to do with my time.

Laurence shrugged. "Well, you're *both* single."

I grimaced. Of course, I didn't want Paul with anyone else but me. "Touché."

"The plane is ready for take-off." The hostess alerted us. We belted into the seats. The plane moved to taxi and soon, we lifted up into the sky. I stared out the window until the landscape turned to clouds. Dad and Mom were still down there, and I was going to be at least eleven hours away or more from Wisconsin.

"Are you still shaken up by the press?" Laurence asked.

"No, it's more...I'm worried about my parents."

"Your dad has the best in the business looking after him. He also has Agata, and she's a nurse, right?"

I nodded and sighed. "Yeah."

After ten minutes, the seat belt light went out.

"Paul has a surprise for you," Laurence announced.

"He does?" I raised my brows.

"Yes. It's in the suite in the back."

I puzzled, but a lightness filled my spirit. He stood, and I followed him down the aisle to the back of the plane.

There was a gift basket and flowers in the room. I picked up the voice language translator in the front. I put in the earbuds and turned to Laurence. "Can we test it?"

"Bonjour, mademoiselle," Laurence rattled off in smooth fluency.

Hello, miss. A voice played back.

I beamed and turned excitedly toward more of Paul's gifts. There were maps of France and a French phone with a list of numbers pre-programmed in it. He included a book with all the clothing shops and museums, a stack of sketchpads, and a new iPad since mine disappeared on the boat. Paul even had chocolates he only watched me enjoy once. *He never misses anything.* And it made my heart ache so profoundly that I couldn't keep myself upright. I sank onto the bed as hot tears fell from my eyes. Paul had the right intention, but it only stood out in its insignificance without him with me.

"Paul planned this for you a while ago," Laurence muttered soothingly. "He loves you so much, Nadia."

I stood and hugged him. "Thanks, Laurence."

"Come out if you'd like. We can share dinner and talk about Paris."

"I will."

Laurence left, giving me the privacy I needed to take in all that was laid

before me.

Oh, Paul...you and your gifts.

Seems like this is Paul's final gift goodbye.



CHAPTER 3

Tomas: We moved up the interns meet and greet. Our recent collaborator, Hayden Madsen, will be here today. Allons y!

A rush of adrenaline and excitement came over me as I read his message. Hayden Madsen was the most sought-after designer of the moment. I was wild about his bodycon dresses that fit like a glove, making all women look sexy, feminine, and beautiful. And I already couldn't wait to see where Tomas's direction would cross in Givenchy's sleek sophistication and elegance. Their premiere show was coming up and all of fashion news was keen about it. However, I had an appointment for my new place.

I turned to Laurence and shared Tomas's message. "Do you think the landlord will meet me this evening?"

"No, but don't you worry. I'll drop you off at Givenchy and keep your appointment." I hugged him and he laughed, patting my back. "See? A 'chaperone' isn't so bad after all."

"You're right. We're friends." I pulled my hair into a ponytail clip.

"We are," Laurence affirmed and winked at me. He took my blazer and closed the trunk of the car while I texted Tomas.

Nadia: On my way

I hesitated at the door and gazed over the tarmac, thinking of Paul taking my hand when we first arrived in Paris. He was larger than life. Gorgeous.

Formidable. Possessive. He'd been so attentive and passionate. I'd fallen so madly in love with him. *How could I not?*

A sharp pain pierced my chest as fear and utter loss spun inside me. He filled so much of my life that every moment without him felt like something was missing.

"Nadia, we should go," Laurence said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I nodded and climbed inside the car.

"How's your French coming along?" Laurence asked in an upbeat tone.

"*Comme ci, comme ca*. I do know the phrase, *je ne comprends pas*. I don't understand."

"That's one you'll definitely use," Laurence joked, and I smiled. He rattled off a few more common French phrases as we drove into Paris, the city of love and beauty. I was instantly enraptured by the view. There were a myriad of people moving past the historic monuments, churches, modern shops, crowded cafés, and bars. The parks were filled with groups of tourists and locals relaxing under a blanket of summer sun.

Laurence pulled up in front of Givenchy, and I gazed over at the sign emblazoned along the intricately twisted wrought iron, and my pulse quickened. *I'm at Givenchy in Paris!*

"My phone number is on the list in your phone. You can text me anytime, and I'll come for you. Now go blow them away."

"Thank you, Laurence." I squared my shoulders and walked inside the building. There, I was immediately approached by a woman with a blunt blonde bob and a wide grin.

"Nadia?"

"Yes." I took her outstretched hand.

"I'm Josephine, Tomas's assistant and supervisor of the internship. Tomas assured me you'd come right here when you arrived." Her French accent was heavy.

I grinned. "There is nothing more I want to do right now than stay busy."

She smiled. "Good. You'll find here things come together fast, and to be included, you must be ready at all times. Most of your fellow interns are here." She gave me a fob pass with my name on it. "Most doors are open during work hours; your key is for early access...we are giving you interns a chance to experience everything: design, styling, marketing, PR, even sustainability. We want you to immerse yourself in all that Givenchy delivers."

“Thank you, Josephine.”

We walked into the fashion studio I recognized from my first visit. Tomas was standing at the front with a small group around him. He was impeccably dressed in a gray tailored suit, and he had removed his facial hair, which made him look younger. Hayden stood almost his opposite in a black leather shirt and pants that were so tight, they left nothing to the imagination—not that I was imagining anything. His blue-eyed gaze suddenly met mine with a laser intensity that had me turning away.

“Don’t look at him. He hates stares,” a rich French voice whispered next to me. I glimpsed at the lanky male in a stylish patchwork jumpsuit.

“Thanks,” I whispered back.

I put on the headphones so I wouldn’t miss any of the translation, though Tomas added in English. “...Hayden is finalizing his show at The Carrousel du Louvre. The internship operates as work, so be prepared to do whatever is necessary. Ask questions, never assume. And when you find your strength, make it known. Now, introduce yourselves and get to work.”

“I’m Wyatt. *Enchanté.*” The lanky man turned and shook my hand. “You’re the American.”

“*Oui. Nadia. Enchantée.* I love your jumpsuit.”

“*Merci. C’est à moi; it’s mine. Totême?*” He touched the lapel on my blazer.

“No, it’s mine.” I smiled.

He raised his brows, grinning.

We both introduced ourselves to the other interns, Ellie, and Patrick, before Josephine returned to us. She placed a hand on my shoulder and Wyatt’s. “I’m sorry to cut your greetings short, but you’ll have plenty of time to meet again. Hayden offered a couple of interns to work on his model fit for the fashion show in a few weeks. Tomas recommended you two.” *Oh my God. This isn’t happening.*

Wyatt and I beamed at each other. “Let’s go.”

We followed Josephine over to Hayden, whose gaze was full of scrutiny.

Tomas placed his hands on our backs. “You’re familiar with Wyatt Dubois. This is Nadia Sokol from New York Design.”

I held out my hand, and he took it firmly. “*Bonjour, Monsieur Madsen. Ravi de vous rencontrer.*” I’d practiced on the formal ‘nice to meet you’ greeting in French.

“Nice to meet you,” Hayden replied abruptly in English. He gave me a

firm grip. His blue eyes scanned over the two of us and my pulse picked up. I'd chosen the suit Professor Elan had praised for its polished precision. Hayden spoke in French to Tomas, then turned to me. "I agreed to one intern. Wyatt."

My stomach took a dive, but I kept my smile. "Whatever works best, Monsieur Madsen. Merci."

Tomas shook his head behind me to let me know I gave the wrong answer. "If you only use one, the other will observe," he told Hayden.

Hayden didn't say a word and walked out of the studio.

Tomas squinted after him, but didn't comment. Instead he called over Josephine. "Please introduce Wyatt to Anne. Wyatt, *à bientôt*."

Wyatt left with Josephine, and Tomas turned his attention to me, frowning. "What was that, Nadia? You were offered to model fit for our Paris show." His annoyance sharpened every syllable.

"Hayden said he wanted to work with Wyatt." I lifted my shoulders. "I thought malleable worked better."

"Not here. Be firm and direct. *Never* let anyone exclude you from an opportunity, *ever*."

My face warmed. "Sorry, Tomas. I'll do better."

I hated disappointing Tomas right out the gate, but he was right. The internship could be career-making, and I couldn't afford to be sidelined.

His face broke into a wide grin. "You will, and that's the end of it." He sighed and greeted me with kisses on both my cheeks. "I'm off the clock now, so I'm allowed to play favorites. I'm happy you're here. What are you wearing?" He scrutinized like Professor Elan did when she critiqued. "You made it."

I nodded.

"*Ouah*. It's cool. Show it off." He had me take off the blazer, and looked over my wide-leg slacks. "Hmmm."

I did a playful spin and flipped the blazer over my shoulder.

Tomas laughed. "You're so lovely, Nadia. Never change."

Hayden had reappeared and Tomas exhaled but held up his hand to speak with him in French. "Excuse."

I took the break to put my blazer back on and look around the studio. Most were leaving for the day, but the workstations held fabrics and mannequins were in various states of dress. My pulse raced with excitement.

"Nadia. Let's go." Tomas came over and linked arms with me and we

headed towards the exit. I spared a glance over my shoulder at Hayden. Josephine stood next to him holding up leather bags, but his intense focus was unabashed on us.

“He’s not invited,” Tomas joked.

I turned my head back and laughed.

We headed toward Café Renault. Tomas greeted his cousin Elise that was now working there. She gave us a seat outside. He lit a cigarette while I texted Laurence.

Nadia: At Renault’s with Tomas

Laurence: Good. I’m hungry. I’ll be there soon.

Tomas didn’t take a drag. “I’m giving them up again.”

“Good for you.” I smiled, and Elise brought us coffee. “Thank you.”

Tomas grinned. “It’s good you’re here. Paris suits you better.”

“Does it? But you barely saw me in New York City.” I stirred in sugar.

“Yes, that was fun. Cecil and I are still amused by it all.”

Tomas and Cecil had been at my place when Sophie visited and witnessed her bending over naked in front of Paul. She’d behaved awfully, but I had never thought she hated me. *Until the boat.*

“Your smile is gone. I didn’t mean what happened at your home. Dad loved yelling at the chefs. He’s already missing the show.”

I swallowed. “I’m fine...old memories.”

“Okay.” He took a sip of coffee. “So, what do you think of Hayden?”

I shrugged. *Kind of an asshole.* “I love his designs.”

Tomas’s grin went from coy to playful. “Are you attracted?”

I cringed. “No.”

He lifted his brow. “Why not? He’s an ex-super model. Good-looking and very sexual.”

My mouth dropped open. “How do you know?”

“No secrets stay hidden.” Tomas grinned.

My brows furrowed. “But we work together.”

Tomas shrugged. “So?”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t want him or anyone else. Paul and I...I don’t know.” I stared at my cup. *Yes, you do. He left.*

“Well, if Paul’s still with you, he should come and satisfy you sexually. You look sad; sex will cheer you up. Tell him if he doesn’t, you’ll take a lover.”

“Threaten him with unfaithfulness to get him to return to me? Ha. I would never.” I scoffed.

“Why not? It’s just for sex, not love. And if you get back together, he can’t hold it against you.”

“I can’t tell him that...” *Can I? Paul, you better come here and fuck me now or else.* What would he do? *He’d show up, strip me, strap me down to a bed and fuck me for hours.* My skin tingled and heated. *Shit.*

“You’re blushing and smiling. See? Do it. He won’t refuse.”

I grinned, letting the fantasy of Paul showing up to have sex with me go for a few moments. I kind of liked the idea, but touching him, especially knowing I couldn’t keep him, would do more damage to my well-being. “As much as I would love it, it would only complicate things. It would never work.”

His smile turned impish. “It does.”

I smirked. “And you speak from experience?”

He put down the cup of his coffee. “Yes, I do. When Cecil and I split up while we were dating, we still had sex. Then she realized she was wrong, and we got married. Oh, and by the way, Cecil would love for you to visit us at our home in Saint-Tropez when it’s all done.”

I beamed at him. “I’d love to go.”

“If we go out there, you can definitely find a lover for the night.” We both laughed. “See? You like it. This is your time. Enjoy yourself.”

“I am, but I can’t be with anyone else when I still love Paul.” I stared down at my trembling hands.

“Then find out what he is too afraid to ask you for. Only fear would keep a man away from the woman he loves.”

I didn’t believe it to be so. “Paul knows I’d never deny him anything.”

Tomas leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You’re in love right now, but with time, it will get easier.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. “Thanks...merci.”

“Good. *Alors*, let me tell you what you need to know about the fashion shows.” Tomas went over the way the shows run, and they were similar to what we did in New York—just with more press to make me even more nervous. The foreign press was less interested, but if I increased my public profile in Paris, would that change?

“The fashion show will be over quickly, and you’ll be exhausted.”

“And I’ve got to get up to start the internship tomorrow at eight a.m.”

“Yes, you do,” Tomas affirmed. He had the interns on a tight schedule, with much practice in sewing, design, and observation, as well as administrative needs around Paris. We wouldn’t have much downtime, and I was happy about it.

“Lose yourself, Nadia. I want you to not hold back. You work for it, and you can live the dream.”

I can live the dream. It already feels as though I am.

The possibilities in Paris could lead to opportunities in my future. But with everything else going on in my life was I up for the challenge?



CHAPTER 4

Laurence arrived at Renault's, and Tomas rose and kissed my cheeks. "*Nadia, à bientôt.*" He shook Laurence's hand before he sat down. Elise came and cleared the table before handing us dinner menus.

"Merci," I said to her. "So, how was the apartment?"

He wrinkled his nose and shrugged. "It was cozy, but it was a walk-up on a dead-end street. If you ran into paparazzi there, you wouldn't be able to get away, and with the lawsuit, we need to be careful. We can't depend on social reason when people are faced with losing everything."

I understood what Laurence meant. The press had become relentless with what had happened on the yacht. Paul and his team had worked overtime to protect our family, but the media never stopped prying. Mainly because it prompted a fifty-million-dollar lawsuit from the mysterious and private Paul Crane. My miscarriage was something I wanted to put behind me, but everywhere I turned back home, I was constantly reminded of the event. *Why couldn't the press focus on the fact that Trevor had disappeared and Landon's pending criminal charges?* It didn't seem particularly fair that the press kept connecting their losses to me.

"But I signed an agreement."

"I've settled it. Trust me, it's fine."

I did trust Laurence, and was so thankful that he was here, helping me navigate Paris.

"I...I can't stay at the duplex," I whispered.

“I didn’t think you’d want to, so I arranged one of the other houses here. It’s a bit more formal, but it’s not too far from your internship and more centrally located. Movers are already transporting the trunks you sent ahead of time.”

“Thank you so much, Laurence.”

“You’re welcome.”

Elise returned, and we both ordered the *sole meunière*. A few minutes later, she brought us warm bread.

“Paul’s in Europe?”

“He’s performing in Germany and working at a studio there. He, like you, needed a break from the US press.”

I nodded.

“You can call him, you know. Paul would still love to hear from you.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m not the one who left. He wants to talk, he should call.”

“You’re both stubborn. So tell me about your first day.”

Laurence and I ate too much as we went over everything I experienced during my brief time at Givenchy. I also knew he would tell Paul everything. And truth be told, I wanted him to know.

Afterward, we rode to the new place in Paris. Unlike the duplex we stayed in the first time, the house had mostly baroque furnishings and oil paintings on the walls. The biggest similarity was a baby grand piano in the living room. My heart contracted, knowing Paul would have played a song. It was his way of starting in a new place. I walked over and sat on the bench and was right back on that stage in Rome. That night, he told the world I brought him back to life....

“Nadia, come meet everyone.”

Laurence introduced me to the housekeepers, cooks, and security before I went to the bedroom, which had a large, four-poster bed with white embroidered linens. This room, like the duplex, had a balcony but with bakery doors that easily opened to bistro-styled seating. I leaned on the railing and gazed out as the night breeze cooled my skin. There was nothing like Paris at night. Its shimmering lights romanced dreams.

My clothes were already unpacked and hanging in the closets, even the things I sent ahead to Paris. I opened Paul’s wardrobes. Mostly empty. Still, I took one of his shirts down and inhaled. *Fresh linen*. I deflated. Nothing smelled of his rich cologne or his natural scent.

I missed his smell, his warmth, his touch. *Him.*

Still, I showered and put the shirt on in some sad hope of feeling like he was here with me.

I sent messages to Mom and Xander sharing a little update on my first day, including the possible fashion show. A few minutes after, Xander called. “Why are you at home?”

Xander rarely returned to his place before midnight.

“I have to work early tomorrow.” I went to the closet again and picked out a pants suit.

“Okay. But did they mention today about the upcoming Paris show? Are you working on it?”

I hesitated. “Not exactly.”

“Tell me everything.”

So I did.

As I got to the end of the story, Xander tutted. “Tomas is right. Hayden has no right to keep you back.”

I sighed and sat back on the bed. “He has an ego for sure.”

“Yeah, but he’s got the looks to back it up. I mean damn. Was it camera tricks or was he hot as hell?”

“I didn’t notice.” I bit my lip.

“Sure you didn’t. What did he have on?”

“Club clothes...very tight leathers.”

“Oh, so you did notice that. Tight makes it all right. He can definitely get it.”

“Not from me. I’m not interested in the slightest.” I added base to my tone.

“Ohh, the lady doth protest, but I get why you’re off him. Hayden was rude to you or maybe that’s a culture thing. Go back and force yourself to get noticed. That’s what I’d do. Have you heard from Paul?” he asked in a gentle tone.

“No. I...I haven’t,” I rasped.

“Give him some time. He’s still fussing, so he’s not completely gone.”

That was what I thought, but Paul had always said he’d take care of me. He’d do it even if we weren’t together.

“Xander, are you ready?” A loud voice called from nearby.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“A friend. Gotta go. I’ll watch the show online. Have fun. Talk to you

later.” He hurried off the line, and I stared at the phone. I know he ended things with Paola, and they were friends. Was he rebounding already?

I couldn’t sleep, so I wrote a brief report for Professor Elan. I planned to send updates every week on the experience of the internship. A message was there from Doctor Casey.

Nadia,

I’m happy you agreed to work with me. There’s still much to be done, and we both want you healthy again. I want to know if you’re practicing your mindfulness during the times you feel panic. Know you’re not alone, and I’m here anytime you feel stuck.

Take care and talk to you soon or write me anytime,

Doctor Casey

I swallowed hard. The woman who had turned me down for surrogacy had become my biggest confidante. She’d also read me well. Back then, I lacked maturity and life experience. There was so much of myself I’d only begun to know and process. She called to listen, and that was what she did. Before I knew it, she had my confidence, and I appreciated her advice. I wrote back.

Doctor Casey,

I’m trying as you told me to do. Every day. I refocus on what I sense and feel in the moments I feel anxious. Recently, I had some rough spots, but I’ve got the internship to keep me busy. I’ll keep you updated.

Thank you,

Nadia

Before I closed the computer, I saw Paul’s name on an online news article. He had created a new scholarship for students at the New York Design School. I scanned over the requirements listed and read the quote from him: “I was inspired by someone dear to me who struggled financially. Most artists are forced to give up their dreams, and I want students to get a chance to live theirs.”

My chest warmed. It was something I’d wished to do in the future. I read on.

Paul Crane turned down Landon Styles' settlement request in his steep, fifty-million-dollar lawsuit. Criminal filings are ongoing and have extended to the Department of Justice with the alleged human trafficking investigation of Mr. Styles' Sugar Cookie dating service, which has since closed. Trevor Livingston's lawyers state he had planned business in Cyprus, but did not disclose when he will return to the United States.

Ms. Isabelle Talbot, a former student at New York Design School, who was one of the party organizers that led to the incident with Ms. Sokol, has since fully cooperated with her lawyers on all proceedings.

Isabelle was trying to save her reputation. But what else did she know? Gunnar hadn't shared anything yet, but that was probably because of Paul. He would want me to focus on my internship. However, I didn't want to be kept in the dark. I texted Gunnar.

Nadia: Please keep me updated with the cases.

Surprisingly, he answered right away.

Gunnar: Aren't you interning? Fine. You ask, I deliver.

I smiled at his message and was about to close my email when an alert came in about Paul. It was a photo of him in front of a gate...and he wasn't alone. There was a willowy woman with a head full of blonde curls flowing over her narrow shoulders in a stylish, strapless mini dress and heeled boots standing close behind him.

Frolicking with Fraulein in Berlin: Heiress ex Ingrid Ludwig joins Brooding Billionaire Crane in steamy, late-night sessions. How the wealthy switch partners so quickly. Despite his amorous announcements about wanting to show "his Nadia" Rome, the talented pianist and composer seems to have traded up. That fizzled out as fast as expected.

Photo: Paul Crane with Ingrid Ludwig photographed outside his home studio in Berlin, Germany, at two a.m.

There was also a smaller photo next to it of Ingrid with Dani Crane, shopping together in Manhattan last year. It was hard to miss the exuberant smile on Paul's mother's face.

On the other hand, the press did get things wrong, and the tabloids in particular were always leaning toward sensationalism. *Paul loves me...*

Still, nagging thoughts filled my mind. How insatiable of a lover he was.

How we started as a sexual agreement. Would he take someone else so soon?
No. But she's not just anyone, she's one of his exes.

I scowled at her photo. Her focus was directed at him. *Maybe she came to "comfort" him in his distress?* I huffed and shut down the computer.

No matter what I read into it, the truth was Paul wasn't alone. And I couldn't shake that thought, even as I rose at dawn's light.



CHAPTER 5

My alarm beeped on the nightstand, and I sat up with a start. First official day at Givenchy. I wasn't sure of what was to come. Only that I had to be ready for anything and everything.

I took a quick shower and decided on a pantsuit and silk shirt. My heeled boots were on before I headed downstairs. To my surprise, Laurence was already in the dining room reading a book.

My lips parted. "You already know my schedule?"

He gave me a sheepish grin and shrugged. "In New York, you always started early."

"Should we leave?"

"It's close. Eat something. It's never good to start anything hungry."

My mind raced and nerves tumbled in my stomach with the uneasiness of first days. But I nibbled on a croissant and fruit bowl before we left.

The drive to Givenchy was only ten minutes, leaving me no time to relax.

"Go knock them dead," Laurence told me and handed me my portfolio on the sidewalk.

"I'll try my best." I squeezed his arm then walked towards the front door, joining the other staff heading inside. When it was my turn, I reached for the handle, but another hand reached it first. It was a man's hand that had a few rings on it that I recognized from yesterday. Hayden Madsen.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Madsen."

"Bonjour, Nadia. Interns start early?" he quipped in his rich, French

accent, holding the door open with a sweeping gesture. His style today was an open blazer and fitted V-neck T-shirt that molded to his strong upper body.

My lip quirked up at the corner. “I suppose I do. Thank you.”

“*En français*,” he reminded me in a teasing tone.

“*J’imagine que oui*. Merci,” I drawled, hoping I pronounced it right.

He only stared with an intense concentration that sent my pulse racing. Was he waiting for something? *More bad French?*

“*Bonne journée*, have a good day.” I turned to go, but his hand closed on my arm. “Wait.”

“*Oui?*” I asked.

“Stop by my office before you leave today.” He switched back to English. “I need your measurements.”

The internship form had included that we might need to assist the designers by trying on the clothes. Since Hayden used all body types from his last shows I’d seen online, it wasn’t something completely unexpected. Still, I offered. “I have my measurements from a fitting I had done fairly recent—”

“I do my own.” He lifted his chin. “So, you will come to my office, please.” His polite request took off the edge of his demand. He gestured towards the corridor and what I suspected was his office.

“Merci, Hayden. I’ll stop by.” I waved and hurried towards the main studio. To my relief, he didn’t follow. I scolded myself. I had to get over his star power. *He’s another designer, and I’m here to learn from him. That’s it.*

I spotted my name at a station near the door, right across from Wyatt, who was already there. “*Café?*” he asked, pointing at his cup.

“*Oui*,” I agreed, and he waited as I put away my things. Then we headed down the other side of the studio to a back corridor that housed the kitchen. There was an espresso maker on one of the long counters. Wyatt ground the beans, and I collected the milk and cups from a cabinet above.

“What do you think they will have us work on?” I asked him.

“If it’s anything like my last internship, work and running errands.” His smile showed dimples.

I lifted my shoulder. “I don’t mind an errand or two.”

“It’s fine when you’re not so busy, but when you are....” He snorted and shook his head.

“But you’re excited to be here in Paris?”

I nodded. “Yes. I am. I’ve only visited here before.”

“So Paris is new for you. But I agree staying busy is better than going home to an empty apartment.” He gazed off and pushed his hand back through his curls. “My boyfriend is gone.”

“Mine too,” I whispered.

“Then, we’re not alone.” He placed his arm around my shoulder and squeezed it, and a bit of the weight lifted. “Merci, I needed that.”

He heated our milks. “I studied in New York at Parson’s a few years back.”

“How did you find it?” I spoke above the noise and pushed the espresso button on the machine.

“Hard, with the language, but a lot of fun, though a bit lonely at first since I didn’t know anyone.”

“I have no family here, and I have no idea how to spend my time.”

“I’ll show you around, yes?” His brows rose.

I grinned at him. “I’d love that.” He took out his phone, and we exchanged numbers.

“I’m going to pick up fabric after work. Would you like to come?”

I nodded. “I’d love to.”

“Bonjour,” Josephine sang out as she walked in with an iPad in hand. “Good, you’re both here. We have so much for you to do.”

We returned to the studio, which was already filled with people chatting and working. The creative energy was a fragrant aroma that I basked in every second. And I could have pinched myself, but I didn’t have time. I quickly put on my translator and rejoined them at a workstation, where a male designer talked to his team. He introduced himself as Philippe.

“Tomas already shared your work with us.” He showed us the line of ready-to-wear he was working on for the winter collection. “Nadia, you’re going to work on similar patterns with samples. Wyatt, you’ll work on the winter textiles and design. They are almost final, but Tomas wants a fresh perspective. Come back over to see me.”

I thanked him and was about to return to my desk when Josephine lightly tapped me on the shoulder. “No, that’s just for Philippe. We have more for you to do.”

She brought us over to three more design stations to add our names to the schedule for assembling accessories, polishing their samples, and helping with showroom set ups. We had fabric to collect and some from shops around Paris. I could barely keep up with the notes and typed on my iPad. *All this for*

a first day?

“I’m here to help. Any questions?” Josephine asked us.

“Not at the moment. Merci beaucoup,” I said to her in an upbeat tone.

“Ah, you thank me now, but....” Josephine didn’t finish since she was called over to help someone else. I returned to Philippe. The collection he showed us had a spark of something new, but I could see the historical tones of the Givenchy house intermixed. Casual chic. Elegant. After studying his work and the patterns and forms he wanted, he gave me a list of where to find his files.

Philippe was patient, but not everyone. I was given a stick diagram to explain what to do from some of the designers. And when I asked for more explanation, the response was a dismissive wave. Deflated, I sat down at my station. The translator was helping, but it didn’t pick up quick voice transitions and slang.

Wyatt came over and sat with me. “How about we go back over, and I’ll have the designers to slow down their assignments. I’ll also translate to help you.”

I glanced over at his seat across from me. He had fabrics and patterns, his computer running. “But you have work.”

“We work as a team.” He winked at me. “Come.”

Wyatt brought me back over to each of the workstations. He approached each person directly, but was kind and firm. “You will need to explain, and I’ll help.”

Every team member went over what they wanted me to do and it became much clearer. Their samples were simplistic and were of the level of a skills test. However, I thanked them with much excitement and enthusiasm. When we were done, I reached to hug Wyatt, but hesitated.

“You’re a hugger. It’s no problem.” He returned my hug and kissed my cheek. “That’s what we do.”

“Sorry to keep you from your work.”

“Not at all. I speak English; that is why Tomas teamed us up.”

Knowing Tomas, he chose Wyatt because he not only understood English, but was compassionate. “Merci.”

Then I was off. My computer and sketch pad were open, and I got lost in creating sample textile patterns. We went together to collect fabric from a department and went back over the designs and patterns. My nerves spiked as I cut and pinned the fabric following the instruction. Before I knew it, three

hours had passed. I felt exhilarated. Even though it was so taxing, especially with the language barrier, it was a sensational environment. *I am so lucky.*

“Bonjour, Nadia.” A smiling Josephine appeared again by my seat. She touched the mannequin and looked over the sketches. I held my breath.

“Hmmm...” Her brows pinched at the fabric. She went over the pattern and my progress again. “Hmmm.” She gave me a nod, and I let go of the breath I held in.

Josephine next went over to Wyatt and checked his work. “*C’est du bon boulot.*” My translator told me it meant, “It’s good work.” She left, and I went over my work again. However, I couldn’t find any issue.

“Wyatt?” I asked him and he came over and checked.

“It’s good, Nadia.” He smiled. “It’s their test to see where they can help you improve your work. Don’t worry.”

Wyatt was right. My focus went to work on the samples, just as I would’ve done for my own. I worked on following their briefs to the letter, and with a few more questions and Wyatt’s help, I made some progress on their designs. After a while, Josephine returned.

“Tomas would like a meeting with you now.”

We followed her to Tomas’s office and she left. Once there, Tomas pulled me aside and squeezed my hand. “Bonjour. You look lovely today. And you’re way too joyful with all the work you’ve been handed.”

I grinned. “I’m too excited to be anything less.”

“I see.” He gestured for us to follow him. “I know you have work, but you also have internship work. Now, let me show you what you will need to do.” We followed him to his office, and I danced inside, seeing what he had planned for the spring. There were brocaded sleek and tiered evening dresses, tailored wool, and leather three-piece suits, modified, Venus-styled bodysuits paired with mixed fabric and embroidered pencil skirts. His vision sent my heart racing. “Oh, Tomas, it’s perfection.”

He grinned at me. “It is, but I want you to create something that will fit in seamlessly with what we have. After, I’ll give you advice on what you need to do to make it better. And you look like you want to hug me, Nadia.”

“I do. I’m so excited.”

He squeezed my hand. “I’ll take a kiss. Off you go.”

I kissed Tomas’s cheek, and we walked outside his office.

Wyatt stopped me on the way back to our workstation. “How about I show you my favorite café? It’s too crowded, the service is bad, but I love the

espresso there.”

I laughed. “What a ringing endorsement. Sure. Let’s go.”

Wyatt and I left the building. I followed him as we headed down a few avenues in a zig-zag pattern, and I was sure I’d never find Givenchy again. While waiting for a car to pass, I glanced over at an alley and froze. A pretty brunette went into Hayden’s arms. He grasped her hair and tipped it back before his lips pressed to her mouth. Her arms went around his waist and his hands moved down to lift the end of her mini dress and squeezed her bare buttocks!

“Nadia?” Wyatt’s tone gave me the impression he tried to get my attention more than once. He touched my chin to let me know my mouth was hanging open.

“Oh, sorry.” My skin flushed and tingled.

“If you stop to see a kiss in Paris, you’ll never get anything done.” His tone held amusement.

“Yeah...uhm, okay.” I turned my head slowly and didn’t miss Hayden’s hand moving between her thighs. *Am I offended? No. How can I be when I know what it’s like to be wanted so much that it didn’t matter where you are?* Sighing, I followed Wyatt and held up Euros to pay for the both of us. “My treat.”

“Merci,” Wyatt said, and we took sips as we walked back to the office.

“I’ll be right back,” Wyatt told me, and we stopped outside a bookshop. A magazine left on an empty table teetered on the edge, and I went over and moved it to the center and stopped. There was a photo of Paul with Ingrid. This time leaving his concert together with Ben. Knots twisted my stomach, but I plastered on a smile when Wyatt returned and we left for the office. I merely glanced, but the image had already imprinted.

Paul. Smiling. Happy.

Has he forgotten all about me?



CHAPTER 6

I followed Wyatt back to my station and was stopped at the desk. Laurence had left the recorder for me and a note.

Laurence: I can drive you both or pick you up. Please text me where you'll be for your safety. Have fun.

I smiled at the message and caught up to Wyatt as we were pulled into a design meeting. The designers presented what they discussed with us individually when we met with them. The translator helped, but I could see the discussions moving faster than I could follow. I held up my hand. “*Je ne comprends pas, peux-tu parler plus lentement s’il te plaît.*” *I don’t understand, can you speak slower please?* My requests weren’t met with all positive responses, but I remained smiling, firm and kind.

When it was time to go, I packed up everything to work on at home, along with my recordings and written notes.

“You’re coming back tomorrow,” Wyatt pointed out.

“Yes, but I need to work on it.”

I planned to go over their briefs and the recordings. Research the designers work again, and send a message to Professor Elan for further ideas. If it wasn’t too late, I’d go over what I need for the studio in the house. I closed my bag and tensed. *Hayden, I forgot.*

“Monsieur Madsen asked me to stop at his office for measurements. I can get us a ride to the fabric shop if that’s okay with you. Or will it be too late?”

Wyatt checked his watch. “*Pas de souci.* No problem.”

I sent a text to Laurence to pick us up. Wyatt showed me into Hayden's showroom. He was on a call, but squinted at us, and waved his hand for us to wait for him to end. After another five minutes, he did.

"Bonjour, Nadia. Wyatt?" He spoke to him rapidly in French, and I heard Wyatt explain we were leaving together tonight. Hayden went over to his workstation and opened a drawer, collecting a tape measure. "We have bodysuits. Wyatt will get it for you."

Wyatt collected the garment and handed it to me. Then I left and changed in the bathroom. After a few minutes, I returned to the studio.

Hayden's eyes roamed freely over every inch of my body in the spandex. I ran my hands down my arms and my cheeks warmed. He gestured for me to stand in front of a floor-length mirror. "Wyatt, since you are here, you can take down the measurements."

He approached and started behind me, pressing the tape against my shoulders.

I went rigid.

He let out a huff. "Turn."

I faced him and shifted on my feet.

His brows pulled together. "Are you nervous?"

"Uhm...no...maybe a little," I murmured.

"You can be nervous, but I'm professional. So, stop being odd, *d'accord?*" His tone was clipped.

I glanced at Wyatt, and he winked at me. And I steadied my body and breath.

Hayden took the tape and measured the length of my back, arms, legs, and shoulders. Up close, I could see he had the handsome face of a model, nicely shaped brows, sculpted cheekbones, and a square jaw. We were also close enough that I could smell his cologne and the faint scent of a flowery bouquet that must have been from the woman I saw him kissing. The memory surfaced of his hands moving between her thighs. He slowed his hands as he carefully moved the measuring tape over my breasts, his hand near my nipple. It hardened. I tensed and turned my head, willing him to move on and he did. But Hayden didn't react at all. His measurement tape moved to my hips and continued to call the numbers to Wyatt without a pause. He finished up with my legs and rubbed his square jaw. "Hmmm. *Bien. Merci, Nadia. Wyatt.*"

"Merci," I echoed. I picked up my bag, but they both frowned.

Wyatt wrinkled his nose. “You can’t wear that out in public.”

Hayden’s expression was equally incredulous.

I was going to put my blazer over it. Still, I changed back into my clothes. They were speaking French when I walked up.

“Merci, Nadia. I’m leaving. Goodnight,” Hayden told us and picked up a helmet.

We walked with him to the front of the building and once outside, we saw the brunette from the street leaning against a Vespa out front. Hayden headed over, and she immediately went into his arms for a kiss.

“Hayden is up to his usual.” Wyatt’s tone held amusement.

“She’s pretty. Maybe they’re in love.”

Wyatt scoffed. “In love? Not at all. I was talking about you.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He took your measurements.”

I lifted my shoulders. “I took plenty of measurements in college. Hayden told me he takes his personally.”

Wyatt grinned broadly. “*Non*, Josephine took our measurements. Hayden doing it after work. I don’t think he expected me to be there.”

I lowered my brows. “But he has a woman waiting on the street.”

“That doesn’t mean anything...be attentive, Nadia. Hayden loves beautiful women. You will be on his Vespa next.”

“No way.” I playfully swatted his arm and Wyatt laughed.

Laurence pulled up and climbed out of the Mercedes.

I greeted him warmly and introduced them. Wyatt climbed in first, and I was about to climb in, but hesitated. My focus went to Hayden and his Vespa. Our eyes connected, and if I hadn’t known better, I’d say he waited for me to look at him.

Hayden seemed curious.

But I looked too. So what does that say about me?



Mom had left a text message.

Mom: I told Gunnar I was worried about you at the airport. He must

have organized for Laurence to pick you up. I hope that was okay. We're fine here. We love you. Enjoy Paris.

I admonished myself for not sending a message earlier. A quick check of the time, and it was Dad's physical therapy time. I wrote back.

Nadia: Sorry I didn't update you. The press was there and aggressive. I'm glad Laurence came, so thank you and don't worry. I love you. Tell Dad I'm fine and miss you both. TTYS.

Laurence had taken me to shops for fabric before, but Wyatt had different ideas. He spoke with Laurence in French and directed him to Montmartre. I could see the Moulin Rouge and knew I'd been nearby before. The area had beautiful, picturesque stone shops with decorative signage, along with cobblestone pavements that made us tourists lose our heads every time. My gaze rose to the top of the hill at the Basilica of Sacre-Coeur, the big white church. Its dome was a beacon of light even in the last rays of sunlight. As the late summer sky was now edged with dark hues, bringing on the night.

Wyatt touched my arm. "The fabric shops I'm showing you are not high end, but it's a good place to find something unique that may become the next trend." We rode along the Boulevard de Clichy, where there were many retail shops, street painters, restaurants, cheese, chocolate, wine, and museums. I was in another level of heaven. There were also a few sex shops. *Something I miss from having it so good.*

We left the car and went into the first store. It instantly reminded me of my fabric hunting when I started at New York School of Design. And like before, the discount fabric shop was a gold mine. Wyatt was well esteemed in textiles and construction. He'd been given much more complex work to do, which led me to believe he'd been working for a while. I found textures, patterns, and colors that filled my head with ideas. We both had a few bags before we caught up with Laurence again a few blocks over.

"How long have you been designing?" I asked.

"Two years professionally. I was a model, like Hayden. Designing was a natural step." His phone went off. "It's Josephine. We are all meeting up for dinner with Ellie and Patrick." It was close to ten.

I scrunched up my face. "Isn't it quite late?"

He grinned. "Not at all. It's a good time to eat."

I wanted to work on some of the work they handed out for us today. "Maybe another time."

“If you change your mind.” He gave me the address.

Laurence took us to Wyatt’s apartment building. It was one with door-sized windows that I’d admired online and so much like the one I had chosen for myself.

He kissed my cheeks. “Hope to see you later.”

Laurence and I rode back to the house, and along the way I had new doubts. Was I even qualified to get such a prestigious opportunity? *I can barely speak French. I’ve only one year of design under my belt...*

“Nadia, are you going to dinner?” Laurence interrupted my thoughts. He’d parked, and I hadn’t gotten out of the car.

“Not tonight. I’ve a lot of work to do.”

“Work already? You just arrived.”

I stood by him and the open trunk. “If I do go out, what will you do?” I hated the idea of Laurence all alone.

“I have a social life and friends here too, Nadia.” He laughed and threw a pretend scarf over his shoulder. “You are free to enjoy yourself. In fact, I insist.”

Maybe, but when I reached the studio, and took out my bags, I became lost in work. I sent a message to Professor Elan and asked her about some of my ideas for feedback. By the time I finished listening to French phrases, working on patterns, and sewing, it was almost midnight. I smiled and went to the kitchen and made an espresso. *Just like college.*



“Bonjour.” I sang out with a smile and kissed Wyatt’s cheeks.

The first week at Givenchy was hard, but now, after almost finishing the second, I set up a breakfast meeting on my own. As for my designs, my test samples from the lead designers were returned with no more than five changes. I hated having to think before I spoke, but hearing French all the time was becoming less jarring.

“Nadia.” Tomas appeared and called over to me. I smiled at him and followed him back to his office.

“Oui?” I asked, and I took the seat across from his desk. He blew out his

breath, and I tensed.

“What have you done these past two weeks?”

“I...I worked on Philippe’s textiles, and Anne’s samples. I collected their fabrics, cut the materials, sewed. I helped them assemble accessories for the clothes being sent to the photo shoot. I handed in your first assignment....”

“You did,” he acknowledged. “Did you go to lunch with the team?”

“Uhm, no. It took too much time out of the day.” I chewed my lip.

He crossed his arms. “What did you do on your weekends?”

“I came here and used my pass to get a few things—”

“Yes, you did. You work all day. Every day. It’s unnatural.” He sighed. “Givenchy is not college. Fashion isn’t just what you do in here. It’s out there.” He gestured towards his large window. “We have work hours for work. I’m disappointed you’re not taking advantage of Paris.”

I deflated and lowered my head. “I’m very sorry, Tomas. I’ll...I’ll do better.”

“No, Nadia,” He came around the desk and took my hands. “I’m not mad. I love your hard work. We all do. My designers already know you are eager to do whatever they ask, and they love it.”

“But you don’t, Tomas?”

“I don’t. Therefore, I’m removing some of your work—”

“No, please don’t, Tomas,” I begged. I frowned and shook my head.

He squeezed my hands. “This is not a punishment, Nadia. To understand Paris, you need to immerse yourself in Paris. That’s your assignment. I want you to end your days at 13h, 1 p.m. You’ll then go out and explore. I want a list of fashion trends you see, so it is still work. This is an artist’s haven. See a play, a band, a movie, something. No more overworking.” He was kind, but also resolved.

I hunched my shoulders. “Oui. Merci, Tomas.”

He kissed my cheeks. “Oh, Nadia.” He squeezed my shoulders. “You will endure.”

I returned to my workstation, and Hayden was leafing through my sketches and looking over the garments I had on the mannequin. It was as intimate as him taking my measurements.

I cleared my throat, but he didn’t stop looking at my work. “Bonjour. *Comment je peux vous aider*, Monsieur Madsen?”

He let out a laugh. “That sounded...almost not bad. *Non*, there is nothing I need your help with.” His tone sounded almost not insulting. “You can join

Wyatt in the model fitting.”

I had only seen him a few times since he took my measurements. It was mostly when I arrived in the morning with Laurence. Though it surprised me that he came to invite me personally. “*Merci, Monsieur Madsen.*”

“Call me Hayden.”

Wyatt appeared. “*Bonjour.*”

“*Bonjour, Wyatt. Where are the best places to people watch?*” I asked him.

“I’ll show you,” Hayden answered.

“That’s very kind of you...Hayden, but I think the assignment was for me to go alone.”

He jutted his chin. “*Non.* Tomas and I talked about it. We agree you’re not seeing Paris. You’re still in New York City in your head. I will show you how to see Paris.”

My mouth dropped open. I hadn’t known Hayden spoke with Tomas about me. Was he the one that suggested I spend time outside of the office? Going with him sounded more like an instructional assignment. Tomas also said I had to relax. However, I had no right to refuse. Though I didn’t understand someone of his caliber taking time out of his day to give me lessons. “*Oui. Merci.*”

“13h. Out front.”

“The Vespa?” I tried to keep the excitement out of my voice. But failed because I couldn’t stop my smile.

His expression brightened. “Yes...hmm.” He scanned me from head to toe. “Your dress is nice. A higher heel would have worked better. But for today, you need shoes you can walk in with leisure.”

I blinked. *Thanks for the critique.* I had higher heels, but I didn’t want to risk falling on the cobble streets if I was sent out. “I’ll change.”

“No bodysuit.” His lips twitched, and he walked off.

I scrunched up my face, and Wyatt laughed. “It’s like having a drill sergeant.”

“*Quoi?*” he asked.

“Big boss, ordering you around to do things.”

“Yes, but it will be fun,” Wyatt’s tone turned suggestive.

I grimaced. “Not that kind of fun.”

Still, I was intrigued. An afternoon with *the* Hayden Madsen in Paris? It was more than a dream come true.



CHAPTER 7

A while later, Anne and Philippe came over to Wyatt, and I could see them chatting and making plans. They had a natural ease with him. Was I being too rigid? I heard them mention going to dinner and now I understood that hanging out outside of work was necessary to being a part of the team.

“May I come?” I asked in French.

Wyatt beamed at me. “Yes, of course. Please come.”

I called Laurence, and he had one of the staff send over a pair of slacks and a printed shirt for me to change into along with heeled boots for my outing with Hayden and to ride on his vespa. Hayden’s earlier fashion scrutiny was on my mind, but the style of clothing I chose was on trend. It was still Paris, and I was spending time with the designer that was probably going to be crowned best of the year. Intimidating.

My nerves jumped when the clock struck the time Hayden set for us to meet. I packed up my station and headed out to meet him.

Hayden was waiting out front. He had on a leather jacket, jeans, and boots. His hair waved in the wind. He looked like he was posing for a photo shoot. Instead of his regular scowl, he smiled, and even I had to say it made him look gorgeous.

“Nadia.” He held out the helmet and secured my bag. “Next time, don’t bring anything.”

My brows rose. *Next time?* But I didn’t question him.

I climbed on the seat behind him, and lightly placed my hands on his

sides.

“You need to hold on tighter, or you will fall off. Place your palms here.” He took my hands, laid them flat against his chest. I did my best to ignore the bunch of his abs as I tried to find a comfortable hold that didn’t...hold him too much.

Hayden snorted. “Just hold me, Nadia.” He sped off from the curb, and I gripped him tight enough to hear him cough. *Good*. But we were flying.

My pulse jumped in my throat, and my body vibrated as he sped through traffic with absolute precision, weaving through cars as if he already had a path paved for him. I held on tight, leaning into the turns. And I couldn’t help but think about Paul driving in Italy, and my heart twinged. But then the sight of The Louvre came into view, with the sun shining on the windows like jewels, and I was in awe. Hayden slowed down as we passed and drove into an underground parking lot, stopping in a reserved spot.

I trembled as I climbed off, and he quickly moved to steady me. “How was that for you, Nadia?” His hands warmed my waist and lingered.

“Exhilarating,” I murmured and stepped back, handing him the helmet. “Thank you.”

His blue eyes pierced into me, and he grinned broadly. “*Bien sur*. It gets better.”

He led the way to the Tuileries Gardens. Even in the park, I didn’t spot leggings. Everyone was dressed to impress. Dress with heels. Suits. Even casual clothes well accessorized. Hayden took out a polaroid camera from his saddlebag and took a photo of me.

“Why waste photos on me? I’m not the subject.”

“It’s how I get to know you.”

“Oh...okay,” I murmured.

He chuckled. “Come on.”

I followed him as we stopped periodically to watch people, and for Hayden to point out the beauty of the architecture and gardens. There were plenty of tourists that were easily spotted with maps and bags. But with more people-watching, a pattern emerged. Numerous women wore white baggy shirts, crop tops, wide-legged dress slacks, cargo pants, and pumps. I noticed bold colors, elegant suits, which I had been wearing, and tailored separates—something I had added to my style of timeless classics. Exaggerated sleeves and oversized clothing were on the scene. The wild-patterned fabric was eye-catching. The chunky heeled boots also made me think that I should have

raided the attic closet when I returned home to take some of my mom's old clothes. Hayden watched me more than the people. Though he took numerous photos of strangers.

"It's impolite to take photos, so don't do it." He did it though, and no one complained. In fact, everyone seemed to be taken with him. More than a few women approached him and touched his arm, saying "*Beau.*"

He smiled with the compliments and provided a compliment in kind. I would have thought he was a terrible flirt, but he didn't exchange numbers to prolong the casual interaction.

I tried what he did, capturing the eyes of a man that passed. He gave me a bright smile and approached. "*Belle.*"

"Merci," I said politely.

His smile broadened. "You're American."

"Yes, I am."

"Would you like to go to a café?—"

"Non," Hayden hissed and rattled off something in French that made the man frown. He walked off without another word.

"What did you say to him?" I asked.

Hayden tutted. "I told him you weren't serious. He was talking to you like I'm not here. Don't hold eye contact with men unless you want them, or do you?" He lifted an arched brow.

"No, I don't. I...I was only being polite."

I furrowed my brows at the next guy in front of us, and he turned away from me. "Better?"

Hayden chuckled. He took my arms and squeezed gently. "*C'était mignon.*"

I puzzled.

"Cute."

I bit my smile.

Hayden took more photos of me, and I covered my face playfully. "I'm not the trend."

"I'm learning what excites you."

I chewed on my lip and stared at the stone footbridge ahead where a couple stopped to take a selfie together. *And make out.*

"Are you hungry?"

"No," I lied. My stomach had been giving little growls for hours.

He peered at me and my best poker face and scoffed. "You are. Do you

ever relax?”

I laughed. “I do.” But he made me feel like I was out with a teacher taking a test that would pass or fail me.

“I’ve seen five smiles in an hour.” His tone wasn’t exactly delighted. And it was then I realized he took photos when I smiled.

I shrugged. “I smile when I’m happy.”

“It’s a lovely one when you do,” he muttered in the wind.

I didn’t get time to contemplate the compliment. Hayden had us moving at breakneck speed back to where he parked, and we were back on the Vespa. He drove through many areas and mentioned them in French. I didn’t completely grasp them. However, I saw Picasso, Dali, and so many other museums I wanted to return to. But soon I recognized the area with the Louvre and the Jardins du Palais-Royal. To my surprise, he chose Café de Flore.

“Oh, my God. This is the famous café that Picasso, Satre, Camus, James Joyce, Simone De Beauvoir, James Baldwin all went to.” I bounced on my feet excitedly after I climbed off his bike.

“You tourists love the fantasy of nostalgic artists. They eat here once; you make a big deal. The truth, it’s crowded, loud with noisy tourists, and it’s too windy for eating outside.”

Hayden was approached by people on the street, stopping with a casual conversation or complaint from what I gathered from their expressions and gestures.

“You need to be social, Nadia,” he started in on me again. “That’s what it takes to succeed anywhere. Talk, smile, compliment. Just put yourself out there. You can’t sit in a bubble and do work.” He told the waiter where he wanted to sit, and when he complied, we had a nice central view of everyone passing at an outside table on the sidewalk, shade, and not that much of the windiness he referred to. Looking inside through the row of windows, it was like most restaurants in Paris, reserve, elegant. Busy. There wasn’t one available seat. But it was the people that made the magic. Not to leave out Hayden, who had been generous with his time. “Thank you very much for showing me around.”

“You’re welcome. Now, what would you like to drink?” he asked.

“Water is fine,” I murmured.

He tutted and ordered a sparkling water for himself, and a hot chocolate for me.

“Hey, I didn’t ask for chocolate.” The waitress hesitated.

He tilted his head. “Hot chocolate is what the place is famous for. You have chocolates on your desk that you replaced a few times.”

I blinked at him and smiled. He noticed that. “I do love chocolates, but I’m also picky. What if I don’t like it?”

He lifted his chin. “You will,” he said with confidence. He ordered croissants, fruit, and omelets for us, too. We thanked the hostess and she left.

“That’s too much food.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re not a woman that worries about your figure.”

I peered at him through my lashes. *Was this an offhand insult?* We were quiet for a minute.

“You’re upset, no?” His face broke into a grin. “You have a sexy figure. Round, full breasts, firm buttocks, long shapely legs. Your body is enticing.”

My face burned. “Uhm, that was...too much.”

He scoffed. “Too many compliments? Never.” I laughed with him.

The food came, and Hayden insisted I try everything on both our plates. “Take the warm bread, now spread the butter, cheese, ohh. Now eat the fruit.”

It was like having an instructor, but at the same time, the food was good, and so was his fussing. “You mentioned Satre. Are you familiar with existentialism philosophy?”

“Everything is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness, and dies by chance. It’s quite bleak.” That was what limited knowledge I’d learned in high school.

“Not so true, but let us discuss.” Hayden was well-versed in every school of philosophy. Although I wasn’t necessarily interested, I enjoyed hearing how passionate he was with his opinions. “You’re a fan of Cubism art, Picasso?”

“It’s not my favorite, but I do like it.”

He huffed and smiled. “You’re a Renaissance romantic.”

“Yes,” I agreed and sipped the hot chocolate, and somehow, I managed to suppress the moan of pleasure at the drop of heaven in the cup. *Delicious.*

Hayden’s expression turned smug. “You complain about chocolate, but you love it...So Picasso is good, but overrated. I prefer Paul Cézanne—he’s original. The rest of the impressionists are copies.” His confidence was clear, and I liked how his natural expectation was for me to be versed in more than just designs.

“Another smile.” He took another polaroid picture of me. He showed this

one to me, and I looked lighter. Happy. I had thought my other days in Paris were my favorites. *This one I'll add to my list.*

Hayden insisted on taking me back to my place. I gave him the address and he seemed a bit confused, but we climbed on his bike again and headed off into traffic. When we arrived at the house. He stood gazing at it perplexed. "You live here?"

"Yes...it's not mine. It's—"

"Paul Crane," Hayden muttered. His eyes narrowed and his smile thinned. "I see...I'm sure you'll be fine here. *Au revoir.*"

"Uhm...okay, Hayden. Thank you so much for today."

He gave me a wave and was back on his Vespa and disappeared down the road without a glance back.

I frowned, peering down the avenue after him. Had returning to Paul's place upset him? I wouldn't know. *He's often prickly.* But his quick exit wilted the day and my mood. I hadn't thought much of our outing—it was a friendly day with my boss. *We both aren't available...or am I?* I still had no word from Paul.

I went in and took a nap, and woke up just in time for the work dinner. Laurence was there to drop me off. I know that he'd seen Hayden, but I was happy that he hadn't asked me about him. Still, I explained, "Hayden took me out as part of work."

"I'm not here to judge you. He takes you on a Vespa, he better make sure you return without a scratch, or then I will have a problem."

I smiled at him. "Okay."

"How was your day?"

I shared with him what I saw in the parks and streets as we drove to the restaurant that wasn't too far from the office. "It sounds a bit touristy, but I'm happy you satisfied your sweet tooth."

"Oh, I did. The hot chocolate was divine...have you news of Paul?"

"His concert sold out and was a triumph. They love him in Germany. He's being treated well. No bad press."

A wave of relief washed over me. Then again, would Laurence ever tell me if Paul was struggling? "Are you sure he's fine?"

"Stop worrying, Nadia. Eat and be your sweet self. Make them love you, too."

I leaned over to kiss his cheek, and climbed out of the car.

The restaurant was dimly lit, but I could see the group from the office. To

my surprise, everyone there greeted me warmly. And what also surprised me was that they weren't talking about work. Still, I discreetly brought my translator so I wouldn't miss out on the conversations. It came time for me to order. "*Est-ce que vous avez choisi?*" The waiter asked me.

"*Je prendrai la formule, s'il vous plaît.*"

"The set menu." The waiter answered in English.

I put on a smile. "Merci."

Wyatt leaned toward me. "Your French is getting better."

But no one ever answered me in anything but English. Though I said to him, "Merci."

"How was your afternoon with Hayden?"

"Very good. He was kind." I smiled.

"He was? Good," Wyatt said, and his shoulders dropped. "He can be pushy; he's always been that way."

"You've known him long?"

"Oui. We were in a care home together...he was one of the few who didn't forget you when he aged out."

"Oh, I didn't know that about him or you." My tone turned sympathetic.

"Yes, it's fine now. There is a group of us that made our own family."

Hayden and Wyatt had aged out of foster care? Their situation could have easily been mine if I hadn't been so fortunate. Wyatt started to work as my translator as the conversations started moving faster, filling me in on what was going on.

"Anne has a boyfriend in Algiers. He's a scuba diver. He is planning a trip to Coco's Island. She's worried for him. Ellie has been on two dates with Philippe."

I covered my surprise with a sip of wine. *I thought Philippe was married.*

Wyatt whispered. "His wife is teaching in Brazil. They have an understanding. Patrick has an American girlfriend. She's an au pair. She's the reason he decided to come here. Now you are all caught up with our lives."

I smiled. "Thank you."

Wyatt squeezed my arm. "Not at all." Our food was served, and everyone's plate was full of meats with vegetables in aromatic sauces.

"You should try to see more of Paris and the countryside, Nadia," Josephine spoke to me in English.

"She should travel," Philippe said. "You should go away for a weekend somewhere."

Everyone shared where they travel to on their weekends. Even living and working in their beautiful art-rich city, they'd went to Amsterdam, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and Dubai, just last weekend. I listened and absorbed, and every minute, my view and world became bigger. This...this was what I'd come to Paris for, and I was so thankful I was beginning to open my eyes and heart to everything around me.



CHAPTER 8

The time for Hayden’s model fitting had finally arrived. His collection and style were a play on glamour with a modern steampunk fantasy. There were leathers, satins, wools, beads, lace, and, to my delight, knits. I loved that he brought in all types of body shapes and heights. Wyatt and I, along with his assistants, pinned, fixed, and steamed clothes, and brought over accessories for him to approve. In the moments in between, we observed Hayden as he meticulously went over each model’s fit.

“Nadia,” Hayden called me over to a model fitting for a leather and velvet jumpsuit.

“This is Cassie.”

The models were the top in the fashion industry, including Cassie. I’d seen her on videos from numerous runways and fashion covers.

Cassie smiled. “*Ca va?*”

“*Ca va, bien.* Thank you, Cassie,” I smiled at her.

“Take images for me at all angles.” I was handed a Polaroid camera and began snapping photos. The camera loved her, and the jumpsuit had the precision and elegance of the best tailoring. I moved around her as Hayden had her walk. His eyes were keen on every movement of the fit. Once he asked her to stop walking for him, I stacked the images for him to review, but he placed them down without looking. He moved on to two similar beaded mini dresses. “Give me your opinion. Mina or Yumi?”

“The dress fits Yumi.”

He glanced at Wyatt.

“Mina.”

Hayden never broke eye contact with me as he spoke to his assistant, but repeated in English, “Give the suit to Mina.”

I kept silent as we both stared at the dress again, and when Mina put it on, it had a small gap at the top. But I scanned over her again to see what I may have missed. She stood with a bright confidence that elevated it. “Go with the assistant and help make it fit, Nadia.”

I nodded and followed the assistant, adding pins before Mina removed the garment. After a while, it worked on Mina.

Hayden came over and peered at Mina as she walked and posed in the finished dress. “Better.”

A model walked out in a form-fitting, gold beaded halter dress, and I was instantly in heaven. Unfortunately, the outfit hung off her petite frame and was too long in the leg, even with heels. It would require significant alterations, but that would ruin the effect.

“She’s too thin.” Hayden frowned. “Nadia, your body type is closer to the model I have for it, but she’s not here. Let’s see it on you. *Dépêchez-vous.*”

I hesitated. *Seriously?* But the team stood waiting, so I went behind the dress curtain and put on the dress.

“No boots,” Hayden called back.

I hadn’t expected to be put on the spot, and luckily, I had on nice undergarments. The dress had only reached below my hips when Hayden appeared. “*Voyons voir.* How is the fit?”

My face warmed, but I could see his enthusiasm for his work and decided to let go of my annoyance. Hayden impatiently gestured for me to follow him out as he and his team surrounded me. As I watched them in the wall mirror, I went into that space as a designer. The dress fit my body like a glove, accentuating my breasts and seductively hugging my curves.

“Can we see it with your hair down?”

I nodded and pulled out the clip and shook out the curls. Someone took my shoe size and brought platforms close to Vivienne Westwood Gillies. I felt like an Amazonian princess.

Hayden came close and squinted at the bustline and lingered on my hips. “How does it feel on you, Nadia?”

“Strong. Sensual. Attractive,” I said, and took pride in myself for not blushing.

He came behind me and his warm fingers pressed on my shoulder. “Shoulders back. Can you walk?”

“I will.” I moved forward with a confident stride and turned.

“*Oh la la*. Nadia is giving us a moment,” Hayden mused.

I did a dramatic pose, and light laughter broke across the room.

“Lovely, Nadia...Hmm. It’s such a shame your presence is...too much of a distraction from the clothes, no?” He glanced over at his assistants, who echoed him. “Still, there’s something here. Our model Renee is in Milan. If she doesn’t arrive in time, I want you to wear this dress for the close of the show. Keep the heels to practice.”

“*Oui, Hayden. C’est magnifique. Merci beaucoup.*”

His lips twitched. “Keep practicing French.”

But had he noticed he did most of his speaking today in English? Hayden was kind, but I doubted I’d wear the dress. *But could I go on stage?*

My heart rate increased at the possibility of bringing public attention my way. Things were going well in Paris so far, but just like in New York City, people didn’t notice you until the press shined the spotlight on you.

The assistants marked any changes to the fit as Hayden went over the dress again. Once he approved, I left and put my clothes back on. Josephine came around with a small smile. “You can refuse.”

“Would you?” I asked her.

“No.” Her lips spread into a broad grin. “I’ve done it before. There will be hundreds of guests from all over the world there. The best fashion editors, stylists, famous people. I would think you might be intimidated, but you dated Paul Crane.”

A pang cut in my chest at the mere mention of Paul’s name. He would’ve been the first person I shared about working on Hayden’s fashion show, but I didn’t know if I could still call him. *And how it hurt that Josephine used past tense about dating Paul.*

“I hear Paul’s touring in Europe. My brother saw him in Italy—oh, sorry. I forgot I wasn’t supposed to discuss Mr. Crane with you.” Her eyes widened, and she covered her mouth.

I put on a smile. “It’s fine.” *The show must go on. Paul wouldn’t want to disappoint his fans who waited years to see him.* “I should go...oh, Josephine?”

She stopped. “*Oui?*”

“Do you know why Hayden takes Polaroid pictures all the time?”

“I’m surprised Hayden hasn’t told you yet. He is obsessed with Helmut Newton’s photography style. He used Polaroids, so Hayden must use it, too.”

“I’ll take a look.” Hayden had me looking up Satre and Cubism art. Why not add in photography? It was then that I noticed how much of an influence he’d become. Tomas had me out in Paris every day, and Wyatt showed me where to find rare things. *Nothing seems impossible here.*

“I’d recommend Helmut. You’ll see a lot of Hayden’s style in it,” Josephine said, cutting into my thoughts. I was surprised to find her still there. She was always hurrying away to do something. “You know, Hayden...has a fondness for interns.”

I shrugged. “I’d say Wyatt is his favorite.”

Hayden accepted more accessories and changes that Wyatt suggested to him than anyone else.

“You think so? Hmm.” Josephine turned her head away. “Wyatt doesn’t have a dress to wear at his show or has been given a pair of shoes.” She checked her watch. “I have to go. The fashion show setup on Friday is an early start, 8h. We’d want you there by then. I’ll also be there, of course, to help as always.”

“Merci, Josephine.”

I walked out of the studio and found Tomas outside the door. He greeted me with kisses on both my cheeks. “I miss you.”

“You see me every day, Tomas.”

“I know, but you are always working or away. How was the fitting?”

“Great. Your clothes are amazing, but you know that.”

“I do.”

“It was great to see how it came all together. Oh, and Hayden let me try on a dress.”

Tomas linked arms with me and we headed outside. “Which one?”

“The gold halter gown.”

“Hmm. Did he?” Tomas murmured.

“Yes. Odd, really. He even said he may let me wear it at the close of the show.”

Tomas scoffed. “Hayden’s not serious. Renee will be here.”

“Good.” I exhaled, relieved. “I don’t want to take a chance of falling in nine-inch heels and four-inch platforms.” *Or bring more public attention to me right now.*

“We do sometimes have issues and everyone that works here needs to be

ready for anything. Hayden's right to keep you on your feet. Do you like him now?"

I shrugged. "He's a great designer."

Tomas chuckled. "You do." He wrinkled his nose. "I'm tired of Renault's. Let's go somewhere else. *Mon, Dieu.*" He stopped walking.

My brows raised. "*Quoi?*"

He smiled. "Look at you using French. I have a concert to go to tonight, but Cecil is still unwell." He rubbed the stubble on his chin.

"Can I bring her soup?" I asked, and Tomas grinned.

"*Tres gentile*, Nadia. *Non*, she doesn't like to be fussed over. She'll be happier if you'll come with me."

I looked down at my shirt and slacks. "Maybe I should change."

"We have time. I'll come pick you up."

"Oh, who are we going to see?"

"Alana," he said casually. "I have good seats."

My mouth dropped open. "Alana? *The* sold-out show of the year, *the* Alana?"

"If you wanted to go, I'm sure Paul would have given you seats, Nadia. Probably even made it so you'd meet her. I mean, he's a music mogul."

I gaped at him. *I could have met Alana.* "Oh, my goodness. I never considered it possible...I'd never make it through a greeting without gushing like an insane fangirl. But really? Wow." I never asked Paul. *Paul.* Just hearing his name panged my heart.

Tomas clasped my chin and lifted it up. "No brooding. This is a night of fun. I'm bringing you because you will dance cute, sing, and smile. Don't disappoint me."

My lips formed a smile and I kissed his cheek. "You're the best boss ever."

"I am," he agreed. "*A bientot.*"

We walked to Tomas's Porsche. He knew my address already and didn't need directions. I was about to burst and couldn't even wait until I got home to tell Xander.

Nadia: Guess who's going to Alana?

Xander: Are you serious?

Nadia: Yes. Tomas is taking me.

Xander: Your boss? Damn. Why couldn't that crazy luck happen

during my visit? I'm jealous, but happy for you. Take photos. Miss you.

Nadia: I'll try. I miss you too.

I called Mom and Dad when I reached the house, but the time was during his physical therapy. I had to learn to schedule a better time to call. I did find an email from Mom, though.

Nadia,

How's it going? I guess busy. Thanks for the photos. Update on Dad. He's doing better. No more chemo! We're finally going home. We have been invited to a few goodbye dinners. The people are so kind here in Texas. I'll miss them all.

We're so proud of you, and I can't help but brag at our beautiful daughter designing in Paris!

We love you.

Mom & Dad

My eyes stung, and I sent a message back.

Hi Mom and Dad,

I'm so happy to hear Dad's getting better! It'll be good to go home and see everyone. I'm glad you both had a break. I'm working and seeing more of Paris. French is still a challenge and I have to plan everything I say, but I'm loving it here. It's beautiful and I'm working on a fashion show this week! I'm so happy.

I'm going to a concert tonight with my boss! I'll send photos.

I miss you and love you both.

Nadia

Knowing Tomas, he will dress to impress, and I also needed to rise to the occasion. I had a black beaded sequin fringe mini dress that I'd been waiting for a good time to wear. It was strappy, with an open back. I showered and changed into it and chose high heels. I stared at my reflection and tensed. *I looked...normal.*

All the pain I'd been through wasn't visible. What did that mean? How could I not be upset? That was the daily struggle after everything that happened on the boat. My parents kept me occupied, and so had work. But the concert and fashion show were public and often posted online. My heart

raced and my mind filled up with worry. I decided to call Doctor Casey, which was our agreement in an emergency. She answered on the second ring.

“Hello, Nadia.”

“Hello. Is this an okay time?”

“Any time is okay. I’m only five minutes from calling you back whenever you need to talk,” she said in a soothing voice. “How are you?”

I leaned against the top of the desk. “I’m...I’m mostly okay...My boss invited me to a concert tonight, and I feel weird about going. Like I should still be grieving....”

“You are grieving. You’re also trying to get back to normal life. That’s what is most important. But think about what’s at the core of your worry. What is your “what if” thought?”

I paused to think about it and then told her. “What if someone films me and puts it online? It could ruin the cases.” I chewed on my bottom lip.

“Let me ask you something. If you are filmed, does that mean what happened to you didn’t happen?”

“No,” I answered.

“Can you control the public?”

“No, I can’t. I can only control myself.” I blew out my breath.

“Good. Take it minute by minute, day by day. You have a life to live, and you deserve it. You’re not responsible for the actions of others.”

Doctor Casey’s words were encouraging. What happen was a fact that occurred in my past. No one could change that. I had a right to keep trying to move forward with my life.

“Thank you, Doctor Casey.”

“You’re welcome. Call me anytime.”

I put my phone away and returned to getting ready for the concert. I kept my hair in a low ponytail so I wouldn’t ruin the view of the people around me with big hair. Ten minutes later, I had a text from Tomas, and I was out the door.

Tomas stepped out of the car, and his eyes widened as I came out to stand before him.

“You look stunning.” He kissed my cheek.

“Is it too much?” I glanced back at the door and inventoried my closet in my head.

“What’s too much for a concert?” Tomas had on one of his tailored suits, but even he had on a neon sequined shirt. He helped me into his car, and we

were off to Stade de France. The lines to get in were long, but somehow, they moved quickly. A sea of people stretched out from a beautiful runway and a stage right out of the movie set of *Metropolis*. We had reached the space age. Alana was the alien queen that ruled this new world. Her flawless soprano climbed to defying heights and was embellished by a troop of dancers moving in rhythmic sync movements that kept on point with the pulsing beat.

Tomas hugged me and cheered. "Oh, she looks celestial."

"C'est fantastique."

Tomas lifted my hand up as she came strutting down the runway. Alana's songs flowed with seamless outfit changes. It was an eye feast, and we dined well. Tomas knew every song, like me, and we sang and danced. And for those magical hours, I was revived.

We kept singing in his car on the way back to the house after the concert. "You sing well, Nadia."

"Merci."

"I'm serious. I hadn't heard you sing before tonight. You constantly surprise me."

I beamed at his high praise. It wasn't something Tomas gave often. We reached my place, and said our goodbyes. "Please tell Cecil thank you for letting me take her place tonight. I wish her a full recovery."

He grinned. "I will."

I left the car and had only made it inside the front door when I found a beautiful box with a ribbon on the hall table. A rush of excitement filled my chest. *Paul?*

I opened the box and inside was a book on Paris by famous artists that lived here. There was also a box of chocolates from a Parisian boutique I hadn't visited before.

You enjoyed the famous café visited by artists you admire. Here's a book about their lives here and what inspired them. You may find it inspiring for you. These chocolates are of a better quality than the ones on your desk.

—Hayden.

My stomach fluttered as I leafed through the book. It was written in

French, of course, but that was the challenge. I ate one of the chocolates. They were of a lesser sweetness than my favorites but had the silky taste I liked. Both gifts were thoughtful, though practical. *Hmmm. If I didn't know better, I'd say Hayden's romantic.* However, something was even more pressing that I didn't know what to do about. *Was Hayden romancing me?*



CHAPTER 9

“Who’s Ingrid?”

I’d made it for over a month without asking him. One photo of Paul with Ingrid, I could dismiss, but there were several. Not only had she attended Paul’s concert in Germany, but she shared lunch with him at a restaurant, and they were spotted walking together with her Great Dane. *What is it about spirited blondes with huge dogs?* Every photo cut me to the core. I’d never expected Paul to disappear from my life so utterly. I’d also not expected him to be spending so much one-on-one time with another woman too. *Did he enjoy having his freedom back? No longer tied to the little girl who’d captured his attention briefly?* Was I really that easy to move on from? To forget?

“Ingrid...is an old friend of the Crane family,” Laurence said, eyeing me over his book. “Paul’s working on the soundtrack for a documentary she’s producing about her family. Why?”

I hunched my shoulders. “It doesn’t matter.”

He tutted. “Oh, it does if you believe rag mags.”

“Well, how else do I learn about anything going on without gossip?” I half-joked with him.

“You can always call Paul.”

And Paul could just as easily call me. Yet, neither one of us had done it. I couldn’t because I didn’t want to hear he wasn’t coming back. Still, I missed him.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. *Unknown number?* I glanced at Laurence and told him.

He frowned. “No one has your new number except Tomas, Wyatt, Josephine, and whomever else you shared it with.”

That was a short list of my parents, Xander, and Professor Elan. I decided to answer it, too curious to let it continue to ring. “Hello?”

“*Allo*, Nadia. It’s Hayden.”

“Bonjour, Hayden. *Ca va?*” I gave a puzzled glance to Laurence.

“I’m fine. I want you to shadow me today.”

“Today? Me?” I croaked.

“You,” he echoed.

“But today is your show.” My voice went up several octaves. He knew I would already be there to work with his team.

“Are you saying no?” His incredulity was laced in his voice.

Hayden was a constant surprise, but this one was huge. The hype was real for his Paris show. Only a fool would turn him down. *And that’s not me.*

“Yes. *Oui*. Okay. Sure,” I stammered.

“Bien. Meet me at the bottom parking lot of The Carousel in twenty minutes.”

“*Oui. A Bientot.*” He ended the call.

I let out a yelp. “I’m shadowing Hayden today.”

“At his show? Wow. That’s great.” Laurence hugged me.

“We need to be there in twenty minutes?”

“We’ll get there in fifteen.”

I told him where I had to go, and quickly got my backpack and we headed to The Carousel. It was the same place he parked the afternoon he showed me around Paris. A few minutes after we arrived, a Mercedes pulled in, and out came Hayden. He put on the jacket of a designer suit that was tailored to perfection. His tousled brown waves framed his chiseled face. He looked smart and sophisticated. *Gorgeous even.* Though I thought of him as my boss and sort of friend. *Bossy friend.* I also knew that even if he just arrived, he didn’t like to wait.

“I’ll call you later, Laurence.”

“Enjoy yourself,” he told me.

I left the car and went over to Hayden. His eyes flicked over me in my simple scoop neck and dark slacks. “It’s American office casual day?”

I let out a laugh. “We were told to wear minimal, dark clothing.”

“Minimal, plain? *Oui*. That’s what I’ll call it.”

I tried to grimace, but I ended up smiling. He grinned back at me.

Josephine appeared, her eyes widening. “Nadia? You’re here with Hayden—”

“Nadia’s shadowing me today,” Hayden announced in an authoritative tone as a couple of his assistants joined her.

“*Très bien*, Hayden.” She gave me the staff pass to wear around my neck, and we all headed inside the mall, passing retail shops along the way. We walked until we reached the space below the glass pyramid of The Louvre, and I gasped. It had been transformed into the glitz and glamour of Europe in the twenties, with a bit of modern steampunk brass and futuristic buildings set like a movie studio. There were stylish dancers in three-piece suits—which had Tomas’s stamp on them—and large, jeweled boots. Models were practicing coordinated rhythmic movements along a moving sidewalk. There were staff members placing name placards on the chairs while a group of press were setting up behind them near the edge of the lit runway.

“*C’est spectaculaire*, it’s spectacular,” I gushed and clasped my hands together.

Hayden didn’t respond, but led the way to the back area that was for setup. He put me straight to work with Wyatt, who was already there. We removed the garment bags. The clothes were the stars—every dress, pant, hat, and shoe were a work of art—and that thrill went down my spine with all the excitement of the show. I went to work steaming clothes, setting the models outfits on racks, and helping with their fit for Hayden to give his final approval.

“Nadia.” Hayden moved me to observe him in styling. “Nadia, this is Anais. She is our head stylist and has worked with me on *cinq* Parisian shows.”

“*Bonjour*, Anais,” I mumbled, completely in awe of the woman before me. She just looked so...suave.

“*Bonjour*,” she answered bluntly.

“I have instructed Anais and her team to have hair styled in short, uniform, colorful bobs, with invisible makeup.” It was an interesting way to style them, as it made them appear like mannequins. It brought the eye to the designs.

They looked sophisticated and sleek. I was thrilled as Tomas joined in to direct his team. The models were changing into the clothes. Everything was

progressing. I had a jacket in place for one of the women, when Hayden appeared next to me again.

“Come,” he commanded.

I blinked at him but followed him over to hair and makeup again.

“I want you to style Nadia as well. Rita Hayworth curls and Elizabeth Taylor long lashes and penciled brows.” The look was nothing like what he chose for the models. It was as if he had thought about me, and I didn’t know how to respond to it.

“*Moi?*” I asked, my jaw unhinged.

“*Oui...style Nadia,*” Hayden said as if this change was every day.

“Wow, but...uhm...is this part of the show?”

His eyes narrowed at me. “I’ll decide when it’s done.”

“But can I please ask why? Why me?” I tried again.

He shrugged. “Humor me.”

Humor me. I was possibly in shock. Hayden Madsen wanted me to be made up for his fashion show even though I was there to support the designers. It was surreal. After meeting the stylist who’d be working on me, I sat down and she went to work, styling my hair into retro pin curl waves that looked odd with my black scoop neck shirt and slacks.

Hayden came over. “That won’t do.” He spoke rapidly in French, and an assistant brought out a dress, a gorgeous black sleeveless sequin embroidered floor-length dress with a side slit. “I want the world to see you in one of my dresses.”

“But...but I’m here to work—”

“And this is working,” Hayden interrupted. “What is the problem?”

I chewed on my lip. The dress was mostly spandex, and that allowed room for last-minute changes because it was form-fitting. However, as a designer, I knew he’d used my measurements to make this dress fit. *He made it for me to wear.*

Working on the fashion show was fine, but it was another thing being brought to attention. I’d already had my experience with bad press, and the lawsuits in progress made me feel like I should try for a lower profile. “I don’t want to seem unappreciative, Hayden, but I wonder if there might be another intern more suited.”

“*Un moment,*” Hayden spoke to his assistants. “Nadia.” He smiled and motioned for me to follow him. Josephine gave me a sympathetic look, alerting me something was wrong.

Hayden stood close to me and spoke just above a whisper. “I wasn’t sure about working with you, Nadia. I know you’re spoiled.”

I frowned. “I don’t think that’s true—”

“Oh, you are. In fact, it seems I’m trying to spoil you at my own show—”

“But I don’t see it like that. Please don’t take this the wrong way. There are just circumstances—”

“Nadia, this is an incredible opportunity for you. Perhaps you don’t see this, no? You see, I had to work for everything; I *never* could say no. I am self-made. Everything here, I sweated, cried, slept on floors, worked many an odd job, some for free.” He gestured around him. “All because I never had the luxury of saying no. You have the belief that opportunities will come again while I never counted on it.”

My brows knitted in confusion. “Please understand, Hayden. This is your and Givenchy’s big day. I’m shocked and I honestly don’t count on anything. I try to *work* for it—”

“And this is *work*, and we’re in the *business* of selling clothes. You’re here to *sell*. A beautiful woman in my dress makes the celebrities beg for it, and the buyers believe they must have it.”

Hayden was using me to advertise instead of dressing me like his personal doll—it was mentioned as a possibility in the internship agreement—though I didn’t appreciate his presumptions about me. “Okay. Fine. I’ll do as you request. Merci...but I’m not spoiled.”

“You are. And even I am incapable of stopping myself.”

Hayden left me staring after him as he stormed off to instruct someone else. He was impulsive. Maddening. *He also called me beautiful*. I touched my throat and a tingle went through my body. I may have enjoyed the compliment, but I wasn’t a complete fool. Kind words and charm were part of being social here. And Hayden was the master. *He’s using flattery to get what he wants*. I straightened my spine and left to change in private, putting on silk stockings and a pair of platform heels. Josephine came back with another female assistant to help with the fit of the dress. However, it didn’t need alterations.

“Stunning. It’s as if it’s made for you,” Josephine trilled.

It was, as I suspected. *Hayden altered this dress for me to wear today*.

I glanced into the mirror, and I looked different, sophisticated, sexy. And hollow.

Still, I plastered on a smile and went with them back to the stylist to

finish my hair and makeup.

Tomas and Hayden came over, both grinning.

“It works on you,” Tomas complimented me. “It’s good. Come.”

I froze. “Where?”

“To sit with us in front.” Tomas took my hand; my palm was clammy.

“I know you’re nervous, but the public doesn’t dictate your life. You are showing our work, and this will intrigue the fashion community.” He paused to scrutinize again and nodded approvingly. “I wasn’t sure at first, but Hayden has convinced me. Seeing you in that dress is a triumph. Ready?”

I can’t disappoint him. I’m strong. I can do this. “... we’re in the business of selling clothes. You’re here to sell. A beautiful woman in my dress makes the celebrities beg for it, and the buyers believe they must have it.”

I licked my lips and nodded. Hayden and Tomas had faith in me. Maybe it was time I had more faith in myself. “I’m ready.”

However, we had no time left to wait. We walked to the front row and applause erupted from the people seated as more cameras approached, photographing us. Tomas stopped us to pose, and I relaxed my expression, angling my stance to compliment the dress, as I had been taught at design school. The show was more than me.

Then we sat in the front as Hayden stood and went on stage. An instrumental of “Back to Black” by Amy Winehouse with a remix of “Le Jazz Hot!” from *Victor/Victoria* played.

Tomas patted my hand, and I grinned at him. “Ready to blow your mind?”

The show was Josephine Baker-dazzling glamour mixed with modern tech. Hayden presented elegant gowns, sleek pantsuits, and bare-chested men in suspended wide-legged pants. There were oversized knits, shifts, and body-tight dresses with a satin-leather mix. The dancing screens with models posing in the dresses made the clothes captivating, and even I wanted everything that walked the stage. It was a whirlwind of magic, and I enjoyed the ride. More so humbled to be a participant, it was a designer’s dream. *And it could be me one day, putting on a show in Paris.*

At the end, Tomas stood and took my hand, and we walked on the stage to stand with Hayden.

“Tomas. Hayden. Is this a match made in heaven for Givenchy?” The press called out between questions.

“It’s clearly a match. Didn’t you watch the show?” Tomas said coyly, and

I loved him for how he handled himself.

Hayden leaned close to my ear. “Keep the dress. No one can wear it as well as you.”

I wanted to refuse, but I didn’t want to be rude. He was happy, and I was happy for him and Tomas both. “Merci. Congratulations, Hayden.”

This show would definitely go into fashion history. I left them to continue with the press and went backstage to change. I took off the dress and my stomach lurched. I rushed into the bathroom and vomited.

Rap. Someone knocked on the door.

“Nadia, are you okay?” It was Josephine.

“Nerves,” I called back. I came out, and she quickly helped me out of the dress and waved my face with her clipboard to help me calm down. *I’m strong. I’m fine. I’m here.*

I took deep breaths. “I’m okay. It’s all been a surprise.”

“Yes, I see, but that’s Hayden. He goes with his instincts. And it serves him well.” She brought my clothes back, and I changed. “You don’t have to help with the clean-up.”

“No. Please, I want to.”

Allowing me to attend the show in Hayden’s clothes had made me feel singled out with extra privilege. I wanted to feel a part of the team.

She hesitated, but relented. “Okay.”

I rejoined the rest of the interns and assistants and took their direction in packing garment bags with the rest of the clothing returning to the studio.

When Josephine came to dismiss me, I found Wyatt standing next to the stage. “Wasn’t that incredible, Nadia?”

“It was amazing,” I enthused.

“You looked beautiful in the dress. The photos will be superb.”

I lowered my head. “Yes, well...”

“Hayden has an eye for what sells. This was a good opportunity. You should be happy.”

My shoulders dropped. “Okay.”

“Are you coming to the party tonight at Hotel Le Meurice?”

“I didn’t know anything about it,” I told him. “Tomas didn’t mention a party.”

Wyatt chuckled. “Tomas only goes to parties he hosts. He dislikes celebrities.”

That explains a lot with him.

“You missed the announcement by Josephine. We can go together?” Wyatt offered. “It would be a shame to miss out on the networking opportunities.”

In truth, I didn’t feel up to a party. However, it was an industry party, and networking was an important part of my work as a designer. But I still had the lawsuit and public scrutiny to consider, especially if I had to testify.

“I’ll arrive around seven so we can still go together. Just text me if you change your mind.”

“I’ll think about it. Thank you, Wyatt.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming text from Tomas.

Tomas: Good news. Hayden wants you to work his photo shoot with him in Monaco.

I blinked at the message. *How is this my life?*



CHAPTER 10

Instead of calling Laurence, I walked to The Louvre Museum with my sketchpad. I had so many ideas brimming from the show, and I was eager to draw while it was all fresh in my mind. After a while in the queue, I reached the inside of the museum and went to check the map to find Canova's *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss*. I reveled in the anonymous feeling as I did when I first came to New York City, seamlessly blending in with the tourists and enjoying the art and beauty. A calm familiarity flowed over me as I moved past the rooms of art. No longer did I have the pressure of time. *I live here.*

Room 4 came into view, and there were Psyche and Cupid. The sculpture reminded me of seeing Hades and Persephone in Italy with Paul. Paul's dreamy gaze as he held me close in his embrace played like a vivid vision. My hands slowly slid down my arms to recapture his warmth. It was the little things that often caused the most agony. But how could I not think of him? *Paris is romantic.*

Sitting on a bench, I stared at the sculpture again with my sketch pad open. My mind flooded with ideas, and I sketched designs and possible fabrics. Each one became my new favorite as I drew more designs. I'd been so lost in my head that I hadn't noticed someone standing near me.

Peering upward, I locked gazes with...*Isabelle?*

My stomach dropped, and my eyes flicked over her as she shifted her stance. She'd covered her chestnut curls with a straight black wig with fringe bangs. I admired the cut of her tailored suit and thought it suited her well.

Surprisingly, I could still find something admirable in the person who had betrayed me so profoundly.

“Wow, your sketches look great, Nadia,” Isabelle said. She used the same cheerful voice when I had once thought she was my friend.

I tensed and closed my sketchpad. “What...what are you doing here?”

Her smile wilted. “I...I told you in New York I was going to visit Paris this summer. I saw the Givenchy show and watched you walk here—”

“You followed me?” I tensed and glanced around me. A security guard and a few other patrons were close by.

“Uhm, yes, I sort of did. I didn’t mean to bother you...Museums are great places to sketch. Anyway, I wanted to apologize in person since you wouldn’t take my calls in New York.” Her tone wasn’t accusatory, merely stating a fact.

“I’m not supposed to have any communication with you, as it may affect the case.” *Against you.* I started to pack up my stuff. But she continued to speak.

“I’m not going to discuss the case. Please, Nadia. I just want to tell you that I never meant for anything bad to happen to you. The party was really supposed to launch my swimwear line. Sophie introduced me to Landon, and he told me about all his business connections and friends who would invest in my company. I didn’t find out until later that he’d taken over Lollipop and turned it into Sugar Cookie. Sophie said he was rebranding when I found out. She lied about so many things.” Her tone turned coarse.

I curled my lip. *You also lied. You told me you were using East Coast Cruise. You intentionally deceived me the whole time.* However, with Isabelle here right now, it could be the last chance I’d ever have to find out something I wanted to know. “Can you answer a question?”

“Anything,” she said without hesitation.

“Whose idea was it to befriend me and work on your designs at my place?”

Her skin flushed, and she shifted on her feet. “I...I thought we could help each other. I had a friend that did your internship, you had a studio. I really did want to be friends and I enjoyed hanging out with you. But honestly, I was wrong to use you like that, and I’m sorry.”

I bobbed my head and crossed my arms. *Good for her to finally admit it.* “I would have helped you if you were honest with me. You didn’t have to pretend to be my friend—”

“No, Nadia. I did—I do like you a lot. I wanted to be friends—”

“Like you were friends with Kelsie?”

Isabelle’s blush deepened, and she chewed her bottom lip, then blew out her breath.

“Kelsie made a mistake. I didn’t know about your dress until after it happened. She ruined it to impress Sophie...Sophie was angry that she did it —”

“So angry that you all were in the jacuzzi together and laughed while I watched.” My tone was harsher and heated, something I hadn’t expected that I had been holding in. *Anger. Raw anger.* And I knew it was okay to feel it, so I didn’t berate myself. I had been wronged.

She rubbed her neck. “I didn’t know until after the New York Design’s end-of-the-year fashion show. You were happy and had moved on; I didn’t want to bring it up and hurt you.”

I held my waist as my stomach churned. “But...but it was fine to trick me into leave New York without Ben. So you and your friends could hurt me—”

“Wait.” She held up her hands. “I was not involved in what happened with Landon and Trevor. I told the prosecutors everything. Please believe me. I’m devastated you lost your baby. I’d never intentionally hurt a child—”

“But you did hurt me and *my* baby,” I choked and pressed my chest. “You deceived me and Ben. You mocked my family when I told you about my dad’s cancer.” I drew in a breath and wiped the corner of my eye. “You...you didn’t come to the—the room....” The memory surfaced of me on the floor in the bathroom, bleeding for hours. Sick. Terrified. Alone.

“I—I was told you were sick and resting.” Her voice was full of anguish.

“And that was enough for you?” My voice cracked. That would’ve never been enough for me. I would have done anything to help her.

Tears fell down her face, and she pulled out a cloth from her bag. “I...I wish I’d done things differently. You were nothing but nice to me. At the time, I agreed with Sophie. We both tried to help you. I tried with the surrogate agency, and Sophie tried with Lollipop. She did wrong there, and I called her out, but when things started going well for you, you completely ghosted us. We both had to ask you repeatedly to hang out, and you behaved suspiciously when I only wanted to look around your place.”

“As I told you, it wasn’t just my place; I shared it with Paul, and I had to respect his privacy, too.”

“We made mistakes and are remorseful. I—I can’t sleep. I’m sick over all

that happened. Please forgive me. I wish we could start over. I wish I could've shown you real friendship."

Bile rose in my throat, and my stomach twisted in knots. *Real* friendship meant she was aware that she was always pretending. She wanted to care now, but she wasn't real when I gave her my confidence. I was done. I didn't owe Isabelle anything, and I was sorry I'd kept this conversation going as long as I had. "Isabelle, look. I don't know what you expected from this conversation, but that part of my life isn't something I want to talk about anymore. Honestly, please don't contact me again."

Her eyes widened and her lips parted, but she said nothing. What are words now when you destroyed trust? There was no way forward, but I hoped she'd do better in her future.

I put my bag on my shoulder as she watched me as I stood and walked into another gallery wing. *Goodbye, Isabelle.*

What I couldn't work out was why. Why come to Paris to find me? What had she really wanted? My stomach lurched. I just wanted that part of my life to be over, and I hated that it still wasn't. *Move forward, Nadia. The past needs to stay in the past.*

Those words stayed with me as I left the Louvre and walked to the Metro subway station. I leaned against the building until the nausea passed. Then, I sent a quick text to Gunnar.

Nadia: Isabelle followed me from the fashion show today into the Louvre Museum. She tried to talk to me about the case. I did speak to her about how I felt. I hope that won't affect anything.

Isabelle was looking at potential jail time, too. Had she come to sabotage the case? Or get me on her side? I wasn't sure, but was certain Gunnar would know what to do. My phone vibrated with his reply.

Gunnar: She was warned not to contact you. I'll file a restraining order against her tomorrow and have a word with security. If you didn't give her new information, we're fine. Do not speak with her again.

I replayed our conversation in my head. There was nothing new shared. *Thank goodness.*

Paris had felt like a haven away from my troubles. I'd dropped my guard, and once again I was reminded I wasn't anonymous. *But I won't let her or anyone else make me afraid again.*

I was going to call Laurence for a pickup, but instead I decided to do something I'd wanted to do since I thought about going to Paris again: use the metro. I took out my map and, with it, went to the booth to speak with the station agent.

“*Ou est...La rue de...*” I pointed to the street name on the map, and the agent helped me locate the stop near the house. I went ahead and climbed on the train and smiled. *I'm doing it on my own.*

When I spotted the avenue to exit, I left the subway and followed the group onto the sidewalk. Once above, I walked down the three avenues highlighted on the directions, but I also recalled the buildings Laurence and I had passed together. After passing a few more familiar landmarks, I spotted the home's glass and decorative iron door. *I did it!* I danced in place on the street. Rushing forward, I unlocked the door and swung it wide. “Hey, Laurence. Are you here? Guess who caught the Metro and didn't get lost?” I sang out.

“Nadia.”

I turned toward the living room. “Paul?”



CHAPTER 11

Five weeks without him. Every day since, I stumbled on the cracks in my life, missing the spaces he filled. And even though it had been heartbreaking, I had survived. There had been moments, especially at the internship, where I felt I had been thriving.

But Paul was here, standing in the living room. His powerful presence filled the space. His magnetism, a potent force, drew me to him. *Even though a large part of me felt so hurt and didn't want to beg for his attention. I'd had enough of that, surely.*

However, as was habit, my heartbeat and breath sped as I stared, taking him in. His wavy hair was longer, and he'd grown a beard on his square jaw. Something I'd seen online, but that wasn't the only thing different about him. His eyes were dull, and there were no smiles like the stories played out in the media. Even his shirt and trousers were creased. Had he slept in them? *Has he slept at all?* This man before me was not at all the elegant man I'd come to know.

The main question bouncing around in my head was, why did he come now? *Is our relationship still over or has he come back for me?*

There was an ache in my chest where my love for him lived. And my desire to comfort him battled with my fear at his surprise appearance and bleak condition. Would he welcome me into his arms? Would it still be as intimate?

"Nadia, come sit with me, please," he said in a soft tone.

I sat on the couch next to him. I really needed answers. Paul ran his hands through his hair and let out a long exhale. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Start wherever you want to.” He didn’t need to plan his words, just open up to me. It was all I wanted from him.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I was hurt when you shut me out. I’m not as fragile as you think—”

“I never thought you as fragile, Nadia. I thought of you as mine.”

My pulse picked up. *Thought instead of think*. But I dared to ask, “And what...what do you think now?”

“I think *I’m* weak. Love makes me weak. It was how I fucked up with Aubrey. It’s how I fucked things up with you.”

I frowned. “Are you saying this because you said you love me? That you think you can’t love me and be with me?”

“It’s not that. It’s...more complicated than that.” He shook his head.

“Then can you explain it? Because all I know is that you pushed me out of your life, you...you left me.” My voice caught, and I hugged my waist. *Didn’t he miss me? Did he care?*

“No, baby. I didn’t leave *you*, please believe me,” he pleaded in a gentle tone. “I left to give us both time to think, but I didn’t leave *you*. I moved you here to keep you safe. I sent you Laurence to help organize the staff to look after you. Anything you need, they will give you. Are they helping you here?”

“Yes. Everyone’s helpful, and I’m grateful.” *But I’d take us together over anything you could ever give me*. My eyes flicked to him.

He reached over and removed strands of hair from my face. “I couldn’t spend another day without seeing you. I hated how we left things between us in New York City.”

“I did too.” The tip of his fingers lightly brushed my arm. I shivered and moved my hands down to rest at my sides.

“Laurence told me how you were doing on your internship.”

“I hoped he would. It’s been good...you’ve been working too?” My brows raised.

“Work. I always work. That’s what I can always count on doing.” There was a twinge of annoyance in his tone. He appeared happy in the media, but I understood now that photos captured seconds. We existed in many minutes. “I missed you.”

My heart skipped a few beats. “I missed you, too.”

“There are things you don’t know about me. Things you need to know.”

Life drained from his eyes and it ached my heart. I touched his hand but stayed quiet.

He sighed. “When I call myself selfish, I’m telling you who I really am. Aubrey needed me, and I didn’t help her. I failed her.” His grief and regret were palpable, but I also learned from grief, we often twist the truth to punish ourselves.

“You didn’t fail Aubrey, you loved her. You married her.”

“Yeah, I did. I married her after I broke her heart.” He cleared his throat. “We had a fight when we were dating. She kept hiding things, stuff about her past, and it annoyed the hell out of me. When I found out the truth, she tried to explain her side. She begged me to try to understand her. But I wouldn’t listen. I wanted to argue, to punish her.” He let out a huff. “Fuck, what an asshole I was.”

“You were angry; we all get angry at times. You’re looking at the situation in hindsight because she’s gone, and you wish you could do things differently. But as Doctor Casey tells me all the time, we can’t change the past. We can only go on.”

He went quiet. Minutes went by, and my pulse quickened. *What if he closes himself off again?* “Did something happen after the fight?” I turned my head back towards him, and he sat rigidly. His eyes were vacant, staring off at nothing, but they were not empty. They were full.

My throat was clogged by the swell of my heart lodged in it. *Oh, Paul.* I took his hand.

“Aubrey was...she was so sweet, so fragile. She needed me. When I realized I fucked up, I tracked her down to her mother’s house. She was digging in the dirt. She’d cut her hair with the garden shears. I...I was too late. I told her I loved her, but...but my love didn’t matter anymore. She was gone.” His voice shook, and he bobbed his head and wiped his chin.

I squeezed his hand, but my arms were aching to hug him tight, wanting to take that pain. But I didn’t know what he’d do. I caught his gaze, blurred by his tears. “Listen to me, please. Love still matters, it *always* matters. I wish you believed this, but no one asked you to be perfect. I’m not perfect. And I’m sure that Aubrey wasn’t perfect either.” I paused, looking for the right words. “Paul, we all make mistakes, and from where I’m sitting, from things I’ve heard, it sounds like you helped her more than you think.”

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. She learned that night I didn’t have her back. She pretended to be fine, but she never dropped her guard with me again. She never let me protect or comfort her. But I still loved her, and I believed she’d come around. I told myself, we just needed time....” His voice drifted off.

Paul was so gentle and loving with me. He was also so protective; I couldn’t imagine him differently. “Well, you must have worked on it; you stayed together.”

“Yes, but things changed in my life, too. Dad stepped down from his Trust duties, and I had to step up. All I did was work.”

I bet she hated it. Much like I do at times. But this wasn’t about me. This was Paul finally opening up. He needed empathy.

“If she loved you, I’m sure she understood.”

“But *I’m* not sure. I knew it was too much. She worked with me in the studio, and came back, and we’d work on stuff at home. It was all blending together. I left her alone a lot too; I still had to travel.”

I nodded as I listened. Art was intimate, passionate, and emotional. Putting myself in Aubrey’s shoes, I would’ve struggled with our relationship if we shared the same art.

“I was fine when she didn’t want to be a gig musician or work at my company. I wanted to help her with her career, but she wanted to do it on her own. Her sister, Faith, made her feel embarrassed by the money. We fought over that too.”

I chewed my lip. *So had we.*

“Anyway, she started setting up private auditions. She wanted to play in an orchestra. But they didn’t work out. When one did, and the director knew me, she turned it down because she didn’t believe she earned it. She...she questioned everything about herself. She became blocked and couldn’t play her violin.”

“All artists have dry spells,” I murmured. There were times when I had no inspiration.

“Yes, I know, and told her that. All I wanted to do was comfort her, but she didn’t trust she could lean on me, tell me how she felt....And I’ve done the same to you—”

“My situation is different—”

“Not completely. You hid your pregnancy because you were afraid I’d hurt you, take your baby away.”

I shrank back into the couch and hunched my shoulders. There was no denying that.

He nodded. "You told me so, and I understand why now. I told you I wanted a child alone...I was lying to myself."

My throat closed. All this time, I'd been scared.

"Aubrey was afraid that my love for her depended on her playing the violin. That I didn't love her truly. So when she couldn't play anymore, she thought she had to change into something else for my love. She tried to get involved in charities and hold parties, like my mom, but her self-esteem was too broken. Then she tried to give me something else I wanted, a child. Fuck, I was overjoyed when she said she wanted to get pregnant. I was so blind, so arrogant."

Hindsight was definitely blurring the truth, I suspected. Would Paul ever see that?

"Maybe not. What if it means that you believed her? She's not here to say she never wanted a baby. And maybe, because of that, you're still hurting yourself."

"That's where you're wrong, and it all became clear to me on the honeymoon. I thought Prague would be good for us. It was where we fell in love. But it wasn't for Aubrey. Walking around Prague brought back memories of playing her beloved violin there. Her success on the song we wrote together there. She didn't want a child with me, she wanted *that* life. We...we had planned to try for a baby, but she didn't want to make love." His voice graveled, and he dropped his head.

"Oh, Paul. I'm sorry..." I whispered and moved closer to his side.

"She booked a flight and left a note saying that her mom was sick, but she knew I could easily find out the truth. She left because she was miserable. And I let her go because I couldn't bear her misery. I...I should have put her first. Given her the love and care she needed. It's my fault, and I'm already doing the same to you...."

My goodness. This man was so complex. His love and understanding of Aubrey were intermixed with his guilt and her rejection of the life he wanted to share with her. It helped me to know him better...but it made me love him more too. Perhaps Aubrey would have regretted leaving. But I'm not her, and I don't want Paul to keep believing that our reactions to things will be identical. *We sound so different.*

"Paul, I'm not Aubrey. I really feel for her and her difficulties in finding

her way. I, too, suffer that, but I'm different. I don't think you're being fair to yourself. You loved her and opened your life to her. She hadn't known she would die on that plane. She didn't get a chance to talk things out with you. Maybe you both would have worked it out or broke up. But I'm Nadia. I love you, and not because you saved me, but because of who you are: loving, protective, funny, caring, patient, charming, talented, and kind. There are so many things to love about you, Paul. We are so good together. You must know that."

He cupped the side of my face, and I pressed a kiss to his hand. His eyes bore into mine with a tenderness that took my breath. "I love you, and I'm selfish. I don't want to let you go." He slowly let his hand fall as his Adam's apple bobbed. "But I know now I'd take your life away, and it would be wrong."

I furrowed my brows. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I've been reckless with you. After the first time you thought you were pregnant, I should have done everything possible to stop it from happening again, but I didn't because I didn't care."

"It was a false alarm—"

"But I *didn't care*, Nadia. I wanted a baby with you. I would have bound you to me forever."

I believed I understood Paul, but I had to ask, "As a surrogate?"

"No, Nadia. I wanted you. So much. I thought if you became pregnant again, and we had a baby, everything would still be fine. But when I came on the boat, I knew the love I have for you was so deep inside me, it's painful. You have me helpless...I need you."

Hearing he wanted to have a family with me, that he needed me, filled me with a joy I could barely contain. I moved to hug him, but he held my arms and frowned. "No, Nadia, you don't understand. There's no freedom in a life with me. You're young, you're talented. Hell, you're at one of the best design companies in Paris. You have a chance at a great career. I'm at the place in my life where I want a family. I can't take that life from you."

I shook my head. "But you can't take away what I want, Paul. I don't want a life without you."

His eyes shone. "You say that now, but you're young. I can't be the cause of another life that turns into regrets—"

"So you're not willing to give me a choice?" Now I was just angry. "I met and fell in love with the man you are now. I know why your life is

private. I know to be part of it, I'd have boundaries."

He sighed heavily. "I want to believe that, but I don't want you to resent your life with me. Give yourself time. Give yourself a choice."

"What do you mean, Paul?"

His eyes bore into mine. "Give yourself over to Paris. Give yourself over to being young and free. I want you to reach for your goals without a thought of me. Then, we'll talk again."

"No, I don't think so, Paul." I glared at him. "I know you believe I'm young, and yes, I am. But age doesn't always determine insight and emotional intelligence. I know that I want the career I've worked hard for, but it doesn't have to be this very minute. Do I want to stay in Paris and enjoy this opportunity? Of course, I do. But why can't we meet in the middle with this?"

He gave me a weak smile. "I want to believe you, but your career and success have just started. It's not that I'm doubting you, Nadia, but I want you to have it all. You're already the talk of a fashion show you just showed up for. You have no idea of the power and talent you're capable of. You can go so far in your life."

"Yes, I can, and thank you for helping me get to where I am already. But I don't believe I need to do that alone. And I don't think loving someone means you should walk away and keep your distance, not if that's not what's best for both partners. Let's stay together." He reached over, pressed his palm to my cheek, and sighed. *Please don't give up on us, Paul. We are so much happier and stronger together.*

"My sweet Nadia. Okay, I will try. I'll try it your way."

His fingers moved over my bottom lip, and my eyes teared. Just his brief touch spiked my pulse and brought warmth to my skin. "Mmm," he murmured. His hand moved down my chin and neck, and I shivered. He moved closer, and I could feel the heat of his body and the familiar scent of his skin. I shifted my legs, and he looked down and licked his lips. We both knew I was wet; we both knew he wanted my pussy. "Oh, Nadia. I don't know what to do." His voice was deep and sensual, making me wetter.

"Make love to me; show me you love me, too," I whispered. I reached for him, and he clasped my wrists, trapping them in his hands. It was the sweet flex of his dominance. I was sure my eyes mirrored his and knew what he could see in them. There was love, but there was also madness, a desire to hold him inside me and never let go. "I love you, Nadia. Don't doubt that."

I'm here because I love you."

Hot tears fell down my face. "Oh, Paul...." He leaned over and kissed them. My skin tingled and warmed as my breasts swelled. I was so wet. *More. Paul. Give me more.* His mouth covered mine and our passion ignited. His lips pressed harder, his tongue thrust in, and I sucked on it, our moans vibrating between our sealed lips. We broke our kiss to breathe, and he let go of my wrists and yanked my top up, pulling my bra with it. His mouth latched on to my taut nipple, drawing hard on the tip, his hand massaging the other. My clit throbbed, and I arched my back. "Touch me...touch me all over," I moaned between breaths. My hands went into his hair, and he nuzzled his face against my breasts.

"Your skin is so soft. Damn it, I want you so bad. I can't resist you."

"Don't. Take me; take all of me."



CHAPTER 12

Paul let out a sexy grunt, and I let him take off my slacks along with the thong until I was naked. We kissed again, tangling, and stroking our tongues. *Off.* I tugged on his shirt, and he pulled it the rest of the way off with his trousers, leaving me to gaze at his strong muscular chest and defined abs to his thick, strong cock. I reached for it, greedily fisting it with two hands. He groaned and grasped my hair, pushing my head down. I licked the pre-cum that glistened on the smooth head and closed my lips around to suck his cock.

His breathing went heavier. “Fuck, suck it good, baby.” My eyes lifted to catch his pleasure. His eyes were dark, fire hot with lust, and his skin was taut and flush. His beauty was so striking it sent a hot spike of lust through my body. I opened my mouth wider as he rocked forward, sliding his cock in deeper. “Feels good, baby.” I swallowed, and he tugged on my hair as he rocked his cock in and out of my mouth. He pulled out and left the couch, knelt between my thighs, and pushed them wider. “Mmm, so sexy.” He kissed my slick lips, and I gasped.

“Mmm, dripping wet.” He licked the arousal at the top of my thigh, and up my slit. I quivered, clenched, and moaned. “Please, Paul.”

“I’ve got you.” He held my waist and tugged me to the floor. Gripping my hips, he commanded, “Ride my face.” He stretched out on his back. “I don’t want to miss a drop.”

Paul teased my nipples and groaned as I straddled his mouth. His tongue stroked hotly against my clit and swirled inside me as he swallowed quickly.

“Ohh, fuck, yes. Yes,” I rasped.

My breath and pulse moved quickly as I rocked my hips. His groans vibrated through me, and I shivered hard, breathing and squirming while he swirled and thrust his tongue inside me. I shuddered. My body continued to climb from each master glide, the pleasure coiling me tighter. “Ohh...ohh, Paul.” I panted and fucked his face madly, rocking against his mouth as he pleased me. He squeezed my ass, and I let go, my cunt clenched as the climax took me to ecstasy. “Ohh, God.”

Paul held me firm against his mouth as he lapped and sucked until I trembled, my sex spasming as I quivered. He lifted me as he sat up and caught his breath, leaning against the couch. He tugged me onto his lap. “I miss feeling you come. You have me weak, baby,” he said between staggered breaths. He smoothed my damp hair off my shoulder and kissed my neck. His hand went down between my thighs, pushing two of his fingers into me. “You’re just too hot. You need to come again,” he whispered in my ear.

“I do; please make me come.” He groaned as I shamelessly writhed, panting and moving my cunt against his fingers as they caressed that sweet spot inside. His fingers stroked in and out, and he used his thumb to rub my clit. I was already so sensitive from already coming. He massaged my breasts as he fucked me with his fingers. My back arched, my moans and breaths heavy.

“Don’t come, Nadia.”

He strummed my clit and pushed his soaked fingers in and out faster. I threw my head back as I squirmed. “I can’t. Ohh.” I couldn’t hold back, and Paul knew it. My inner walls squeezed around his fingers in ecstasy as I came.

“Mmm. Didn’t I tell you not to come, Nadia?” His tone was sharp. He moved me onto my back and pulled my hands above my head. “You keep them there.”

I panted as my pulse spiked. “Spread those sexy legs.” I followed his sensual command, gapping my legs wider. His eyes were dark with need as he climbed on top of me.

He slid his thick cock between my soaked slit, and I cried out breathless, “Ohh, please put it in.”

“Fuck, baby.” He climbed off me and got a condom from his trousers. I stared as he rolled it on. It was our first time using a condom. But he didn’t hesitate to return on top of me. He slid it against my hot flesh, then pushed

his hard cock into me. We both cried out in pleasure at how good we felt together. Even with the barrier, I lost myself in the fullness of him inside of me. I let out a sob as emotions washed over me. I missed him.

Paul kissed and gripped me, swiveling his hips. I wrapped my legs around him, taking his weight on me. Our breathing became heavier and faster as he continued rolling his hips, fucking me with short thrusts. My hips lifted to take more of him in. He picked up the rhythm, and our bodies rocked and glistened with sweat. Sweet slick sounds of his cock inside me filled my ears. My pulse was as fast as my pants, moving at a feverish pace against each other until I came, clenching hard on his cock. Ecstasy flooded my body as I tensed and cried out, “Paul, ohh.”

“Oh, Nadia. Fuck.” His body jerked. I could still feel the flex of his cock as he came. *Oh, Paul. You’re mine.*

Paul let out a grunt after he slowly pulled out of me. The condom was wet as he eased it off and tied it.

“Be right back.”

Paul reached over, dropped the condom into a waste bin, and pulled me into his arms. “We’ll go to bed.” He kissed my forehead.

I wrapped my arms and legs around him as he lifted me and carried me up the stairs. He placed me down and instantly pulled me on top once he settled next to me. “I’ve missed you so much. I want you to hold me all day.”

He grinned broadly. “You hugging me is persuasive. What would you like to do tonight?”

“You’re staying?” I asked excitedly, but then I frowned, remembering the party.

Paul touched my chin. “What is it?”

I lowered my eyelids. “There’s an industry party at Hotel Le Meurice, but I’m not going to go.”

“Oh, yes, you are. You’re here to network and build working relationships. That doesn’t change, even with me here.”

“Will you come with me?” My request was more of a plea. I didn’t want to be without him.

Paul trailed his hand down my face, his eyes soft on me. “No, Nadia. I’m serious about you living your life and experiencing all you need to experience. It’s part of your internship. I’d only be a distraction. I want you to go for all your opportunities.”

I groaned. “You sound like Tomas.”

“Tomas rose to creative director at Givenchy. I’d say take his advice as gold.”

“But what will you do?” My hands traced over the hair on his chest, and I leaned over and kissed it.

“Mmm...I have a documentary to compose.” He sighed.

“For Ingrid Ludwig,” I mocked.

He grinned. “We’re friends.”

“Tell that to her face. She has hungry eyes for you, as my mom would say.”

He chuckled. “You’re jealous? Don’t be. I don’t care what her face says, I don’t want her.”

I smirked. “You did at one time.”

“I did when I thought I needed to be something I’m not. I didn’t love her, and besides, we’re better as friends. I’ll make sure you meet.”

“Okay, Paul. I trust you.”

“Just as I trust you with Hayden Madsen. Laurence said he stopped by with a vespa.” His voice held annoyance.

I squinted at him. “Is that why you came?”

“No, Nadia. I came because I love you.” He kissed me, and my heart swelled. “I do have other news for you and hear me out. My mother’s presenting a Kusama exhibit that’s touring here. She said she’d like to have dinner with you.”

I pursed my lips. “I’m very busy.”

“You needn’t be threatened by her. She has no power over me, and it’s important to me that we heal your pain there. If you do decide to be with me, I want you to have a civil relationship with her. She knows what it’s like to be with a Crane.” His tone was even, but there was his vulnerability. I knew it now to be his fear of rejection.

I placed his hand on my stomach. “And maybe one day she’ll be a grandma.”

His eyes gleamed with a longing that tugged at my heartstrings. He visibly swallowed but didn’t answer, and I understood why. He was still unsure if I could sacrifice so much for him—or so he thought was a sacrifice. I wanted a family, though I also struggled with his protectiveness and isolated lifestyle because of his fame. *He’ll probably lock me in a room until I gave birth to his heir. And that in itself was daunting. I may raise a Crane, a child who would inherit a business empire. And what would that mean for me as a*

designer? Would I even have time for a career?

Paul started to move his hand away, but I squeezed it holding it in place.
“I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.”

Joy filled my heart. Paul’s promise was a start, but I needed him to see how much his leaving had hurt me. I didn’t deserve to live with a nagging fear and doubt. “These weeks without you have been horrible. Not knowing...doubting your love. Trying to figure out what, if any, future we had. Promise never to let me go.”

“I hear you, my love. I love you.” He kissed me hard, his hands moving like my lover, caressing, soothing, healing. And I was happy because, even with all that was to come, we had love.



CHAPTER 13

The sound of the piano drifted up the stairs, and a warmth spread in my spirit. I stretched out on the bed and smelled the sheets. *Paul's aftershave*. Paul was here, and it took all the strength I had to not go back down the stairs to hold him and never let go. He'd unburdened the pain he carried with Aubrey. He wanted a family. She wanted her career. Her untimely death ended their chance to find a way back to each other. Aubrey struggled, sure enough, and Paul was so certain I'd do the same. In his place, I could see why. Before Paul, my world was smaller, and what I thought I could do was limited. Then he showed me a bigger world. And today, I stood next to top designers at the top of their game, helping on a fashion show I would've lost my head over online. But would all that have to change if we stayed together?

My mind mulled over numerous scenarios as I showered. Paul was a public figure and private. I would have to live the same way. How could that work? What about the criminal and civil cases? Would I be safe? *Isabelle found me easily*. What if it was a man from the boat? A trickle of fear rose, and my pulse picked up. *No. I have Laurence and Ben*. And what kind of life would I have as a designer with security around me all the time? Would life return to normal? What was normal anymore? *I don't know. But for now, I have to prepare for the work party*.

There was one person I knew I could confide in and get sound advice. I checked the time and called my mom. It was noon in Texas, and even so, she sounded drowsy when she answered. "Well, if it isn't my super talented,

Parisian daughter.”

I laughed. “Hey, Mom. How are you and Dad doing?”

“We’re fine. Everything is going good. We’re back in Wisconsin.”

“You are? Since when?”

“A few days ago. I’m sorry I didn’t update you.”

“Sorry, I haven’t called. I haven’t gotten used to the time difference, and I’ve been so busy. When I think I should call, it’s too late or too early.”

“It’s okay, honey. If anything happened, you would hear from us regardless of time.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“So tell me, how is Paris? What’s it like living there?” Her tone was upbeat.

I stared out the window at the beauty of the sun reflecting over the stone architecture. “It’s beautiful, exciting, busy. I think I’m in shock every day I’m here. The hardest part is the language. I have to think of what I say to be understood. It feels like work to talk to people.”

“I knew that would be hard. Vacations are fun, but living is always harder. Even in Texas it took some getting used to. They have a different social language.”

“Yeah, that too. I practice French, and I have an electronic translator to help me when it’s hard, but it doesn’t know everything. I have to ask for help all the time and it feels like a constant bother. Fast food doesn’t feel fast, people eat late, and they know so much about art, history, travel. I feel kind of dumb.” I left the window and sat on the edge of the bed.

“You’re being too hard on yourself. They asked you to come, they know it wouldn’t be easy. It’ll come. Be patient with yourself. How’s Givenchy?”

“Competitive. Intimidating. Incredible. The designers are on top of their game. I have to work harder to keep up.” I walked over to the closet and looked at my dresses, choosing a denim corset piece.

“Are they being nice to you? Are you making friends?”

“I’ve made one. His name is Wyatt and he’s an intern, but a few years older. He’s a more experienced designer and really kind. He helps me out a lot. Tomas is always looking out for me. They all try to be helpful. They also encourage me to go out and see more of Paris. And the more I do I spend. It’s getting expensive.”

“Eating out in Texas was pricy too. I went back to cooking.”

“Yeah, but dining out is part of being social here.”

“I’ll send you money—”

“No...No, Mom. I’m fine. Seriously. Paris being expensive is just like New York City. There’s always something exciting going on that you can’t miss out on. Oh, and today I was helping with a Givenchy fashion show.”

“Wow. How was it?”

“Nothing short of spectacular. I’ll send you pictures. The designer had me wear one of the dresses, and I was photographed.” My pulse picked up at the thought of the public exposure, but Mom let out an excited cheer.

“Oh, my goodness. My daughter is modeling in Paris, too.”

“Hardly, Mom; I was just sitting with Tomas and the designer, Hayden Madsen.”

“You’re downplaying it. I know you. You’d be jumping all over here like a firecracker if that happened a year ago. But I guess you live such a worldly life now that you’re not as affected. Paul whisked you away to exciting places. Oh, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to mention him.”

“No, Mom. You can talk about Paul. He’s actually here right now.”

“He is?” Her voice was as excited as my own.

“Yes, he came back, and we talked.”

“That’s good, but that has you worried?”

“Yes...no...I don’t know. He says he wants to be together, but he’s afraid to ask me to put his needs first. I mean, his life and needs are complicated.”

“Not so complicated, Nadia. You need to be honest with yourself. He’s older and an accomplished celebrity living in a luxurious, secluded bubble. To be with him, that’s your future.” Her tone was even, but my stomach flipped. *Would choosing to be a mom first disappoint her?*

“And you disapprove?” I chewed on my lip.

“It’s not for me to tell you what to do.”

“But Mom, that’s what you do.” We laughed.

“Seriously, you knew all that, but there is something else....”

Mom always knew when I was holding something back.

“Paul told me he wants babies.”

“Babies?” Mom’s voice rose with delight. “Sorry. I keep promising myself I won’t get excited about grandchildren, but I can’t help it. Everyone I meet here keeps sending me cute videos of their grandchildren sleeping,” she half-joked. “That’s what I wish for one day, but I’d still be happy even if it never happened. Now, what do you want, Nadia?”

“I don’t know. When I thought I was pregnant, I was ready and willing. I

want children, too—”

“When you’re married—” Mom cut in. “Call me old-fashioned all day, but I haven’t heard that word mentioned. If he wants babies, he better plan on marrying you.”

“He didn’t say marriage.”

“What *did* Paul say?” Her tone wasn’t exactly delighted.

“He said that he wants me to live a life without him before making a decision to be with him because he’s afraid I’ll resent him or regret it, like he thinks his wife Aubrey had.”

“Oh, I see. Such a terrible shame what happened to her. He’s cautious, and that’s good. You’re both at very different places in your lives; that can’t be ignored. He’s lived more life than you. I think he’s doing the right thing.”

I slumped on the bed. “But I don’t care. I don’t need to wait to get a life when I already know I love him. You knew you loved Dad in high school—”

“But I also dated other guys, too. He’s the love of my life, but not my first love.”

Mom never talked about dating other men. Then again, when did we ever really have conversations about men when I spent so much of my time pushing men away in fear that I’d end up pregnant and alone? And in a way, Paul did leave. He’s still so heavily involved in my life, though. “It’s all so much to try to figure out, Mom. I just know I love him, and I would have wanted our baby. And I’d still want to build a life with him, including children.”

“But I believe Paul is right about you not living much on your own. It sounds like he wants you to have some freedom there—or as much as you can without his interference. Go be a designer, go on adventures. And if you’ve done some living and you still choose to go into his complex private life, you’ll go in fully knowing what you’ve signed up for.”

I hadn’t fully understood what Paul meant when he talked about Aubrey. But from what I knew now, she had a hard life, but she also had an independent one. She hadn’t lived inside his complex private life until they had already fallen in love, whereas I’d fallen in love with Paul while in an arrangement. *I love him more still.*

“Think on it, Nadia.”

“Okay, Mom.” I sighed heavily. “I’ll give myself time. The internship has so much going on already. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s playing poker with Gunnar.”

I tensed. “Gunnar? Gunnar’s there?”

“Yep. Dad’s using every horrible joke he has in his arsenal, but Gunnar is giving him a run for his money. It’s quite entertaining.”

“But, hmm. I don’t know why he came instead of sending Ben or someone else.”

“Gunnar came because he likes us. He also cuts through a lot of red tape at getting legal stuff done with the house and hospital.”

“Okay. Tell him thank you.”

“I will, and oh, I almost forgot. He said he’d call you soon with something about legal developments.”

My pulse jumped and my stomach twisted in knots. If Gunnar told Mom to tell me that, it meant negotiations were not going well, and I might have to make myself available for a testimony. *Which also means the public will be all over us again.* And maybe that explains why Isabelle tried to get into my good graces. Had she wanted me to influence how she was treated by Gunnar and our team of lawyers? I didn’t want to be spiteful, but I really didn’t want anything to do with her. And if she was treated how I was treated on the boat, then I’m not sure I’d mind. But I wasn’t sure how much bad news I could handle right now.

“Okay, tell him to give me a couple of days, please?”

“He’ll do it for me.” Mom’s tone was confident. And I needed to meet the Gunnar that had my parents wrapped around their fingers. Overall, I admired how Mom and Dad had taken all the changes in their lives in stride. Truly, Paul had done a lot for us, and they were as grateful as I was for his help.

“Tell Dad I miss and love him. I love you, Mom.”

“We love you so much. And please take Paul’s advice and enjoy Paris.”

We ended the call. I stared at the denim dress again and went over to my laptop to do a quick search for Hotel Le Meurice. I exchanged the denim corset I planned to wear for a vintage Givenchy, black, one-shoulder cocktail dress. I curled my hair and finished off my makeup, copying the pencil brows, lashes, and gloss lips the makeup artist had done at the show that I admired.

“My Love” by Paul McCartney and Wings filtered upstairs.

My heart swelled. *That’s him.*

I carried my heels down the stairs and left them in the foyer, before rushing over to Paul at his piano bench and hugged his neck.

He continued to play, but said, “There you are. I was going to wake you

up.”

“I wish you had.” I pressed a kiss to his neck.

He turned around and his gaze warmed as he looked at me. “You look ravishing.”

“Then ravish me,” I joked.

He sighed. “I wish I could, but my trip here wasn’t planned. I have to return to Germany and—”

“And we’ve just started going through my family archives.” A woman’s alto voice spoke behind us. I turned and saw Ingrid Ludwig standing by the couch with a bright smile. Her blond hair in a side twist looked lovely, and her casual, soft leather jacket and cargo jeans looked trendy and elegant. She gave me a wave. “I’m Ingrid.”

I walked over and shook her hand. “Nice to meet you.” I turned back to Paul. “You just got here. Can’t you leave tomorrow?”

“I’m disappointed, too. But it’s all been set up. I’m dabbling in directing.” His smile broadened.

“You are?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes. I’ve done it on a smaller scale before, but this would be more extensive. And I’m also considering doing a documentary on my family.”

“That’s great, Paul.” I kissed him again.

“I hear you have a party to attend tonight?” Ingrid mentioned in a light tone.

“Yes. Well, it’s work-related.”

“A party as work?” Her voice raised an octave. “I mean, wow. You get to spend a few weeks in Paris before going back to school. So cool.” She laughed. “Gosh, when was the last time we were in college? Ten years? I went to Yale Business school. I can’t imagine going back to homework.”

I tensed. “It’s more than homework—”

“It’s a chance to network,” Paul added and opened his hands, and I went over and clasped them. Our eyes locked and my heart lifted.

“I could go later and we could have dinner?”

“Next time.” His gaze was soft on me. “You should get going. Will Tomas be there?”

“No. I’m meeting a new friend there.”

“Who?” Paul asked.

“Wyatt. You must see his designs.”

He grinned. “Okay. I’ll try to come back as soon as I can to see you.”

“Just like old times,” I murmured and hugged him. “Don’t make it too long.”

“I won’t, baby.”

He kissed me again, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Thank you for tonight. For all of tonight,” I whispered, and he held me tighter.

“We should go, too, Paul,” Ingrid called over. “I need to feed Bobby.”

“Oh, yes, Bobby,” Paul echoed, and they laughed.

“Your dog?” I asked.

Ingrid nodded her head. “Yes. He has a trainer that travels with me, but I like to do a lot of it myself.”

“So you came all this way with Paul for his short visit?” I said in a light tone.

She squinted but smiled. “I had things for Bobby here, so I took the ride. Anyway, it’s so nice to meet you.” Her tone was cheery, but it still felt dismissive.

Paul took my hand, bringing my attention back to him. “I’ll be right back.” He placed his arm around my shoulder, and I held on to his waist and we walked out of the house. “The visit was too short. Are you sure you can’t stay and have dinner?”

“I wish I could.” He kissed the side of my face. “You can call me anytime, and I’ll try to get back. Now.” He stopped us by the car door, took a deep breath, and held me at arms-length. His gaze washed over me, drinking me in, as his lips spread into a dazzling smile that struck me with awe.

“You’re so handsome,” I whispered.

“You’re beautiful.” His expression turned earnest. “Laurence will stay close by, okay?”

“That’s fine with me.”

“You’re so accommodating. It’s sexy.”

“It is,” I echoed. He kissed me and squeezed my waist playfully, and we laughed as he helped me into the back of the car.

He leaned his head inside. “Have fun and know it’s what I want for you.” His tone turned serious.

I cupped his face and rubbed the hair on his jaw. We kissed twice. “Go.”

“She’ll be fine,” Laurence whispered behind him. “I’m here.”

Paul moved back from the car door, and Laurence squeezed Paul’s shoulder and closed the door. But we stared at each other through the window. He went to stand in front of the house. Ingrid came and joined him.

Her hand rested on his arm, but that wasn't what bothered me—or at least, not the only thing. There was something about the way she looked at him that reminded me of the gossip magazines.

Yearning.

And I wasn't sure if I should worry.



CHAPTER 14

Nadia: I'm on my way.

Wyatt: à bientôt

See you soon. I'll be fluent in no time.

The press and photographers were out, but they were being held back behind barricades with tourists by security. Goosebumps broke across my skin, and my pulse turned erratic. Where the stars went, the media came—or so the saying goes. I wanted to leave, which meant I needed to go on. I took a few deep breaths to calm my nerves. *All I have to do is go inside. I'll be fine.*

Laurence came around and opened my door as cameras flashed. He used his body to block clear images of me, and security stepped forward to keep the photographers and press back as they moved us inside.

I squeezed Laurence's hands, and he handed me off to Wyatt. "Call me, and I'll be right here."

"Thank you." A weight lifted off me, and I watched Laurence walk out. He'd become a person I could always count on—and I understood why Paul always kept him close. He kept the press at bay, but I knew I couldn't avoid them forever. I'd need to prepare myself. *But how?*

Wyatt broke my trance by kissing both of my cheeks in greeting. His gaze moved over my dress approvingly. "Bonsoir, Nadia. *Tu es magnifique.*"

"Thank you. So are you." He wore a single-breasted, structured black suit with minor embellishments of silk piping and extra buttons that fit his mix-

textile style. We were dressed to impress, as was everyone we passed as we walked under weighted crystal chandeliers and gabled ceilings. The hotel was right out of Versailles, and I was instantly captivated as we navigated past Corinthian columns seated between French classical oil paintings and fine furnishings. It was French Baroque opulence and grandiose, pairing well with Hayden's excessiveness displayed at his show.

As we moved through the rooms, we passed small circles of people. Some we both recognized from Givenchy. Other groups of celebrities, socialites, and elitists in the art industry were chatting above the low hum of modern instrumental music. Their eyes moved over us with a vacant warning not to approach. *Or maybe I'm just feeling intimidated.* When I was with Paul, he was often approached with warm smiles and good wishes. Then again, he, as a Crane, always had fame. That was his normal.

We located the other interns.

"I'm heading to Milan for a fashion shoot," Ellie announced excitedly when we walked up. "Patrick also has news." Ellie elbowed him, and he grinned at her.

"I'm moving to the marketing team. I have a good eye for trends and a chance at a full-time job. I'll take that." He repeated in English for me.

"Congratulations," Wyatt and I enthused.

"I also have something to share," Wyatt continued. "Hayden has offered to bring me in on a casual line."

"But I thought you wanted to work on your own line? That's why you took the internship in the first place," Ellie pointed out.

Wyatt shrugged. "It's funding. I have to go where I can work and stay visible. Every step counts."

While I thought the internship was a huge step, I understood it wasn't the finish line. As Professor Elan taught, ninety-nine percent of us would fail, and fashion design should only be pursued out of love and not necessity. *And if a bigger opportunity comes, take it.* I was instantly reminded of my reaction to Hayden earlier when he gave me an opportunity to wear his clothes at the hottest show in the industry. I had been influenced by the privileges given to me by Paul. *Hayden was right; saying no is a luxury in our astronomically competitive industry.*

"What about you, Nadia?"

I grinned. "I did my first fashion show today. I'm happy with that."

"Nadia's also doubling as a model," Wyatt teased.

They all laughed as I posed playfully, and we chatted about what we loved about the fashion show today. Decidedly, I didn't mention that Hayden had offered me a chance to work with him in Monaco. It seemed I had so many fortunes given to me, and hearing their news reminded me how hard it was to be a designer. My reality was so different, and if it continued, it would never be normal.

"Would you care for a drink?" a server asked, carrying glasses of white wine. We took them, along with one of the cream-filled appetizers that another waiter passing by served. I excused myself and went to the restroom. When I returned, I found them all in a new circle of people.

My eyes darted around and dread churned my stomach. On one hand, I wanted to approach, but on the other, I feared the questions that would be asked once someone learned who I was. *What should I do?*

A hand brushed my back, and I turned around to find Hayden. He wore a simple black suit and fitted T-shirt. His hair was gelled and parted to the side. It was a classical style, but on him it looked chic.

His blue eyes narrowed. "Why are you standing alone by the wall?"

I put on a smile. "I'm just taking it all in. It's a lovely party."

"It is, and you should enjoy it." Hayden's voice held conviction. "Why do you behave like this?" He seemed genuinely confused, but there was a commanding edge to his voice, expecting an answer.

I glanced at my hands holding the wineglass. "I've never been good at approaching new people."

"That's pitiful bullshit. You learn from practice." Hayden placed his hand firmly on my back. "I'll introduce you to some people you should know in Paris."

Hayden moved to the groups I passed with Wyatt, and they opened to him like flowers in the sun. "This is Nadia Sokol. She wore my Allure dress from the Glam Collection today at the Givenchy show where she is interning. Nadia also exhibited her first showing last month in New York City."

My eyes widened hearing the way Hayden presented me. He didn't use Paul; he used my own achievements. As a result, I received polite handshakes and a few exchanges of my newly printed business cards that I shared with buyers, and textile and marketing representatives. Though some said, "Oh, how nice to start in Paris," then turned to speak to the person next to them. While still others asked, "Weren't you in Rome recently with Paul Crane?"

"Yes," I answered politely.

“Ohh, you’re *that* Nadia...Hayden, your show was a triumph. When can we talk you into doing an interview? Are you going to work on the new *Titan* film?” I stood smiling while he answered, “*Oui*, Titan will be an exclusive.” They were thrilled at the news, and he’d move me to more circles. As quickly as I was introduced, I was mostly dismissed. When we stepped away from them, I deflated. “Thank you, but you don’t need to babysit me.”

He scoffed. “Is that what you think? I would never.”

I smiled at him. “Thank you, but I think I’m too small to go around circles.”

“*Absurde*. It’s going better than it had for me.”

My brows rose. “Really?”

“Yes. The woman that kissed me over there...”

I spared a look behind me at the older woman with octagon thick glasses. “She had her security remove me from her lobby a few years ago. Now she writes endlessly about how amazing I am and begs for access.”

“How do you put up with it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I must. I’m relevant now, but I won’t be forever. I need to promote myself at every turn—that’s what it takes to continue. Of course, unless you have a wealthy benefactor.”

Although Hayden didn’t mention Paul by name, I knew him well enough to know he’d fund my line tomorrow. And I, like everyone else, would think I didn’t work for my success, that I didn’t deserve it even. Paul had told me that had happened to Aubrey. She questioned her merit and second guessed herself. *Am I doing the same to myself already?*

“You’re upset, no?” Hayden asked, and I bit the inside of my cheek. He was quite observant, and I’d have to school my expressions.

I straightened my spine and smiled. “Not at all. Thank you for letting me wear your dress today and for introducing me to your guests.”

Hayden’s smile broadened. “It’s what I’m here to do.” His eyes scanned over my dress approvingly. “I love this dress; it looks like one of mine.”

My lips parted, but I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t thought of Hayden when I chose it or what he’d think if he saw it.

“I know it’s Givenchy. I recognize it,” he added.

I nodded in confirmation.

“Seeing you in one of my dresses inspired me, and I had to have you wear another. You’re a muse. You’re also stunning. I see why Paul Crane’s enchanted.”

I dipped my head. “I don’t know about that.”

His gaze lingered on my lips. “Modest, too, hmm.” He sighed. “It’s Wyatt’s turn. Don’t stand like a wallflower. Be fascinating. Charm. Talk.”

“*En Francais*,” I joked.

“*Oui*. Try.” He brushed my arm, then walked over to Wyatt and immediately took him around for introductions. Wyatt was charming and much more at ease with himself. He appeared to receive a good reception, which I was happy for and admired.

“Hayden’s a good man,” Josephine said as she stepped closer to me.

“Yes, I suppose he is,” I murmured and gave my empty glass to a server.

“He’d done the same for me when I was working as a buyer at a department store. Now I’m at Givenchy.”

I smiled at her. “That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, it is. He’s an exceptional designer...passionate, attentive.” Her tone turned wistful.

I glanced at her and saw she was staring at him. “You like him.”

Her smile broadened. “I do, but who doesn’t? He’s extraordinary.”

Hayden turned and crooked his finger at Josephine.

“Enjoy the party.” Josephine rushed forward to Hayden, and he placed his arm low on her back. Our eyes met, and I quickly turned my head away. It wasn’t my concern what he had going on with Josephine. *Or the brunette in the minidress.*

I left the room and went to the adjacent one, where music was playing and some people were dancing.

“It’s quite a party,” a woman spoke next to me.

“Yes. It’s a lovely venue.”

“You’re Nadia Sokol.”

My head turned toward her. She had a beautiful head of white hair, well coiffured into a bun. Her lined face lifted into a dazzling smile that I couldn’t help but return. “Yes, I am. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Christina Ralls.” She presented herself, but her tone made it seem like I should recognize her name, but I didn’t.

“I’m sorry. Have we been introduced before?”

Her lips turned down in a frown. “You don’t recognize my name? Well, I suppose you wouldn’t know everyone on the lawsuit. You do clean up nicely—so nicely, in fact, that I’d have thought you were someone special instead of an escort.”

I stiffened. “I’m most certainly not an escort.” I moved to walk past, but she caught my arm.

“My husband was on the yacht for a business meeting with his friends. He had no idea what you and your ilk were up to.”

“I was up to nothing. Let go of my arm,” I said in a sharp tone.

“I will, but I need you to listen.” She let go. “Louis has been fired from his job as CEO of Technologies Pharmaceuticals. He’s in the hospital being treated for depression, but here you are, out partying. So many good men are having their reputations ruined because you used your body to allure him, and while pregnant, too.”

My skin heated. “I, too, was tricked into attending that party—”

“Nice story; too bad no one believes you. He swore he saw you partying and pregnant. I mean, how could you not know you were pregnant?” She snorted.

I narrowed my gaze at her. I wasn’t supposed to talk to anyone about this, but I couldn’t take being talked down to by a woman I’ve never met before. She didn’t know me. She had no right to judge me. “I don’t know why you feel you have the right to say these things to me. I was almost raped, I miscarried, and my life was threatened. And it was by men like your husband. Yet, you’re attacking me?”

“You’re obviously fine.” She gestured down my body. “You were prancing down the runway today, hardly the vision of someone who’s distraught. And because of you, good men have lost their livelihoods.”

I clenched my jaw. “Sure. Those same ‘good men’ were trying to have sex with underage girls there. Did you know there were girls as young as fourteen? Your ‘business party husband’ ruined their lives. Where is your concern for them?”

Gunnar had shared that at least three of the girls were that young. They were trafficked in for a certain clientele by Landon. The boat party had been much more extensive and illegal than the original Lollipop gatherings. The party attendees never expected to be found out, and they wouldn’t have if Isabelle hadn’t pushed for me to come to the party. Nausea churned in my stomach.

Her face drained of color and her eyes darted around. “This is no place for this conversation.”

I pressed my hand to my chest and could feel the hammering of my heart. “Oh, but it’s fine to blame me for being hurt?”

“Christina, what are you doing?” Hayden appeared behind us.

“Oh, nothing.” Christina smiled. “I was just asking Nadia here some questions.”

“You did more than that, you were cruel,” he said in a terse tone. “I want you to leave.”

Her face turned bright red.

“No, actually, I’ll go. It’s been a long day. Thank you, Hayden.” My words rushed out of my mouth and I quickly walked off to the lobby. There, I took out my phone to text Laurence.

Nadia: I’m where you dropped me off. I’d like to leave now. Would you please pick me up? Thank you.

Laurence: I’ll be there in five minutes.

Hayden caught up with me. “I had no idea Louis was on the boat, or she wouldn’t have been invited tonight. I’m sorry.”

I lifted my shoulders and sighed. “If it wasn’t her, it would’ve been someone else. That’s my life now.”

He rubbed his jaw. “I hadn’t realized how hard things must be for you, but you handled it with grace.”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

Christina Ralls had caught me off guard, but I had learned the public always judged what little was known to them. I had to be prepared and not let it affect me. *I’ve done nothing wrong.* That was the truth. I hadn’t done anything wrong except trust the wrong people.

“Then you should stay and enjoy the party.” Hayden smiled. “You can dance, yes?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I’m ready to go...I’m not leaving because of Christina. I’m tired and I have a full week of work ahead of me.”

Even though I said that to Hayden, a part of me wanted to run to Paul and hide in his world. But even he couldn’t always protect me. I wouldn’t allow Christina or anyone else to win by disappearing. I would continue to move forward.

“Well, rest up. We have Monaco soon.” His tone was cheery, unlike him. A small spread on my lips despite what happened.

“Thank you, Hayden. You can go back to your party.”

He scoffed. “You dismiss me?”

“Uhm, no.”

He grinned. "I only do what I choose. Now tell me how much you loved my show."

I laughed, and he listened while I fawned over every garment and set up. "What inspired you?"

"I love the twenties and thirties here in Europe and Hollywood. That's what I say to everyone, but...." He leaned closed to my ear. "I watched *Metropolis*."

I beamed at him and bounced on the balls of my feet. "Oh, my God. I loved that movie."

His gaze was warm. "I see. But I'm a lover of neo-noir."

Laurence appeared and walked to my side.

Hayden's lips were soft as he brushed my cheek. "*Bon nuit, Nadia.*"

I blinked rapidly. "Good night." *Everyone kisses goodbye here. It's nothing.*

Laurence quickly moved me to the car, and I sighed heavily in the back seat. *What a relief.*

"How about a ride around Paris?" he asked.

"Yes, Laurence, I'd love it." He drove around past the monuments, and the beauty of the night lifted my spirits and distracted me from the lingering thought of Christina Ralls' cruel words. We pulled into the house and ate chocolate ice cream before I headed up to bed. There, I allowed myself to let go of the feelings I held in. Tears burned my eyes. *How could you not know you were pregnant?*

It was something I thought about often. *I didn't know for sure, but I begged for help.* Trevor and Landon's leers and snide remarks filled my head.

You escorts party too hard.

No doll, I can't help.

Get rid of her.

My pulse raced, and my skin prickled with heat. I clawed at the dress to remove it. *Too hot.* My mind began to replay the boat party. *No. No. No.* I pinched my wrist to refocus. *Stop. Focus on the rest.* Paul walking in the bathroom on the boat. He saved me. *I'm here. I'm fine. I'm strong,* I repeated over and over, my attention listing all that I could see that was real before me. After a few tense minutes, my pulse eased. I meditated to calmness in respite.

Pulling off the dress, I went into the shower and stood under the hot spray until it ran cold. It was times like these that I felt so alone. Yes, Paul said he would always be with me. He'd comfort me, that I was sure of. However, that

was not sustainable. *I have to do the work myself if I'm going to recover.* Therefore, I decided to send a message to Doctor Casey.

Once I was back in comfortable clothes, I grabbed my laptop and settled on top of my bed. And I typed out a quick journal note while everything was fresh in my mind.

I ran into Christina Ralls, and she was confrontational. Her harsh words hurt me immensely, but I tried to stay calm. When I returned home, I couldn't stop shaking. It was as if my mind couldn't stop thinking about her insults. She said I was partying and knew I was pregnant. But she was so wrong. I didn't party or know I was pregnant. My heart raced and my skin felt like it had a rash. I used the calming effects, but it took time. I don't know how I'm going to testify. I'm scared I'll freeze. I want to block it out and let it go.

After reading it over I sent it and went to bed, turning on the television. I drifted.

Buzz.

Paul? He hadn't called yet. But when I checked it was Danielle Crane. Paul must have had her name programmed into my phone. I hesitated, but decided it was rude not to answer. Even though it was nearly ten p.m. "Hello, Ms. Crane."

"Hello, Nadia. I'm sorry for the late call. I promise not to keep you on long."

"It's fine," I told her and sat on the bed.

"Well, first I want to say how sorry I am for your loss. It was horrific what happened to you. I'm also sorry for the manner in which I treated you. Will you please accept my apology?"

"Yes. Thank you." I accepted because I never wanted a bad relationship between us. Paul's mother was an important part of his life. He had so few who were close to him. I hoped for, if not friendship, then kindness between us.

"Great and thank you for accepting. I don't know if Paul mentioned it, but have you ever seen Kusama's art?"

"Online I have, and I love it. Paul mentioned you were working on a show?"

"Yes, I am. I'm part of a foundation that sponsored Kusama's *Infinity Mirror* installation at Musée D'Orsay. I'll be doing an early walk-through on Wednesday, and I'd like for you to come and have dinner with me."

Dani coming to talk to me after Paul told me what happened with Aubrey seemed equally timed. I knew she wanted to clear the air, but I suspected I was going to get more information on Crane expectations—something Paul wanted me to know before making a commitment. At the same time, the internship had flexible scheduling, but Tomas also had his one-on-one design that was due.

“I honestly don’t know if I’ll have the time free, but if I do, I’d love to go.”

“Great. I’ll speak with you soon.”



CHAPTER 15

“Bonjour.” I sang out and waved at Wyatt as he came outside of his apartment building. We were off to Saint-Ouen Flea Market. Everyone at the office had something unique from there. And with Wyatt, I had a good chance, as he was the expert at finding gold in a bail of straw with his styles of mixed textile fabric. I pulled out an embroidered jacket I found while walking around the city. “Do you like it?” I asked in French.

Wyatt’s large hazel eyes widened approvingly. “*Où l’as-tu acheté?*”

“*Marché Vernaison*. It’s yours.” I held out the jacket.

His smile evaporated, and he clicked his tongue.

My brows rose. Had I done something wrong? “*Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?*”

“You do too much.”

“*Non.*”

“*Oui*. Every day.” He listed off rides home, coffee, lunch, a book he mentioned in a conversation I heard he wished to buy.

“But I...” Honestly, I didn’t know how to put it in words. Wyatt wasn’t rich. He worked as a private French tutor and sold his work online, like Xander. It afforded the apartment he lived in. But when we were out, he always went for discounts and bargains. He seemed to spend as little as possible.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to help you.”

“I don’t need your help, Nadia. I know you have money, but you don’t need to spend it on me.”

I lowered my head. “None of what I have is my own...” On the tip of my tongue, I was going to say Paul gave it all to me, but I stopped myself. With the criminal case coming up, I didn’t want to risk Wyatt being subpoenaed about the money. It could paint me as a gold-digger or his escort. *But I had been Paul’s kept woman.* In a way, he still kept me, with a beautiful house to live in, a driver, and a cook to make me food. There wasn’t a thing I wanted Paul wouldn’t give me. *I didn’t earn any of it.* My eyes darted, and I swallowed, placing the jacket back in the bag.

“You’re sad? I didn’t mean...bad.” Wyatt frowned and rubbed his chin. “*Je t’adore.* I adore you and I want us to be friends.” He opened his arms, and I took the hug.

“We are. Thank you for explaining to me.”

He then took my hand, and we headed down a few blocks to the Metro station to take line 4.

“Paul Crane’s your boyfriend, no?”

“*Oui.*”

“He’s returned?”

I smiled and nodded.

“We all know; you have been happier.”

I had been. Holding him even for those short hours had rejuvenated my spirit. Though we spend time away from each other before, it felt harder this time. However, he assured me he’d come back to see me in Paris soon.

We had finally reached the subway entrance when my phone buzzed with a message. *Doctor Casey.*

Nadia,

I read your journal entry, and I’m proud of you. You identified what was happening. You stopped and use the tools you had to bring you out of it. You also reflected on what triggered the feeling. There will be good days and bad ones. But it’s one day, not forever. You will get through it all.

I’m proud of you. Keep it up. You’ll not just be saying you’re fine, you will be.

Doctor Casey

Christina Ralls’ confrontation frightened me, and I knew it was only the beginning if the case went to trial. So far, no one else had tried yet, but then I didn’t go anywhere without Laurence or security most of the time. When I

was alone, I texted Laurence my location.

I took a photo and sent it to him.

Laurence: The car is better.

I smiled and put my phone away. He'd given me more freedom since Paul had made it that he wanted me to do more things independently. I liked it, but I also enjoyed his company.

We got our tickets and waited on the platform. Soon, we packed on with the rest of the riders. It hadn't taken long. We rushed up the stairs and down streets that I didn't pay as much attention to since Wyatt knew where we were going. When we saw the stalls of markets, I took out my digital camera and placed it around my neck to take photos.

"Petite Hayden," Wyatt teased.

I waved dismissively. "Hayden and Helmut create art. I'm being a tourist."

I did look up Helmut. His polaroids were works of art that I admired. My digital camera gave more chances to correct mistakes.

"Not true. You create some interesting patterns. Philippe's impressed."

Was Wyatt giving me one of the Parisian social compliments or was his observance real? I wasn't sure. Philippe gave me more work to do than most. I loved the constant instruction, but sometimes it felt as if I was having professors all the time.

"They all love your work, Wyatt."

Wyatt shrugged. "It's not all love. Anne? I don't want to work with her."

Anne breathed Givenchy. She expected sleek, symmetrical lines with absolute precision and was always complaining about Wyatt's patch style.

Lucky for us, Tomas was our instructor this week. He'd given us a project to make a sample jacket that would fit in with Givenchy's spring line he was directing. He'd up the stakes. The successful jacket would be included in a limited edition ready-to-wear online catalogue. Our chances were slim, but the more I tried, the more I learned. *I love every minute of it.*

The weekend brought not only the tourists, but everywhere was full of parents, children, and elderly shoppers. We joined the maze and moved through it, stopping to point at a few clothes, antiques, cards, and paintings. After two hours, it was almost a bust, until I saw a silk pinstripe fabric that I instantly loved. I bought it, but also planned to take it to a shop to see if I can find more. I checked my phone. There was a missed call from Xander. I'd

made his photo of the two of us my screen saver.

Wyatt took my phone and looked at the photo. His jaw dropped.

I laughed. “*C’est Xander.*”

“Xander,” he repeated and grinned at the photo. He handed it back to me. “Go on and call.” He gestured that he’d be looking further into the stall with antique clocks across from where we stood. I called Xander back. “*Allo, bonjour.*”

“Well, listen to you sounding like a little French girl,” he answered.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

The sound of music, carts, and chatter had me covering the phone to wait for a group to walk by.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“I’m shopping with a new friend, Wyatt.”

“Good. I was afraid you weren’t going out...gurl, I saw you in the fashion show online.”

“You did! Oh, my God. Seriously?” My voice rose excitedly. I’d seen the models’ runway at Givenchy, but I hadn’t seen any of myself.

“Yep. I screamed like a fangirl. Scared everyone around me.”

“Did you? It was last minute. I can’t believe I did that. The dress was insane.”

“It was. Why haven’t you seen the pictures? It shows up if you search for the show.”

“I don’t look for myself anymore.”

Every time I typed in my name, the boat party came up in the search, and every press outlet had a hot take on what should happen.

“I’ll collect photos and bring them with me. I just want to let you know that when you stepped on stage, you stopped the show. You did that, Nadia. I know what a big moment this is for you. Remember when I found you knitting in the hallway during lunch in middle school?”

“Yes. It was when we became friends.” My voice was thick.

I never imagined this life for myself. And it all started from that moment in a hallway when a wildly charismatic teen came and sat down on the floor next to me. He told me he sewed too. Then he kept finding me and talking to me. Before I knew it, we were sewing together.

“Now that same shy girl stood on stage with the top designer of the year and the creative head of Givenchy at a runway in Paris. I’m crazy proud.” I could hear the sobs in Xander’s voice, and my throat tightened with emotion.

“You’re at an internship at Givenchy. You’re living your dream.”

I waved my eyes to stop myself from crying. Sometimes I’d forgotten how far I’d come. Our friendship changed me. It made me dream of bigger for myself. “Thank you, Xander. I miss you so much.”

“You’ll see me soon enough. Have fun shopping and next time tell me about Wyatt.”

“I will. I love you.” I ended the call, and Wyatt walked up to me.

“You miss your friend?”

I nodded. He hugged my shoulder, and I got an idea. “Can I take a photo of you? Xander’s curious.”

He took a selfie, and I sent it to Xander.

We only walked a few paces before I received the message back.

Xander: We must meet.

I showed Wyatt, and he was also pleased.

Well, look at me branching out as a matchmaker.



“Let’s see your jacket.”

All of us design interns were buzzing with the challenge of making a sample jacket that fit into Givenchy’s spring casual wear. The successful jacket would be included in one of their limited-edition, ready-to-wear online catalogues.

Instead of the patched, uneven hems I’d seen at other stations, I went for a wool crepe with a raw edge on a blazer, which I then lined with silk.

Tomas inspected my stitching, turning the garment inside and out. His eyes and fingers ran over every seam. “You’ve got a tailor’s hand, Nadia.”

I beamed at him. “Thank you.”

“But I’m not in love with the blazer. It’s too cautious.” He pointed at the colorful pinstripes on the lining. “This makes me excited. We want women to find it impossible to scroll past the clothing. We are surpassing the expected and creating conversations.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Tomas.” He hesitated and picked up a knit dress

I'd abandoned. It was a crafty patch with bright balls of light—something I'd been inspired by when looking at Kusama's art online. I hadn't wanted to meet with Paul's mother completely ignorant of the art, and I couldn't help but return to my beloved knits.

Tomas turned it around in his hands and laughed.

My cheeks warmed. "It's downtime fun."

"Make it prime." His gaze concentrated on the dress and he examined it again. "It's definitely a conversation. Drop the blazer and move to finish this."

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." I was on my feet hugging him and let out a happy squeak, then covered my mouth.

"One noisy cheer is okay. And you earned it. But now, let me tell you what you need to change." Tomas took out a pad and sketched the changes that he wanted on the garment as I listened and took notes. *This was what I'd come here for. This moment. I'd finally done something he was interested in seeing more of.* Designing was Tomas's vision here, and he ran the show. "I'd like to see your progress tomorrow."

Tomas had started making hard deadlines to get us to create on our feet and be ready for anything. But there were only a few hours left before I had to meet Ms. Crane at Musée D'Orsay.

"Yes. Of course. Thank you, Tomas. I'll have something to show you." I'm sure my smile was the brightest it had ever been. There was a lot of work, but there was no way I was leaving here without progress.

"Good, Nadia." Tomas squeezed my shoulder and moved on to the next person. I took out my phone and sent a text to Paul.

Nadia: Guess who's creating knits for Tomas. It's nothing concrete, but he's interested in seeing more of a knit dress I made!!

Paul wrote back almost instantly.

Paul: I'm not surprised. I'm proud of you. We'll celebrate when we are together again.

Nadia: When?

Paul: I'm hoping soon, but I don't want to give you a time if I can't show. I love you.

Nadia: I love you too.

Paul: Have fun with my mom.

Nerves danced in my stomach. I still wasn't sure what we would talk about.

Nadia: Are you sure it will be okay?

Paul: She'll love you. Don't worry.

Ms. Crane didn't love me when she met me in New York City. However, she did apologize, and she was trying. If my parents can forgive Gunnar, then maybe I could stop holding grudges, too.

Tomas had a lot of changes, and I went to work, getting the type of wool he wanted me to add to the dress. I had only cut it out before Wyatt held up an espresso he made for me. “*Merci. Ca va?*”

“*Comme ci, comme ca,*” Wyatt replied, gesturing so-so. He showed me the changes Tomas asked him to make on his jacket.

“Well, at least you get to use it. I'm practically starting over.” I showed him the changes to the dress I was making. We both looked over our lists and also offered ideas, which was something I loved doing since I came here. Everything could be improved, and every time we had to make a change, it really was for the better.

Josephine came to my workstation. “Did you contact the department to get the dresses from archive for the meeting tomorrow?”

I reached over and patted my iPad. “I've already spoken with Dauphine. I'll be here at nine a.m. to help with the set-up.”

“*Merci. Bien?*” She paused, but Wyatt and I could see the strain on her face of wanting to move on.

“*Très bien, very well,*” I said. Wyatt echoed.

She rushed away, and we smirked at each other. I'd finally realized Josephine mostly gave us things she didn't want to do.

“Nadia, I want you to come dancing.”

“When?” I asked.

“This weekend?”

Xander was due for a visit, and knowing him, he would expect something fun to do. He was the only person I ever met that got depressed if they stayed in for a night. “Yes, I'd love to go. I'll bring Xander with me.”

“You will?” he asked with a grin. “Great.”

I finished off my coffee and we both went back to our projects.

The creative zone had me humming, and I loved the feeling of the fabric

between my fingers. It wasn't until my phone buzzed that I realized how much time had passed. *Oh, no! I'm ten minutes late!*

I took a deep breath to calm my pulse and answered the call from Ms. Crane. "Hello. Sorry. I'm on my way."

"Don't rush. I'm here but speaking with a friend." Her tone was light.

"Okay. Great. Thank you." I hung up and packed up my bag, including the dress Tomas wanted me to alter, then stopped at the bathroom for a quick brush of my hair and to change into one of my floral-printed dresses instead of the one inspired by Kusama's art because it was something I now had to improve for Tomas. Paul loved the dress, and in a way, it made me feel like he was here. *I can do this.*

Walking out into the lobby, I spotted Ms. Crane ahead. She had on a button-down shirt with a colorful Hermes silk scarf around her long neck and dark slacks. Her usual bobbed hair was pulled into a chignon, and she had a flawless elegance about her. She wasn't just chatting with a friend in the lobby; she was chatting with Nari Min, one of the most sought-after actresses in the world after her show-stopping performance in *The Offering*. While we often saw celebrities at Givenchy, this one had me fan-girling inside. Xander and I watched every movie she's made. She always played a strong-female lead, and every time I watched her, I admired the depth she brought to every character she portrayed.

Dani's head turned my way as I slowly approached, and she gestured for me to come forward. "Nari, this is Nadia. She's a new designer at Givenchy."

"I'm an intern," I added and smiled, shaking her and Dani's hand. I didn't want to give either one of them an inflated idea of the level I was at the fashion house.

"Interning at Givenchy is no easy feat," Nari said, and Dani nodded in agreement.

"That's exactly what I think, Nari. Nadia's modest. Let me tell you what she's too shy to say. In only her first year, she was a standout. Dior and Chanel Creative Director and Ex-Vogue Editor Naomi Elan was impressed, and she is never impressed. She and the team awarded Nadia best of year. Her gown walked at Bryant Park, and now she's here. She was even a part of the Givenchy show in Paris."

Nari nodded and smiled broadly. "I know, Dani." Nari turned toward me. "I recognized you the second you walked out. I was at the Givenchy Paris show. You looked beautiful; the dress was stunning."

“Thank you, Ms. Min. I’m so happy you liked the dress.”

“It’s Nari. You think I only liked it?” Nari laughed. “I loved the dress. I’m here to demand Hayden and Tomas show me it again.”

I gaped at their praises. Ms. Crane knew more about me than I had known. And Nari saw me there! This was too much. “Thank you, Ms. Crane, for all your kind words.”

She squeezed my shoulder. “Call me Dani.”

I trembled. “Thank you both. The dress and my coming up on stage came together as a surprise. Tomas and Hayden are definitely the top designers in the world. Their design and vision are what you saw, and I’m honored to have been given the privilege, and even more humble to be an intern at this prestigious house.”

“You can relax, Nadia.” Nari tilted her head toward Dani. “She could use an evening of yoga and meditation.”

“I will definitely recommend it,” Dani murmured.

“I’m sorry. I’m not usually like this. I’ve watched all your movies. I’m a big fan of your work,” I gushed and could have kicked myself.

“I’d like to see more of *your* work. Maybe I can have your card?” Nari asked.

My shock struck as a pounding pulse, and I almost dropped my bag. I found a card and held it out, my hand shaking. She put it in her purse, then clasped my hands. “You are lovely. I’m happy to meet you, and I hope to see you again.” She made eye contact with me, and her steadiness and warmth calmed me.

I beamed at her. “Thank you, Nari,. I’m happy to meet you, too.”

Tomas arrived and greeted Dani and Nari. “You’ve met our Nadia.”

“Yes, and I’ve told her I must see the dress.” Tomas gave me a, ‘see, we were right’ look. “Nice to see you again, Dani. You keep giving public speeches at awards; you must come back here.”

“Of course,” Dani said. Tomas kissed her cheek, then linked arms with Nari, and they walked off towards his office.

“Thank you so much for that,” I told her.

She smiled broadly. “You’re welcome. Nari deserves her hard work paying off. I’m so happy for her.” She motioned toward the door. “Ready?”

I wasn’t sure how ready I would be for this conversation. So far, Dani had surprised me with her kindness. Meeting Nari was an honor I’d never forget. However, this was about her son, and she hadn’t mentioned to Nari that I was

with him. She also knew every dark secret in my family. But that burst of confidence given to me by Dani and Nari wasn't by chance. I held my head high as I followed Dani out the door.



CHAPTER 16

Dani had her own car. It was an electric Audi that was parked in a space six blocks away. We settled in the seats, and she pulled off the curb, and almost instantly fell into conversation about Paris.

“I believe I first came here when I was...three.” Dani let out a laugh. “Now, that was a long time ago, but I love it here. It’s a home away from home.”

“I love it here, too. The internship is wonderful, and I get inspiration all the time. I have sketchbooks filled with ideas.”

“That’s why I love it, too. I was a painter. You know, I painted some of the paintings hanging in the duplex you and Paul shared.”

My mouth dropped open. “Wow. They’re spectacular.”

“Thank you. They’re not at the caliber of the greats, but I got a few shows.”

Dani was being modest. When I looked her up online, she had artwork displayed in many galleries, and she had a long list of accolades in her own right.

“I’m not surprised Paul was drawn to you. Crane men are attracted to us artists. I think it’s because they are born to lead business empires, but they also need that outlet to step back and enjoy the beauty of life.”

“Paul’s an artist,” I pointed out.

“Yes, he’s amazing at it, but he’s also a businessman. Anyway, I hope we can start over by clearing the air.”

I licked my lips. "Okay."

"I'm not a fan of sexual arrangements, but it wasn't about you personally. It was because I know Paul to be a loving man, and I wanted him to search for someone to fall in love with and build a life together."

I glanced out the window. "And I want that for Paul, too, and for myself."
"But things have changed between you two." Her tone was light.

I cleared my throat. "Yes, we love each other...I know our start wasn't ideal, but I have no regrets about my reason for entering into the arrangement. It helped my family, and I'm grateful." I glimpsed her, and tensed.

She drove around a corner. "I've never been in a situation like yours, and I believe I would have done the same to help my parents. I do understand why Paul and Jonas had gone through such extremes to have intimacy and privacy. They get blackmailed and sued all the time. I had thought it would be easier with someone who understood the issues we faced, but love isn't easy, and he loves you. That's what's most important to me and Jonas. I want you to know that I personally accept your relationship."

I let go of the breath I was holding. Jonas, Paul's dad, had been accepting from the start, but I wasn't sure Dani would come around. Paul told me not to worry about her disapproval, but I did because I never wanted to come between them. "Thank you, Dani."

She smiled. "Thank you, Nadia. Now, let me tell you about the place we're going for dinner. It doesn't have a name, but the chef expects you to eat a lot. I hope you're hungry."

"Is it Jacque and Lulu's?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. Of course Paul took you there," Dani said cheerily.

"Yeah, he did during our trip together. He played the piano."

Paul played the piano at the restaurant after we went to Moulin Rouge. He had me so captivated by everything he did.

"They must have been delighted. Jacque's known Paul since he was a child." She pulled up into a reserved parking space, and we climbed out and navigated past a few shops until we reached a quiet side street. The restaurant had no sign, but the aroma of food was enough to draw anyone there and make it a lasting memory to share.

We walked in, and Dani and I were greeted with hugs by Lulu.

"Dani and...Nadia." Lulu remembering my name surprised me. "Jacque will make you something special for your return to Paris. Is Paul here too?"

Dani touched my arm. “Not this time; it’s just the two of us.” Her tone joyous.

“I see.” Lulu grinned, her eyes shifting between us. “Upstairs then.”

Dani nodded in agreement. “One sec.” She went to the back, and Jacque came out of the kitchen and hugged and kissed her. He came over and hugged me too, then he chatted in French to Dani as we went upstairs to seats before a bay window with a view outside. They didn’t provide menus, but would serve Jacque’s choice.

“Here, we can relax and talk.” A hostess took our request for drinks. She ordered lemon water, and I requested a glass of red wine.

She smiled at me. “Now I’m rusty at these Crane speeches. I’d received mine when I was younger than you and pregnant, and it was given by none other than Matthias Crane.”

We both cringed. Matthias was a ruthless, cruel womanizer who was voted most likely to cuddle a baby to take their blanket. Jonas was so kind, and I wondered how hard it was to live with such a vulgar man.

“That must have been horrible.” I gentled my tone.

“It was. Even with all that going on, I was from a prominent family, but my parents were hippies before there was a word for them. I was a painter working part-time in the West Village as a curator. But Matthias told me my family was well-off, not wealthy. His family comes first in all things. Jonas would take over the business from him, and my job was to have a male heir to take his place. Otherwise, I needed to get out, and he’d make sure I never returned.”

I frowned. “Wow, that’s awful. But I know you’re telling me this for a reason. Paul told me he needed a male heir, or a female must have a male to head the family.”

Her shoulders dropped. “It’s such a relief, you already know. Aubrey came to us cold, and it was hard for her to adjust when Paul took Jonas’s place.”

“What about Lily?” I asked after a sip of wine. She was Jonas’ current wife.

Dani’s face lit up. “She is one of the kindest souls I have ever met. She always wanted a family, so we never worried about her. She had Darling, and eventually, Darling will receive the conversation. But this is about you now, and Paul. How do you feel about it? It’s caveman bullshit, but the Crane men descend from a family of assholes.” We laughed, and I was surprised at how

frank Dani was with me.

Before I could answer, Dauphinoise Potatoes were presented to us, and my mouth watered. We ate, and I used the time to think about my answer. How did I feel about needing to have children? Ultimately, it would be my choice.

“I didn’t want children at first, but now I do. I...I wanted the child I lost.” My voice wavered, and I nibbled my bottom lip. Dani reached over and clasped my hand.

“Paul did, too. He was frantic on his call from the hospital when they took you in. I hadn’t seen him so distressed since Aubrey died.” She sucked in air and tilted her head downward. “Aubrey didn’t adjust well to all the changes in her life. I wish I’d done more for her.”

Dani shared the guilt I’d seen in Paul, and I thought it important to give her the same comfort. “From what Paul shared, Aubrey had a tough time in her career before they met. I’m sorry about what happened to her. He said you helped her.”

“I tried. She was delicate, and we loved that about her. She was a great violinist; it was so natural for her. But she lacked the advanced classical training for a symphony, which was her dream. When Paul tried to help her and she received an offer, she turned it down because she didn’t ‘earn’ it.”

“He told me something similar. I can understand her concern,” I murmured.

“Yes, but the director was willing to give her guidance, and in time, it would have been hers, but that wasn’t how she took it. She gave up and lost herself, and that’s what you will face, too. I don’t know how you’ll navigate a public design career. You will be going to the Oscars, Emmys, meeting with dignitaries and heads of corporations. You will, at times, travel the world, and you will also have children to raise. It’s a lot to do.” I could not believe I was having this conversation with Dani Crane. I had thought she’d hated me, and I felt so much better understanding her reasoning. It made sense. But to have her place such confidence in me was incredible.

I sat taller. “It can be done. You did it...you made what seems impossible, possible, Dani.”

She grinned and touched her face. “I did. I wasn’t perfect, but I did and found my way. Lily made hers, and we all got along. While I gave up being a full-time painter, I own my own gallery, and I head foundations that support art worldwide.”

“Do you still paint?” I asked.

“I do it as a hobby now. But, as a Crane, doors opened for me. I got to study art with the best artists of my time. I also had an amazing son, who I’m proud of every day. Being a Crane has public limits, but you will have access to a world of opportunity that can give you a rich life. Lily has her Love Legacy Foundation that continues her late parents’ love of the arts, giving supplies and lessons to children worldwide.”

“Yes, Paul had played Beethoven with the children from the program at his concert in Italy,” I added.

“Yes. That’s Lily’s program, and she has Darling and Jonas, and they are happy.”

“And you’re with Alan?” I asked.

“Yes. Jonas’s best friend, but that’s another story for another time.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” I gentled my tone.

“No, there are no secrets. We all confide in a lawyer. Jonas and I have Ian. Paul has Gunnar. You’ll have to choose a lawyer, too.”

I nodded slowly. “Yes, I’m beginning to understand.”

Paul told Gunnar everything. He was rude to me once, but Gunnar knew my life well, and I felt comfortable confiding in him because he was ready and willing to do whatever it took to protect me. *He’s also charmed Mom.*

“Great.” Dani clasped her hands together. “I’m always here to help you in any way you need. If you ever get stuck or need someone to vent to, you can call me. I want you to have that open honesty because if you and Paul stay together, I never want you to feel alone. I’d also want to meet your parents. Your mom and I spoke once....”

I lifted my chin. “I know. Mom told me.”

Mom called Dani and told her off for putting me down.

“I deserved what she told me.” Dani dipped her head, her cheeks pinking. “I told myself I’d never be a snob, but I behaved like one. I’m sorry.”

It meant so much to hear Dani express remorse for how she treated me—and her remorse will mean a lot to my mom. Paul must have had told her how much he loved me. She seemed to think I would stay with him, which meant a lot to me.

“Can I hug you?” I asked her.

“Yes. Please do.” Dani reached over, and we hugged tight, and it was healing. It was what I had hoped would happen. Of course, it wasn’t a guarantee everything would be easy, but everything became easier when you

had people who cared.

I took out my phone. "I'll give you my mom's number so you can speak with my parents."

"Okay, Nadia. I will, but today we have Kusama. Are you ready to be blown away?" Her smile was so similar to Paul's when he was happy.

"Yes. I'm excited to learn more, and thank you again for your invitation."

She reached over and squeezed my hand. "I'm happy to share this with you."

The rest of our meal was delicious, and there was a level of comfort between us that surprised me. The time to depart came so quickly. Once we were back in the car, we stopped next to the bridge over The Seine, leading to the Musée D'Orsay. Inside, it was reminiscent of New York City's Grand Central Station. There were domed arches with an ornate clock high above, but then all that disappeared as we entered the mirror exhibit, a large dark room with thousands of sparks of light. It was as if we were moving into another dimension, and I grew more relaxed as I floated through outer space.

"We are mirrors of light. Kusama has created our self-image in our infinite brilliance as balls of light," Dani enthused.

I gazed among the stars that filled the vast space. *Could this really be all we are?*

"We are stardust." Her words lifted when my mind journeyed.

I grinned at her. "You sound like my dad."

"He's right. I heard you sing Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock". I wish I could hear you sing it again. It had so much soul and heart in it. You looked like you were in a trance."

"I believe I was," I admitted. "I sang it to my dad when he was on dialysis. He said it made him believe death wasn't the end, and that life continued. That we all are light and love."

She took out a necklace of beads and twined them in her hands. "I feel that. I'm going to meditate as we walk." She went in silence, moving her prayer beads as we moved through the rows of light. It was breathtaking, and I wished I could capture it with film, but it wasn't for that. It was an exhibit to be experienced. Dani kissed and shook hands with the people on the way out, but still took the time to introduce me. It was as if she was going out of her way to associate me as a part of her family. It touched me so deeply that I had to lock down my emotions or I'd burst into tears of joy.

"Thank you so much for bringing me to the exhibit; it was amazing." To

be honest, Dani was amazing. She was completely different from when I met her at Paul's loft in Tribeca.

"I'm so happy you enjoyed it, Nadia." Dani's smile was exuberant. "The museums are my favorite part of Paris. And working at Givenchy is such an amazing opportunity. Have you considered staying here for a while longer or are you fixed on returning to college this fall in New York?"

"I don't think so." It was the first time I admitted that I considered leaving college to myself. Returning to the New York School of Design had always been my plan, but that was before the boat party. I loved the college, but I needed some time away from it after what happened. There were bound to be friends of my enemies there, and I wanted some space. I only began to understand Paris, and I hoped for more time here.

"Paris is a wonderful place to stay. Paul also loves Germany. Have you been?"

"No, I haven't, but I've always wanted to see Berlin." I told her.

"You should go. I'm sure Paul would love to show you. It's a beautiful city."

"Paul's busy working on a documentary for Ingrid."

She exhaled a long breath. "*Ingrid*. They were close. I know she's still hopeful, but you'll always find women around."

I frowned. "Yes, I know." I told her about what happened with Linux in Paris. She kissed Paul in his studio, and I suspect she knew I was there. Even afterwards, Paul gave her a warning about her behavior, she trash-talked me with her band.

She grimaced. "That's bad, but I've experienced worse, and so has Lily. I wish I could tell you it won't happen again, but that would be a lie. The Crane men have always been a magnet for women. I don't blame Lily for spending most of the time on the island. Jonas had a constant stream of exes, one-nighters, and women so sure they could take him away that she had to distance herself from them."

A stream? Jonas was a known playboy, and so was Paul at one time. *Ingrid still holds hope.* I trusted Paul, though I couldn't help but think of them alone in Germany.

Dani dropped me off at the house ten minutes later, and after thanking her profusely, I went to my room to change. I had so much on my mind after the night I'd had with Dani. I had loved my time with Lily and Jonas. It was so hard to see him as such a playboy when I'd seen him as a contented and

extremely happily married man. *Would Paul be like Jonas if we were married?*

I felt energized though, so I made my way into the workroom. I had to work on the dress while Kusama's exhibit was still fresh in my mind.

Opal appeared, and I left my station to greet her. "I didn't know you were coming here."

"It was Mr. Crane. He thought it would make things easier to have me with you."

Opal had been with me since I moved into The Hudson. She always anticipated whatever I needed before I asked and went out of her way to make the place feel like my home.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No, I just had dinner. I'm going to work a while longer."

"Did you see the packages?"

"Packages? No, I haven't." *Paul?* Two other housekeepers came in with a box and placed it down. I opened it to find Hayden's dress.

"Merci. Thank you." *He said he'd give it to me, so I guess this was okay.*

They left and returned with more boxes. There were more of Hayden's clothes, accessories, and designs he must have chosen for me. *He's insane.*

I took out my phone and called the number I had for him.

"Allo, Nadia. You like your clothes?"

"I love them. They are so beautiful, but really, you're much too generous. I can't accept the gifts."

"It's not a gift. I'm clearing out a warehouse, and we sent over some things to everyone. It's what we do a couple of times a year for staff. Some keep the clothes, other sell them online."

I touched my warm neck. "Really?" *No way. These clothes are to die for.*

"But they're gorgeous. I'm surprised you're not giving them to stylists for celebrities. I'm positive so many would die for these clothes—"

"But I gave them to you, Nadia. I want you to wear them."

"Hayden. I don't know how I can accept your dresses."

"Nadia, you wore one, and we have a demand to carry it at stores. It's advertisement. Does that help? Stop arguing with me and say, 'Merci, Hayden'."

"Merci beaucoup, Hayden. The dresses are so beautiful, and you're too kind. Thank you for considering me in your clearance. It's very thoughtful."

"That's better. Next time, be happy and stop being an American cop."

I laughed, and he joined in. “Thank you again.” We hung up the phone, but I went through the clothes again. They were my size, and I knew a few items had only recently become available in retail. There was no way they were in a clearance warehouse. *What’s Monsieur Madsen up to?*



CHAPTER 17

Paul appeared on my phone screen as we FaceTimed, and that wild energy he carried with him brought on a rush of excitement. “Hello,” I sang out.

“Hello, Nadia. Stand up, please, so I can see all of you. Is the dress one of yours?”

I had on one of my floral sundresses he’d seen me create back in NYC. “It came out great.” I spun in a circle and laughed before sitting back down.

“Damn, you look lovely. Sexy.”

I smiled and pulled my hair over my shoulder. “Thank you.”

I’d dressed especially for him to admire. But there was always something intimate in the way he looked at me, but today there was more. He appeared rested and relaxed. Happy. There were two sounding boards and monitors behind him. I could make out the image of a palace paused on the screen.

“Where is that?” I asked, gesturing behind him.

He turned his chair so I could see the entire screen. “That’s Linderhof Palace. Ingrid’s family traces back to King Ludwig II of Bavaria. We’ll be heading over there to do a location shoot soon.”

“So that means you’re not coming back to Paris?” I asked, and while I tried, I couldn’t hide the disappointment in my tone. Even though Paul wanted me to spend time alone and focus on my work, I hoped that still included him visiting me.

He rubbed his neck. “Not yet, baby. But I’m doing all the location shoots, so I can be free to spend time with you again soon. Okay?”

“Okay,” I murmured.

He winked at me. “Good. Mom said her visit with you was delightful.”

I nodded. “It was. She apologized and was very kind. The Kusama exhibit was amazing, and it inspired me.”

“What about the knit dress you were working on for Tomas? How is that turning out?”

I scrunched up my face. “It’s like tearing it all down and rebuilding it. But it’s better. He has shown me a lot about ways to mix fabrics.”

“It sounds good for you then—”

“Paul.” Ingrid’s voice rang out off-camera. She appeared on the screen and pressed a button behind them. INXS’s “Need You Tonight” came on, and she shimmied before him.

Paul rolled his eyes and turned it off. “I’m on a call.”

I smirked. *Yeah, you are.* “I thought you were directing?”

“He is, but we’re also having fun,” Ingrid answered for him and grinned.

He cocked a brow, and I jutted my chin. “I am working, but Ingrid discovered INXS and one of her cousins tried to imitate the lead singer.” He showed me a picture of a guy with long brown hair, a leather jacket, and leggings with holes cut out on the sides. He pretended to cringe. “Eighties.”

I wagged my brows. “He looks hot to me.”

“Does he?” Paul changed the photo back to the castle.

“Hey!” I joked. “He’s not as sexy as you.”

Paul jutted his chin. “Damn right.” We all laughed.

“Mom’s a big fan. She told me the first song she ever danced to when she went out was an INXS song, ‘The One Thing.’”

“I can’t remember how that one goes?” Paul tapped his chin. I knew he did, but I took the bait.

I started singing the chorus and danced in my seat. Ingrid turned away and fiddle with some of the papers on the desk.

He gave me a suggestive gaze that turned me on. “Damn, I need to get to Paris.”

“You do. You’re missing out,” I teased.

“I know I am.”

Our gazes locked, and my pulse sped up as his eyes darkened with lust. *And I bet he’s thinking of ways to cut his trip short.*

“We won’t need much of that song. It’s not a big enough part of my history.” Ingrid quipped, then tugged on Paul’s arm, pointing at the watch on

his wrist.

Paul sighed and turned his head back, smiling at me. “Agata can give me some perspective on the eighties.”

“She’s an expert. Her first live show was to see a band called The Psychedelic Furs.”

His brows raised. “I must hear that story, but as Ingrid reminded me, we gotta go soon.” He spoke to her in German.

Her lips curled upward. “Bye.”

I waved. “Bye, Ingrid.”

Ingrid finally left, and Paul rubbed his jaw. “She’s out, and if she returns, I’ll lock the door. So tell me, are you doing more fashion shows?”

“Not recently. I’ve been helping the designers, attending meetings, and completing the internship dress for Tomas...I miss you.” My voice caught.

“I miss you, too, baby. I promise, I’m working double time to get back to Paris. But like I said, I want you to enjoy yourself. Go out.”

“I go out every day,” I pointed out. “Xander’s coming to visit. He sent a list of what he wanted to do, and I’m already exhausted.”

He chuckled. “Good. I want that for you. Tell Xander I said hello.”

“I will. I love you.”

“Love you too. Talk to you later.”

Paul blew me a kiss, and I blew one back, and the screen went dark.

My heart contracted. I missed Paul so much, and he did seem busy. *Busy with Ingrid.* Why did it annoy me when she made Paul smile? She didn’t do anything too forward, but Dani warned me that she still wanted him. Then again, this was something I would have to deal with. As Dani said, women will always be around. *Some think they can take him away from you.* Ingrid did seem keen to me, but Paul was oblivious. He also looked relaxed, something I hadn’t seen in a while. And he wants the same for me. *So why not just have fun?*



When Laurence and I reached Xander in arrivals, he was chatting with a new friend who hadn’t seen us, but everyone could hear them. “...you deserve to

have your time. Let Paris happen, darling.”

“You too, Xander. I’ll give you an update when I return to Iowa.”

“If you’re in trouble, call me as your emergency here, okay?”

They hugged each other, and the woman walked off toward the car rentals.

I tapped his shoulder, and he turned and lifted me into a bear hug. “Nadia.”

“It’s so good to see you.” I kissed his cheeks when he placed me back on my feet. My hands touched strands of his new purple and black hair.

“Like it? I wanted to do something for Paris.”

“Looks fab. So, you made a new friend?”

“Yes, and Abby needed one.” He shook Laurence’s hand as his assistants took Xander’s bags. “She is in for a time, let me tell you.” Xander sucked his teeth. “She’s newly divorced, dipped a toe online, and hit the jackpot.”

“Oh, do tell,” I mused, and he linked his arm with mine as we followed Laurence toward the exit.

“So, Abby and I were living it up first class with too much wine and bad TV on our beds when she filled me in on her travel plans. You see, she met this ‘tortured sculptor’ who promised to pour wine down her body and then fuck her like crazy.”

My brows knitted. “It sounds like a catfish. Shouldn’t she be worried he’s fake?”

“This isn’t twenty years ago. Abby did her homework, made him do live web, and showed me video, but....” he dropped his voice to above a whisper, “the man is fibbing a little. I saw a pair of Bottega Veneta shoes and an Armani suit jacket. He’s probably some newly rich crypto nerd.”

I snorted. “*Tortured*. Did he have the loft, too?”

“Yeah, gurl. He doesn’t need to be Rodin; just move around some clay and fuck her like a king, and she’d go home to Iowa scratching that Parisian sculptor itch.”

Of course, Xander told her to go for it, and it seemed like harmless fun. He also gave her a contact number, and I knew he’d check in on her. He was good like that.

“And she’s not the only one looking for some fun.” He wagged his brows and climbed into the back of the car.

“When aren’t you looking for some fun, Xander?” I didn’t mask my reproving tone.

He smirked. “Jealousy isn’t a cute look on you.”

“I thought Paola was a good look on you.”

He sighed. “Trust me, we’re better as friends. Now, catch me up, and please tell me we have plans tonight.”

“We have been invited out to dance.”

He rolled his neck. “Spa first? I’ve been flying and need to unwind.”

“Already ahead of you.” I had rescheduled my spa visit because I was busy with the design projects.

“You look like you have a lot on your mind. What’s going on?”

I filled Xander in on all my woes, as I always do, because he lives to be in someone else’s business, as he puts it. Though I left out the issues with the possible trial, I told him about Paul wanting me to be free and decide later about us.

“Well, Mr. Crane, you’re my kind of man.” He pretended to flick hair over a shoulder. “Damn, does this man put it all out there? Giving the woman he deflowered permission to have a lover before he commits.” He fans himself.

I narrowed my gaze at him. “You know, I told my mom the same story, and she gave me advice, but you go straight to sex.”

“Yeah, well, Paul knew who you were before you started dating. But getting back to what I’m interested in, what will you do?”

“I’m not going to do anything,” I said before Xander entered his poly-crusade.

He rolled his eyes. “Of course you won’t.”

I lifted my shoulders. “Why should I when I’m thoroughly satisfied?”

“Brag much?” Xander huffed, and we laughed. “It doesn’t matter how good the meal is; eventually, you get tired of it.”

I snorted. “Plenty of people are happy and don’t cheat.”

“True, I wasn’t going to ask you, but...”

“But what?” I smiled at him.

“Who’s the blonde with Paul? I’ve seen her in a few photos,” he asked.

I smirked. “That’s Ingrid Ludwig. He’s working on a documentary about her family’s history. I’ve been introduced to her.”

“Okay, so she’s work. She seems to get photographed a lot.”

“I’ve noticed too,” I said in a casual tone.

“It’s suspect as fuck. She probably has her own press contact and tells them where they’ll be. Messy.” He wrinkled his nose and we laughed.

“The food on the plane didn’t fulfill me. Can we stop somewhere?”

“Sure. I’ll ask.” I pressed the call button. “Laurence, how about we all go to lunch at Renault’s?”

“Renault’s will be swamped right now. It will make you both late for the spa. How about Camille’s?”

“Oh, that would be great.”

Camille’s was a café close to where Paul fed me chocolates. *I love it when he feeds me.* It was good to see Paul, but was I not taking Ingrid’s presence in his life seriously enough?

“I did find a gorgeous clip of you in a magazine you must keep.” He leafed through a magazine and pointed to a picture of me standing with Hayden at the fashion show. His hand was on my back and his gaze appeared lustful, but maybe I was reading more into it.

“I mean damn, Hayden is hot as hell. Paul better get his house in order, or he might find the gardener inside,” Xander joked.

I wanted to poke fun, and I knew that was why Xander showed me the photo. He quickly shut the magazine, but something else caught my eye. I stopped him and turned back to the page and headline. *Hayden’s New Muse: From Music to Fashion, Nadia’s “Recovery” Rebound. Oh, la la. How Sweet It Is.* My stomach knotted reading the headline. “Recovery”? Was this the type of trash they were publishing in the US? *People would believe nothing happened to me if they read this article.*

“Shit. I only meant to show you the photo. I should have ripped it out the magazine first—”

“No. It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” Xander touched my arm, and it was trembling. “The press isn’t all bad. Most are ripping apart the men involved. Sophie and Isabelle’s names are mud on women’s magazines, and me and my friends are quick to snap-back at the trolls online. You have support out here, too.”

I blew out my breath and leaned my head on his arm, and he hugged my shoulder. “I’ve been trying to block out the cases. It’s easy here for the most part. But I’m still nervous about the possible trials.”

“Don’t worry. You’ve got the best lawyers in the business, not to mention that you have the truth on your side. They don’t stand a chance.”

Paul and his legal division had a stellar reputation for winning cases. That I did know.

Xander came all this way to see me, and I didn’t want to bring down the excitement of the two of us sharing Paris. *Besides, I can’t change it now; it’s*

already done. I have to move forward.

I took a deep breath and sat up. “Fuck it. Let’s do Paris.”

“Hell, yes.”



CHAPTER 18

“I need something new to wear tonight, and so do you,” Xander announced after our spa treatment and lunch.

“You haven’t even seen what I have at home or unpacked. Trust me, I have plenty of things to wear.”

“Okay, then we shop for fun.”

After calling Laurence, he took the list of shops I learned about at work. Our first shop was for shoes. Xander walked in and picked up four pairs before we passed the first display. “*S’il vous, plait.*” He gave his shoe size in French.

“Of course you have your sizes already planned.”

“You betcha,” he said, impersonating my mom’s Wisconsin twang.

I hit his arm playfully.

“You know I love Agata. She’s my mom, too.”

He tried them on and chose one. “*Merci.*”

We decided on three pairs of heels and a low-cut boot, before walking out of the shop. I texted Laurence and glanced around. There was a top hat on the side of a building ahead.

“Let’s have a look.” Xander was already walking towards it, and I followed. The sign read, “Hayden’s *Fou de Toi*,” which meant crazy about you in English. It was his first shop that catered more to his whimsical, gothic wear, not his successful glamour style that made him a big hit. I’d only seen the shop online, and when we got to it, it was a kaleidoscope of colors with

oddly shaped chairs and couches you'd imagine if invited for tea through the looking glass.

"Let's shop here." Xander had his hand on the door, but I stopped him.

"I don't want to shop there." Going to try on his clothes felt intimate, like seeking him out with interest.

Xander scoffed. "But his shop is the only one I know that makes clothes for every body shape. And I feel it is a duty as a designer to support progress." His tone was downright smug.

I rolled my eyes. We both knew he just wanted an excuse, but I was curious, too, so we walked in. The first rack we passed had a "*Fou de Toi*" T-shirt emblazoned on it. *200 Euros? No thanks.*

"Maybe it's for charity?" Xander offered.

I asked in French, and delighted, Xander beamed at me. Asking questions was something I had mastered. The shopkeeper nodded and showed us the sign, showing it was to raise money for clean water. *Okay.* I decided to buy one.

We walked two steps before Xander approached a woman standing beside a mirror. He motioned to the dress she wore. "I saw Lora Statom wear that dress in *Vogue*." Just hearing Lora's name brought several other customers to the dress, looking for their sizes. They were tourists like us. In no time, he had clothes picked out for other customers before he picked out a black latex bodycon dress for me to try on.

"I should work on commission," he said and laughed. He chose silver and black spandex shirts and a leather jumpsuit. I chose a few dresses. We both brought the clothes back to the changing room. The latex dress molded to my body like it was poured onto my skin.

I walked out and stood in awe before the mirror.

"Insanely hot," Xander drawled, and ran his hands over my hips. "You're on fire in this dress. *Oui, s'il vous plait.* So hot."

"I feel naked."

"That's a good thing." Xander smiled at the shop manager, who nodded in agreement. "These dresses are made for you."

"But Hayden already sent over a dress that looks like this one." I covered my mouth, but it was too late.

Xander's eyes widened, and he grinned like the Cheshire cat. "You kept that quiet."

"Hayden gave me the dress after the show, and then he sent some other

clothes he thought I'd like. I'm returning them."

Xander huffed. "Of course you are. But are you still getting to work with him at least?"

"I've been invited to work his fashion shoot for Formula One."

"You mean in Monaco, for the promotion of *Titan*?" Xander enthused.

I shrugged. "I did hear *Titan* mentioned at the industry party. You know I don't like action movies."

"Well, it's not just action it's a period drama love story."

"Hmmm. I'll have to take a look."

"Do that. It's also not around here. So you'll be staying with him?" Xander asked in a suggestive tone.

I furrowed my brows. "No. It's not overnight, but I believe Laurence said we could stay at *Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo*."

"Damn. That's it. Paris is the place for me," Xander declared, and got a pair of pumps brought out in my size. I put them on and did a twirl. Next, he tried on leather latex pants and a sleeveless sequin shirt. "I've been lifting." He flexed his muscles before the mirror.

I squeezed his left bicep. "Looking good."

"Yes, I am," Xander trilled. We changed back into our clothes and went to the counter. Xander took out his card. "My treat."

I shook my head no. "There is no way you're buying this for me."

He smiled. "I owe you, and my accessories are viral. I have a meeting here and in Milan. My line isn't in my dorm room anymore. But just like I told you, I'm all-in and doing whatever it takes to make my business work."

"I'm so happy for you." I kissed his cheek. "But no more clothes."

Laurence met up with us outside the front of the building. He put our shopping bags in the car trunk. "Did you leave anything for the rest of the shoppers to wear?"

"Nope," Xander joked back.

He chuckled and gestured for me to follow him. "Nadia, a moment."

I walked over to the building, and he smiled softly at me. "It's time for our rotation. I'll be going to Paul, and you'll have Ben with you."

"Oh, Laurence. I'm going to miss you." We hugged each other tight. He always made everything seem easy. I loved him, but I was glad he would be with Paul. A car pulled up, and Ben climbed out. He came over and handed Laurence the keys to it. Xander came over to us.

"Hello, Nadia, Xander." Ben gave us a smile that didn't reach his eyes. It

was obvious to me that he still felt terrible about what happened on the boat.

I went over and hugged him, too. “So happy to see you.”

I gave Laurence an extra hug, and Xander also shook Laurence’s hand before we got into the car. Seeing Ben reminded me of Isabelle.

“Did I tell you Isabelle came to see me?” I put on my seatbelt.

Xander wrinkled his nose. “She’s not in jail.”

“Not yet. I think she’s hoping to make deals.”

He tutted. “She hurt Paul Crane. Rich guys don’t have to get over it or make deals. She knew she was in the wrong, otherwise, she wouldn’t be crying now. Besides, we don’t negotiate with backstabbers.”

I pursed my lips. “No, we don’t.”



The sun had already fallen, and we were well into the evening. We only had time to shower and change before meeting Wyatt at the club. Xander went for a fitted shirt, stretchy pants, and fancy boots that he had just bought—and we both knew he’d complain about sore feet tomorrow.

He spun in a circle. “I’m breaking them in.”

“Sure, you are. Be right back.” I chose one of Hayden’s embroidered leather mini dresses that had a flared and buckled skirt. “Is this too much?” I asked, adding the platform pumps.

“Hell no. Show it off,” Xander said.

I gave a reluctant twirl.

He groaned. “Relax woman. Let’s go.”

Ben drove us there, and within twenty minutes, we arrived at The Scene, a club on the bottom floor of a warehouse. There was no line to get in, though there were a lot of security checks. We handed over our phones and bags for the guards to search. And after that, we went through a metal detector.

“Do I need an X-ray next?” I half-joked.

Xander shrugged “It’s a private club, which means exclusive. Big names come here.”

The security guard had told us as much. Walking inside, we found the place packed with people dancing around a raised platform. The DJ hovered

like a spider, and tiers of dance space shaped like a web surrounded him. The music pumped as lights flashed and spun.

“Nadia!” Wyatt yelled. He walked up from the back bar wearing a muscle shirt and bondage pants.

Xander leaned over my ear. “He’s sexier in person.”

“Oh, he is. You’re already smitten,” I teased.

“I could be,” Xander joked.

Wyatt was followed by more people, including Ellie and Patrick. We did quick introductions as the bass pounded through the speakers to a song we all wanted to dance to. Xander took out a whistle and blew it before doing a high kick entrance on the dance floor.

Wyatt laughed. “*Ouah, il est intéressant.*”

“*Oui.* He is.” I agreed with a smile. We joined him on the floor, and I moved to the music with the crowd’s energy—stomping, bouncing, and shaking. Closing my eyes, I lost myself in the hard beats. My hands moved over my head as I swayed my hips. Hands closed on my waist, and I was pulled flush against a solid muscular frame. I froze. *Whoa.* But he didn’t. His hips moved in time to the beat, and he was excited. I could feel an impressive bulge against my ass.

“Let go of me,” I hissed.

“Nadia...” The voice was far, but I could see Trevor. He was in his robe. His hands grabbed my waist, pulling me hard against his body. The acrid smell of his breath as he hissed, ‘*You have me too worked up to let you go.*’

I clawed into the hands on my waist, my breath staggered. “Let—Let go. Let go of me. Now.” I gagged. My stomach lurched. *He’s not going to stop.* “I’m sick. Let-Let me go. Now.”

“Whoa.” The hands dropped. “Sorry, Nadia.”

He said my name. This person knows me? I turned around to find Hayden, holding his hands up and smiling. “I was only...what do you say, *vibing?*”

“No, you weren’t,” I raised my voice and stormed off the dance floor. I was burning up. My heart was racing. *I need air. I need out of here. I can’t do this.*

“*Attendez.* Wait. Don’t leave,” Hayden called out as he caught up to me. “I don’t understand. It was only dancing—”

“Not to me,” I hissed, and my hands fisted tightly at my sides. I could barely find my voice. I wanted him to leave me alone.

“In nightclubs we dance close, no?” he puzzled.

I stiffened. “No...no one touches me without permission.” *Never again.*

His eyes widened and I could see he remembered what he knew had happened to me. “I’m sorry. Are you going to be okay?”

I took a few deep breaths, then nodded. “I am...you...you caught me off guard.”

“I hadn’t thought. You were wearing my dress and dancing. I lost my head.”

I nodded. If I saw someone wearing my clothes, I’d be excited too. I took deep breaths and went over again how it happened. Hayden hadn’t grabbed me. His hands were on my waist dancing, like many around us. The front of his body did brush against my ass, but he hadn’t been aroused. “Okay. I’ll be fine.”

“Come back and dance. I promise to keep my hands off?” He put his hands behind his back.

My eyes darted at the many people around. Quite a number of them were staring at him with interest. “I’m sure you can find plenty of partners.”

“I could, but I choose you. Watching you dance was a pleasure. You were natural. Having fun. It was a pleasure to see. S’il te plaît, please.” He gestured his hands broadly for me to return.

My gaze went to Xander, who was dancing closely with Wyatt.

Hayden apologized. It’s only a dance. Besides, I’ll have to work with him. The last thing I need is more problems. And he hadn’t been wrong. I had been doing my best to embrace Paris, but there was a deep sadness within me to not have this time with Paul as well. But the dancing had been fun, and Xander was right. I needed more fun.

“Okay, let’s dance.” I returned to the dance floor with him, and Hayden proved to be a man of his word. He matched his movements to mine, and after a few songs, the bad memories disappeared from my mind. We both smiled and danced to song after song. Hayden also pushed back other hands that brush my hips and ass. *Sheesh.*

He leaned over to speak in my ear. “See? It wasn’t just me.”

I grinned. “Okay.”

Then a slower song came on. Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin, “*Je t’aime Mon Non Plus*”.

I stopped and Hayden raised a brow. My head turned, and I peered over the dance floor. *Dance with Xander?* He was all over Wyatt. *Of course.* I

blew out my breath.

“We can waltz?” Hayden held up his hands in a formal gesture.

My hands trembled as he lifted them, placing one on his waist. We swayed in slow motion. His large hands were warm and gentle in mine. My body danced with the beat of the song, but Paul took up every corner of my mind. How we danced in Rome that first night. He looked at me like he could hold me forever as fireworks filled the sky. He was passionate. He couldn't make it to the vineyard without pleasuring me. Her sensual sighs in the song filled my ears, and I shivered. The sound so much like my own when Paul touched me. *When he fucks me.* Just listening made his absence even more profound, and pain spread under my ribs, blocking my throat.

Hayden stopped moving, slipped his hand under my chin and lifted.

“Paul Crane is a fool to leave you alone in Paris.”

I blinked up at him. His gaze was hard on me, and it was even harder to look away. He inhaled sharply. His tongue tracing the seam of his lips, so clear in the passing strobe light. My pulse sped up, and a shiver went down my spine.

What am I doing?

Bang. A booming noise sounded like something had exploded and we stopped dancing. It was followed by a rapid ticking. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Hayden's eyes widened, and he looked up.

It was the ceiling sprinklers. It was also too late to run. *Whoosh.* Water poured down like a torrent of rain.

I held up my hands to cover my head. “Oh, my God.”

Hayden laughed.

Security came out, ordering everyone to the exits.

“Merci beaucoup. *Au revoir,* Hayden.” I turned away and rushed over to Xander and Wyatt, who were following the crowd out the exit doors to the street. I stared down at myself. *Soaked.*

Hayden appeared behind us. His stare was bold as it slid down my minidress. It clung to my body in the light of the streetlamps. And it dawned on me that it showed off too much skin. I folded my arms, and he grinned. “Why don't you all come to my place? It's not far. You can dry off there.” A few other people came forward that we could see were with Hayden. One of them was the brunette female I'd seen on his vespa. Her expression I couldn't read, but she didn't appear angry. *Maybe it's no big deal for your boyfriend to dance with another female?* He spoke rapidly in French to them while I

went over to Xander and nudged my head signally a private convo. He stepped away with me.

“Ben can pick us up and drop off Wyatt—”

“Or Ben can drive us to Hayden’s. I’m not ready to end the evening.” Xander angled his head toward Wyatt. “Please, Nadia. It’s impromptu fun; we can’t miss out.”

Xander wanted the adventure and was on vacation. I couldn’t say no, especially when I saw the chemistry between him and Wyatt. *Even if Hayden makes me uncomfortable, at least I won’t be alone with him.* And his girlfriend will probably be there. “Fine. We’ll go.”



CHAPTER 19

Hayden's place was a renovated warehouse. It reminded me of a museum, with large contemporary sculptures and abstract expressionist paintings held by chains attached to concrete walls. Even the furniture looked too artsy to sit on. He gave us towels, *Foix Du Toi* T-shirts, leggings, and even new socks to put on while our clothes dried.

Xander, Wyatt, and I returned to the living room, where Hayden was propped on a chair that resembled a throne. He had changed into a V-neck T-shirt that was low enough to show off a well-defined chest, and his leather pants appeared poured on. I glanced at Xander, and I could see the “hot damn” look on his face and had to bite my lip not to laugh.

“Are you hungry?” Hayden asked and stood, strolling with a flick of his wrist for us to follow as he led us into a steel and stone kitchen fit for a restaurant with huge workstations and a walk-in freezer. His entourage seemed used to being there, as if they lived with him. They opened cabinets and took out plates, uncorked bottles of wine, and even took out platters of food. Music came on, and so did the television somewhere in the home.

“I always have after-parties,” Hayden explained after seeing my and Xander's confused stares at all the trays of food. “You all should relax. Wyatt, you've been here before. Show Xander around?”

“I'd love to.” Wyatt grinned at Xander. “Merci, Hayden.”

Xander gave me weighted eye contact paired with a smirk smile. That was the look he had often used when he planned to make out—then left me

with Hayden. *Great.*

“So, it’s me and you, Nadia. Come, let me give you a tour.”

I shifted on my feet and picked up a carrot. “I’m fine here, thanks.”

He tilted his head. “I’d think you rude if I didn’t know you. I’m your host, and you’re my guest. A tour isn’t something to refuse, no? *S’il te plaît, Mademoiselle Sokol.*” He added a playful bow that made me laugh.

“Bien. Merci, Hayden.” *Why not?*

He walked like he was dancing with a rhythmic strut that brought attention to his broad shoulders and cut arms. *And tight ass...stop looking.* I jerked my attention to the dining room, which housed a large metal table, medieval chairs, and stained-glass windows.

“Perfect place to feast after a battle,” I joked.

He chuckled. “You have no idea how close that comes sometimes.”

We reached the end of the hall, and he paused. “That direction leads to my bedroom. Hmm...how about I show you my studio?”

I beamed at him. “Yes, please, I’d love to see it. Thank you.”

There had been brief clips online from some of his interviews that showed the space, but I was intrigued to see more.

“Another smile. You make me work for them.”

His tone wasn’t exactly humorous, but I took it in stride.

We walked down a hallway lined with more art, this time photographs. One of my new favorites was on display. It was a Helmut Newton image of a woman in Yves Saint Laurent’s famous dinner jacket, pin-striped formal trousers, and pussy-bow blouse on a street in Paris. “This photo was part of Helmut’s private collection?”

He grinned. “You’ve been studying Helmut?”

“*Oui. J’ai étudié,*” I answered ‘I studied’ in French. “Josephine mentioned it’s why you take polaroids.”

“It’s not my only reason,” Hayden said. “But you were told I did and studied his art. *Très bien.*” Joy bubbled up inside of me, and I grinned broadly. Hayden’s delight and praise were rare, and it felt like a high mark on a hard exam.

“This is *Rue Aubriot*. It was taken right outside Helmut’s home here in Paris. When I saw the image as a child, it was...” He gestured like an explosion had gone off in his head. “I had very little money, but I bought a postcard of it.”

“And now it’s yours. That’s wonderful.” I gazed at it again.

“It is. I have my designs, but having this image makes me feel successful.”

It surprised me that Hayden kept the iconic image private. Perhaps its meaning was too close to the heart to share easily. *Or to keep it secure.*

We descended a flight of stairs to stand in front of a large metal wall. He pressed a code into a panel, and the wall rolled back to reveal his studio.

My mouth dropped open. I thought my studio was great, but his was the dream.

The space itself, with large factory windows and skylights, were impressive, but his designer’s setup was extravagant. Hayden had built-in oak shelves, which he opened to show me racks of clothes, fabrics, and accessories. He had custom worktables with sewing machines, and I couldn’t stop myself from examining them all. My hands were gentle over the clothes on the mannequins. There were silk blousy shirts with corsets and leather jodhpurs and evening gowns with delicate laces and beads. He took what was old and innovated it into something new and exciting.

“Oh, Hayden. Wow. I’m floored. These are incredible,” I gushed.

“Yes, they are,” he agreed. “Let me show you more.”

I moved to the computer screens, where he showed me proofs from shoots and his fashion shows. “And you will join me in Monaco for *Titan*.”

“I’m very excited,” I said emphatically. “I’ve researched the film and read the original story of Titan. It’s a beautiful love story that journeys over the thirties to the sixties. I’m thrilled to see where your design merges with the eras.”

His eyes widened, and he grinned broadly. “You prepared again. I’m pleased.”

I lifted my shoulder and smiled “It’s my first, Tomas has given me advice. I also ask the other interns.”

He stood taller. “You didn’t ask me.”

“What’s your advice, Hayden?”

“Observe. Listen. No job is too big or small. You endure until it’s yours.”

Hayden had a commanding presence. I couldn’t imagine him taking orders from anyone. Still, his advice was something beneficial, and I appreciated it. “Thank you; I’ll keep that in mind.”

On a far wall were rows and rows of accolades he’d already received for his designs. He achieved more than anything I imagined for myself. He truly was an emerging icon.

I glimpsed over at him and found him staring at me. “You’re watching me?”

He leaned against a worktable and folded his arms. “I am...it’s your beauty. It’s, how do you say? Hmm...unnatural.”

I grimaced. “Unnatural?”

He lowered his brows. “You make a face? No...I’m not meaning negative. You have large violet eyes, high cheekbones, and a luscious mouth. It’s a...Hollywood movie star face from the glamour age. It’s rare. And your curves, and long shapely legs. They are sensually inviting. No man’s immune to it.”

My cheeks heated. “No more.”

He huffed. “You blush and you’re timid. That I don’t understand at all. I find it...annoying.”

I snorted and furrowed my brows. “I’m unnatural and annoying? Ha. I find you rude.”

Hayden shrugged and smiled. “I say what I think. You’re too shy for all you have. Beauty. Talent. Women who have little of what you have stand taller. You should have more confidence. That’s why I pushed you out of your cage and onto the runway. And now, women around the world want to be you in my dress.”

I lowered my eyes. “Your designs are beautiful, without doubt. But I’m not interested in the spotlight. I love designing, that’s what gives me life. I’m thankful for the experience at your show. It took me out of my comfort zone. But I have legal cases I’m involved in...”

“Oui, I understand. And that’s why you were worried?”

I nodded.

He sighed. “Christina surprised me. I had no idea she was so horrible. However, I still stand by my decision. I’m happy you wore my dress. You upheld the vision I had for it.”

“I’m glad it worked out for you and Givenchy. Thank you.” My eyes darted to the door. Have we been gone for a while? *What will people say?* “Thank you for the tour. You have a lovely home—”

“Before you go, can I sketch you? You inspire me.” He didn’t break eye contact as he went to a workstation and opened a drawer, pulling out a sketch pad. “You can just stand and walk around here...please. *Mon Dieu*. You have me pleading in my own home. Come, look.”

I went over to stand beside him by the workstation, and he showed me

some of his sketches—which were primarily of nude women. They were artsy, but they were still naked. Was he expecting the same from me? “I’m not taking my clothes off—”

“I didn’t ask.” He picked up a remote and pressed a button, and a woman’s haunting voice filled the space. “I love the female form. But what I want from you is a sketch of your face.” He had his sketchpad open, and I didn’t see the harm.

“Well, okay...what is this song?”

“It’s ‘Face to Face’ by Siouxsie and the Banshees.”

I started to sway and stopped myself.

“Oh, please dance. It’s nice to see you enjoy yourself. Here, I’ll dance, too.”

Hayden swayed with me. He took my hand and spun me around.

I let out a laugh and touched my smile. *He’s too much.*

“That’s better.” He picked up his sketchpad, and I walked to stand across from him, returning to his book of designs. The designs were truly remarkable.

“Talk to me, Nadia.”

“Can I ask where you grew up?” I was curious since Wyatt shared he met Hayden in foster care.

“Paris. I never knew my birth dad. My mom was a teen; she had me and didn’t want me. So I was moved around relatives for a few years until I ended up in care.”

“I’m sorry. My...my birth mom was a teen too. I was adopted.”

“I know.” He folded his arms. “We’re not so different. My parents were cruel like yours, but your story is more public. Justus Black, *oui?*”

“Oui,” I murmured.

Justus was a rock star legend, and my birth father. He blamed drugs, his rockstar lifestyle, and even his lawyers for paying Nora to leave with me. Still, he gave me his number and sent me flowers after my miscarriage. And I almost called him. Almost. In the end, he made a choice. And there was honestly nothing left for me to say to him.

Hayden’s hands drew faster on the sketch pad. “What an asshole. My deadbeat relatives came around when I became successful, but I refused to see them. I wasn’t good enough before, I’m not now.”

I could feel the pain from the passion in his voice. It was the pain of rejection that never entirely went away.

“I’m thinking about trying to meet my birth mother, though she doesn’t want to meet me.”

Gunnar had hinted at it, and Mom told me she refused to see me when she went to jail. After all, she left me behind and didn’t want anything to do with me.

He let out a grunt. “Fuck that. You’re living now, so why hurt yourself? You don’t need them.”

“I know, but it’s more about me.” I didn’t need Nora and didn’t look for her again for many years. However, now, I needed to see her, even from a distance. I needed to know the woman who walked away, even if I never understood, I wanted that closure.

Hayden motioned for me to come over. “See what you brought out in me?”

My mouth dropped open. “You’re done?”

“I used to draw on the street. If you want money and tips, you keep things quick.”

I came over and stared at his sketch in awe. He’d captured me in the moment. My eyes were soft, and I wore a small smile. It was the mask I sold to everyone, the mask that said *I’m all right*.

He turned more pages, and my mouth went dry. There were many sketches of my face. “You did these from the photos you took of me?”

“I did, but not this one. It’s from memory.” He pointed to the drawing of my mouth on one. “I sketched this one after the hotel party. Your lips were plumper, and your eyes were dilated. Had you made love?”

I blinked and didn’t answer. He *knew* the answer. There was an intensity in his eyes that made me feel exposed. The room felt too close, and Hayden was even closer. My skin heated, and my pulse sped up. I ran my hands down my arms as alarm bells went off in my head. *What am I doing here?*

Hayden had charm and an unassuming way in his seduction, but this was all wrong. I love Paul, and I only want him. “Paul and I are together.”

“He’s not in Paris. If you are still together, why is he not here with you?”

I closed the sketchbook and lowered my head. “I don’t talk about Paul.”

“Then I will. He’s a fool to not be here with you after what happened to you. You still look wounded. And where is he?”

“Working like I am. I have an internship here. Paul also has work. He’s doing what he can in court—”

“He has lawyers for that. He’s Paul Crane. He can work anywhere.

You're alone and hurting. He's being selfish. Things got hard, and he left—"

"He didn't leave me," I countered. "I'm hardly alone. I'm in his house."

"Can't you see that's the problem?" Hayden's voice raised. "It's *his* place, *his* things. He's trapped you in a gilded cage. You don't need him to make it. You have the attention of Tomas and me. You work hard; you will achieve success on your own."

I frowned. "I'm putting in the work. He's not doing it for me. My designing is separate from our relationship. We're together because we love each other."

"If you are in love, why are you so sad? You've been through such a horrific experience, and he can't take some time away to give you support?" My heart ached at the sympathetic look on Hayden's face now.

I turned away and hunched my shoulders. "It's not like that...."

How could I explain what I didn't understand fully myself? Paul wanted me to live more independently, to reach for my dreams. But the dreams I had included a life with him in it. *The problem is, Hayden's not wrong.* What I experienced was traumatic and horrible and shouldn't that have been the time Paul stayed by my side? The pain of abandonment rose and flooded my senses. And even though I knew it wasn't true, I felt like the little girl peeking through the snowy window in that trailer, left behind.

"Nadia." Hayden was behind me. He turned me around and pulled me into a tight hug, and I surprised myself by taking it. All my loneliness, pain, and grief rose to the surface, and spilled, latching on to the comfort where it was found. Hayden sighed and his chest expanded as I held on to him. His heartbeat pounded with strength. The bare skin on his chest was hot and scented with spice. His hand warmed my back as he rubbed it. "I'm not trying to hurt you, *petite poupée*. I see your pain. You're in a foreign place without the man that's supposed to care for you." He slowly loosened his arms and whispered something softly as he lifted my chin up to him.

I blinked; my brows raised. His gaze bore into mine, and he inhaled sharply, then crushed his lips against mine. *What the?* I gasped, my lips parting in surprise, and he slipped his tongue in and groaned, pulling me tighter in his arms.



CHAPTER 20

Oh, no! My hands pressed against Hayden’s chest and pushed. I stepped back and gulped in air to calm down. “What...what the hell are you doing?”

“Kissing you,” he replied nonchalantly.

I clenched my jaw. “So that’s what you wanted all along. You brought me in here under false pretenses to see your studio—”

“I didn’t. You were sad, and I hugged you. You looked up at me and we kissed.”

“We didn’t kiss, *you* kissed me,” I hissed.

“And you’re upset? We did nothing wrong. It was innocent. There is so much more I want to show you in my arms, Nadia.” His gaze was concentrated.

I shook my head. “Stop. I don’t want to listen to anymore—”

“Why not? Because you liked it.” His nostrils flared.

I glared at him. “I did not. I...I didn’t even know you were going to kiss me—”

“But I felt your kiss back, and it felt good. You don’t want to admit it because you’re waiting for Paul Crane—”

“I’m not waiting for Paul; we’re together.” My words were rushed, and I crossed my arms. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I do, Nadia. I know men like Paul.” He sighed heavily. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t kiss you again. I don’t want you right now. Not while you’re still yearning for a man that left you behind, and before you deny it

again, he's not in Paris, and that is the truth. He stopped by for sex. That, I'm sure of."

My face burned, and I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as his words cut in like a knife to the bone, swift and deep. *How dare he?*

He winced. "*Pardon*. Sorry. I didn't mean to offend—"

"But you did," I snapped. "My private life is none of your concern."

He blew out his breath. "I'm sorry, Nadia. You bring out a need in me to protect you in my own way. He's mistreating you. I only wanted to say you deserve better—"

"No, you wanted to hurt me. You meant every word. And I thought..." I blinked back tears and covered my mouth. *What did I think?* I thought he was at the very least a friend.

"I like you very much. You must know that. Please, look at me." His expression softened. "We are alike, you and me, and if you were mine, I would shut down my life to be at your side. Nothing would be more important than taking care of you. I'd show you how good a man treats a woman he cares for."

I squinted and crossed my arms. "You talk this way to me? You have a girlfriend."

He looked confused. "Dominique? *Copine*. She's a friend."

I thought about the look on her face as she stared at him outside the club. It wasn't completely indifferent. And what about Josephine's eagerness when Hayden crooked a finger? We were all a game to him. He doesn't think highly of me either. *To him, I'm Paul Crane's sad escort that he occasionally visits for sex.*

I shook my head and swallowed, crossing my arms. "I think it's best I leave now."

He blew out his breath and moved in the direction of the door. "You can go. If that's what you want to do."

I followed him back to the room where guests were chatting, and he went to greet them while I went in search of Xander. He was outside kissing Wyatt in the hallway when I walked up. "We're leaving. We can drop you off, Wyatt," I told him in a flat tone.

"Sure. So, what were you two up to?" Wyatt teased.

I stiffened. "Nothing at all. I saw his studio and his sketches, that's it." I snapped.

Wyatt held up his hands. "Excuse."

“Nadia.” Xander said my name in his “you’re being rude” way.

My head throbbed. “Sorry, Wyatt.” I rubbed my temples.

He smiled. “It’s fine. I know you adore me.”

“I do,” I told Wyatt.

“Besides, Nadia isn’t the type to fool around—I am.” Xander laughed with Wyatt, and they went back to kissing.

I texted Ben, and he replied right away.

Ben: I’ll be there in ten minutes

Xander came over and clasped my shoulders. “What happened?”

I shook my head and averted my eyes. “Nothing. I’m just tired.”

He sighed. “Okay, tell me later,” he whispered. “Would it be all right to ride back with Ben to Wyatt’s? I won’t stay the night. But I’d really like to talk to him longer.”

“Of course,” I smiled despite it all. “I’d hope it would work out that way.”

“Thank you,” he whispered, then went back to Wyatt and kissing.

Ben appeared ten minutes later, and I sat up front with him to give Xander and Wyatt space. And so that I wouldn’t have to feel like the third wheel while they made out.

Hayden was out on the street as we pulled off. I quickly turned my head away. And I was grateful for Ben speeding off down the avenue.

“Are you okay, Nadia?” Ben asked.

“I will be. Thank you.” I sighed. “Xander wants to ride with you back to Wyatt’s.”

“Okay. I’ll let him know if he wants to stay for a while, I’ll pick him up later.”

“Thank you so much, Ben.”

Ben played classical music the rest of the way home. It was Bach, from what I learned from Paul. And a heavy weight sat as a lump in my stomach. I should have gone home like I wanted to do. *Xander could have gone without me.* My annoyance quickly dissipated and left me with guilt. It wasn’t Xander’s fault Hayden kissed me. Was it all playboy charm the whole time? Had he always thought of me as a *petite poupée*, a little doll, to dress up and show off his clothes? He seemed more upset that I didn’t want to model than my desire to be a designer.

The cold behavior the day he dropped me off at the house came to mind.

He judged me that day. He saw me as Paul's kept woman. "*He keeps you in a gilded cage...he stopped by for sex...*" Pain ached in my chest as his harsh words taunted me. There was no way Paul Crane would be with someone like me. That was why he kissed me. *He thought I was easy.* Even in Paris I couldn't run from my past.

"We're here." Ben pulled me from my thoughts, and we arrived at the house. I climbed out and waved at the window, signaling to Xander he didn't need to give me an extra goodbye. They waited until I was inside and closed the door. And behind it, I sank and let the tears flow down my face. It wasn't only because I was treated poorly by Hayden. It was my loneliness, my doubts. *Did Paul have doubts of his own? Was that why we had to continue to live apart?*

I climbed the stairs and instead of changing, I called Paul. The time difference was the same, but it was close to one in the morning. It took five rings before he answered. There was the sound of classical music before he came on the line. "Nadia? It's what...one a.m. Is there something wrong?" The concern in his voice panged in my heart. The time wasn't working out well, and every day felt like too long apart.

"Yes, I want to see you. Can I come to Germany?" I opened my computer and typed in flights.

"Come here to Germany right now?" His tone rose an octave.

My pulse picked up. "Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Isn't Xander visiting?"

"He'd go with me to Germany." There was a pause on his end that was only seconds but felt like minutes. And in that time I already knew that my pushing Xander to Germany was rude. He had come all this way for me. But then Paul said, "Well, it's kind of chaotic here. Ingrid is staying at the house ___"

"She is? Why?" My voice rose.

"Her house is being fumigated for fleas, so she's here with Bobby."

My brows furrowed. "But she's from Germany and has relatives who live in castles. Couldn't she have stayed somewhere else?" My tone sharpened. I closed my laptop.

"What's this? You're upset? It was sudden and it's a big house. I'm not even there right now. I'm in the studio."

"But she's living with you." *I've only been to your home a couple of times.*

“It’s not living, it’s only for a night or two. Honestly, you have no reason to be jealous.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. *No reason to be jealous?* But I had every reason to be jealous. A woman he had previously been with was *living* with him, something I’d never gotten to do. Wouldn’t he hate it if I were living with someone else? Do I dare ask him that? *No. Focus on what you’re feeling here, Nadia. He needs to hear you speak your truth.*

“I don’t want us to be apart anymore. It was too long when you left, and I had only a precious few hours before you were gone. I need you with me.” My voice was hoarse.

“I’m sorry, baby. I have a couple more video interviews. One with a historian to speak with tomorrow. Afterwards, I’m turning things over to my team so I can go to Paris. I’ll finish up the work there so we can be together. I could come now, but it would only be for a few hours. We both didn’t like that. Please, can you hang in for me a few days more?”

I sighed heavily. He was at the studio working and he planned to come back. We all had work. *I have the Monaco fashion shoot soon.* “Okay.”

“Did something happen?”

I didn’t want to tell him about Hayden. He’d be furious and interfere. He couldn’t fight all my battles. “No.”

“Is Xander enjoying Paris?”

“He is. He’s having fun with Wyatt.”

“Okay. Is that good?”

“Yes. It is. I had hoped they’d hit it off.”

“Good. If there is anything you need at the house, let me know.”

Another one of Hayden’s insults dug in. *It’s his place. His things.* Nothing around me belonged to me. “I was thinking...maybe it would be better if I moved into my own place? So I’d be more independent.”

“What? No. It’s not safe. We have security around the clock. I heard from Gunnar; Isabelle tried to contact you. Nadia, I’m confused. You say you want me to come and now you want to move? I don’t understand.”

My eyes darted around the bedroom. “Everything here is yours. It’s...It’s all your things...”

“You want to redecorate? I’ll send an interior designer over. Change whatever you want, or is it that you don’t want to stay?” I could hear the worry in his voice. He thought I was going the same way as Aubrey. But that wasn’t it. *Hayden Madsen got in my head.* Paul was doing everything he

could for me here. He supported my internship and my career. And how do I pay him back? I believed a guy I didn't entirely know just because he gave me attention.

"No...no. It's fine. I was only thinking. I'm busy too. I'm going to a fashion shoot in Monaco."

"When?"

"Thursday."

"Before the Formula One?"

"Yes."

"I'll meet you there—"

"Really? You'll come?" I squealed, thrill resonant in my tone.

He chuckled. "Yes. If not that day, the very next one. I'll make sure I meet you down there, okay?"

His trip no longer sounded definite. "Yeah, okay." I managed to keep my tone even.

"Good. We can talk later today or anytime. I will do my best to make it for Monaco. You have fun with Xander. Ben has the details for the hotel there. We will see each other. Okay?"

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you too, my love. I'm working as fast as I can to return to you. Talk soon."

I put down the phone and blew out my breath. Paul was doing what he could, and I had to do the same. Xander was already into Wyatt, and there wasn't a chance he would want to go to Germany this weekend anyway. It was a crazy idea from the start. I didn't like Ingrid staying over, but he hadn't given me a reason to doubt him. Hayden not only made me doubt Paul, but myself. *And he's wrong.* So why was I still upset?



The bed dipped, and Xander climbed in with me. "Wakey, wakey."

I groaned and buried my head in the pillow. "You sound like Mom."

He laughed. "I know. Agata never sleeps past eight a.m. It's two."

I sat up. "Two? In the afternoon? Oh, no. I'm sorry."

It had been a restless night. I tossed and turned, got up, worked on my designs, and sent emails before trying to sleep again. I hadn't expected to miss so much of the day during his visit.

Xander waved dismissively. "It's fine. Ben took me out for breakfast. After that, I walked around the Louvre with Wyatt, and then we returned to his place for a while."

"Oh...ohh. Did you have sex with him?"

Xander grin turned sheepish. "Not yet."

I reached over to feel his forehead. "Are you sick?"

He gently pushed my hand away. "Ha. No. I actually enjoy talking with him. We ended up showing each other our work—it was more like fashion foreplay. But now that you're up, I want to know what happened that had you running out of Hayden's place like there was a fire."

I harrumphed. "Well, he gave me a tour. You would die for his studio; I mean, *whoa...*we talked and he sketched me."

"Oh, he did, did he? Hmm." Xander cocked a brow. "Was it real talent as an artist, or was it a ruse to flirt?"

"A bit of both." I pushed my hair back from my face.

"It was pretty obvious he was interested. Wyatt and I knew he only invited us over to spend time with you, and I knew you wouldn't go unless we went along."

I pursed my lips. "That's right, and now I wish we just went home."

I threw the covers off and stomped to the bathroom to shower. Hayden's opinions haunted my thoughts and disturbed my sleep. He probably had Paul worried I would pull away, and it had me thinking I was still in an arrangement. One he was more than willing to free me of for himself. He seemed sympathetic, but how sympathetic was he to the women in his life when he made a pass at me? *Unbelievable.*

Xander was on a call when I returned to the bedroom, and I changed into a T-shirt and jeans.

He tutted and put his phone in his pocket. "Where are the bespoke clothes? I mean, seriously. You're just letting it all hang out."

I narrowed my gaze at him. "So? We're going out to hang; what's your problem?"

"You dress better when Paul's around. I mean, what do you do when your man's here?"

I smirked. "Him."

Xander laughed. “Oh, I like that one. So you hate Hayden now, but you were away with him for a while so it couldn’t have been all bad. I mean, damn, he’s hot. If I had a free pass and could keep Paul, I’d let him fuck me until I passed out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Go right ahead.” If I told him Hayden kissed me, he might accidentally tell Wyatt or make a big deal about it. I hadn’t expected it or wanted it.

“You’re annoyed about something. We’re not going anywhere until you tell me.”

I lifted my shoulder and brushed my hair. “We talked, and he’s a bit like me. He had a teen mom, but he went to foster care. I was impressed by his studio and all he’s accomplished, you know. He’s on top right now.”

“Yes, but fashion is fluid. It changes daily. He’s relevant now—”

“And that’s why he is cross-collaborating. He’s making fashion that can become timeless.”

“Oh, la-di-da.” Xander put his hands on his hips. “You’ve become a mega-fan overnight.”

“Not at all.” I picked up a pillow and threw it at him. He caught it, stretched out on the bed, and put it under his head.

“But you’re attracted....” Xander teased.

I scrunched up my face. “I was a little curious. Until he tried to tell me Paul was mistreating me.”

“Oh, let me guess, Hayden said he’d treat you better? It’s right out of the players handbook. He must have followed that up with something.” Xander looked at me hard, and I bit the inside of my cheek. “I’ll let it go, but I already know you, Nadia. You don’t get haughty unless a guy made a move.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I brushed my hair vigorously. “I called Paul and asked if we could go to Germany.”

“Seriously?” Xander said. “It is on my list, but I take it Paul turned the impromptu trip down?”

I hunched my shoulders. “Yep, and oh, Ingrid claims her dog has fleas, so she moved into his place with her dog after she got him treated.”

Xander rolled his eyes. “Sure, he does, but Paul’s not interested. He hasn’t given you any reason to think he would cheat on you, so let her keep embarrassing herself by chasing a man who doesn’t want her.”

I took a deep breath. “Good advice.”

“That’s what I do. Now, let me tell you about what Wyatt does with his

tongue—”

“Wait.” I held up a palm for him to stop. “There’s no doubt he’s hot, but I have to work with him.”

Xander grinned. “He is, and that accent? Love it.” His expression turned dreamy. “I’m in the mood for a Paris romance.” He went into my closet and took down a jumpsuit. “You slept all day, and I get visitor’s perks. Bottom line, fuck Hayden. He doesn’t know shit. You know your heart. Paul’s a loving man that cares for you. That’s what’s real.”

I went over and hugged Xander. Even though I knew it to be true, there were times I needed the reminder. Still, Paul’s work always came first. *Will his career always eclipse my feelings?*



CHAPTER 21

Xander had spent a great deal of his visit with Wyatt. I didn't mind because Tomas had allowed me time to make the Kusama-inspired knit shift dress into something more in line with the brand. He was still considering it for a limited, ready-to-wear online spring addition. The web knitting muted the balls of yarn into something more upscale. I did the finishing press, then waited for him to come over. He studied it for an eternity. "I think we can use it."

My jaw unhinged, and my eyes welled up. "Really? Oh. My. God. Are you sure?"

It had been my tenth try. All the free time I had, night and day, had been spent following Tomas's direction in finishing the garment to his high expectation. I could only hope he'd be pleased, but to use it on a limited release was beyond anything I imagined.

"Yes, Nadia." Tomas smiled. "The design fits what I envisioned. It has a playful, yet stylish finish. Very Rudi Gernreich. Congratulations."

I covered my mouth to lessen the sound of my scream, but I couldn't. My arms flew around Tomas's neck and I squeezed him tight. "Oh, my God. This is a dream."

A dream come true. I saw myself in my bedroom back at home looking at the fashion images from runways on my wall of Givenchy. How I held it as the highest in the world, and dreamed. Never had I believed I'd be standing here with the creative director telling me he wants something I worked on to

be under the prestigious house's brand. I shook with joy and Tomas squeezed my waist. "You're going to make me cry, and I will never forgive you." He kissed my cheeks. "Keep it up, Nadia."

That was Tomas. He was always working directly with me, sharing his knowledge and pushing me to elevate my design. Professor Elan did the same in New York City, but college was so much different. The destruction of my designs, the catfights, and negativity. It bothered me that I'd have to leave Paris when I had just started to grow under Tomas's tutelage. *Could I stay? What would I do? The internship was only eight weeks.*

"Can I call my parents?" I checked the time and deflated. *Too early. Paul?* I pressed his number, but it went into voicemail, and I didn't leave a message. It would be better to share it with him in person. *Hopefully in Monaco.*

Tomas checked the time. "You should go home and prepare for the photo shoot." My phone chimed and Tomas went to the next workstation. It was Xander.

Xander: Milan is going very well.

Nadia: I knew it would. I'm thrilled for you.

Xander had left a few days earlier and had already booked additional appointments in Italy for his company. I doubted he would return to college with his business expanding. Everything he wanted to do, he went for it.

Nadia: I have good news too. Tomas is using my Kusuma inspired dress for Givenchy online.

Xander: OMG!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Get out of town!!! That's fucking fantastic!!! Are you losing it?

Nadia: I would, if I wasn't at work. And I have to go to Monaco for Hayden's shoot.

Xander: We will have it all. It's fate. Enjoy Monaco. I'll call you. Wyatt's on his way.

Nadia: Still feeling romantic?

Xander: Damn right I am. He's in for a special night. Contact you later.



Hayden's photo shoot in Monaco for the *Titan* movie had finally arrived. I was due to meet the assistants at the airport in three hours. *And hopefully, see Paul.* He was working on the documentary. There had been more photos of him with Ingrid on location shoots. The pictures of them together had been enough to convince the press that I was old news, which was good since I could move more freely without as much concern. But I hoped that would change when I saw him.

I cleared my workstation and waved bye to Tomas outside of his office. He held up his hand for me to come in and grimaced. "*Hello...Josephine. Oui...Toto? No. Nadia...?*" He switched to French, and rapidly and in a sharp tone, I couldn't follow. He slammed his phone down and cursed.

I frowned. "What's wrong, Tomas?"

"*Désolé.* Sorry, Nadia. Josephine believes you have to sit out of the Monaco shoot."

My stomach knotted. It was obvious something was said on the call. "Can you tell me why?"

"*Titan's* producer changed the head photographer to Toto Reeves, and he's a pompous ass, but I believe you could deal with him. It was something else Josephine shared." His brow knitted. "Hayden demanded you be removed from the shoot. He's requested Ellie to come instead, and she's already with Josephine. I just don't understand the last-minute change. Did something happen between you two?"

I dropped my shoulders and told Tomas what had happened the night we had gone to Hayden's place after the club. I suddenly felt so ashamed. Tomas knew what my feelings were for Paul, and I desperately hoped he knew I didn't lead Hayden on.

Tomas scratched the hair on his chin. "Unlikely. Keeping you off the shoot because of a kiss would be ridiculous for him. But I'm going to see what I can do." He picked up his phone and made a call. He spoke in French, his voice even and calmer than before switching to English. "*Oui, I insist. Nadia can handle herself. We don't remove opportunities. So? I'll take responsibility. She'll be there. Au revoir.*"

He lifted his chin. “There’s concern about your inexperience, but Ellie doesn’t have much either. The photo shoot won’t be easy, but you must learn to handle difficult ones. This is too good of an opportunity to be sidelined. However, you can change your mind.”

My jaw tightened. I refused to go back to being a victim. I was stronger than that. This was too good an opportunity to give up. *My parents didn’t raise me to be a quitter.* “I’m going. I will prove to him and everyone else I deserved to be there.”

Tomas beamed at me. “That’s right. Be a dragon and go into the fire. You will rise from the ashes like a phoenix.” He kissed my cheeks. “Au revoir.”

“Au revoir.” I left for the house, and on the way, I called my mom.

“Hey, Nadia. How are you?” Dad said on answering.

“I’m fine, Dad, but why are you answering Mom’s phone?”

“It seems all this running around has finally caught up to her. She accidentally took my phone instead of hers. I figured I’d get the best calls.”

“Does she know? Where did she go?”

“I called her to let her know. It was hard enough to get her out the door. She’s with Mandy at Summerfest.”

“Really?”

“Yep. I finally convinced her to go and have fun, and it’s not far since we now live in a house on Lake Drive. It’s temporary until we get more help with our house, and this has a gate, so it’s secure.”

“I’m sorry, Dad. You and Mom keep having to alter your lives.”

“It hasn’t been that much of a hardship, Princess. I received first-class health treatments, Mom and I got a real vacation, and I crossed seeing The Space Center off my bucket list. Though your uncle Jan’s calling me a snob now. I told him he could be my handyman.”

“Dad,” I drawled out in mock admonishment. We laughed.

“He told me I couldn’t afford him, anyway.”

“You’re making jokes, but how are you feeling?” My tone turned serious.

“I’m fine. Every minute of the day, people are asking me. You should know by now that everyone would know if I wasn’t all right.”

“That’s true,” I agreed.

“So, how’s Paris?”

“I’ve been in so many design meetings. I’ve seen the latest collections. I’m overwhelmed with all the constant inspiration. But that’s not all. Something amazing happened today. I haven’t been able to process it fully,

but....”

“Don’t keep me in the dark.”

“Tomas is using one of my knit dress designs for a limited edition in maybe the spring.”

“Oh, my Lord. Your mom’s going to lose her head. I won’t be able to bring her back to Earth. Gosh, Nadia. We can’t be prouder.” Dad choked up and my eyes watered.

“I can’t...believe it. It’s too much. I keep asking myself why me? I still can’t believe my dress was chosen by Professor Elan or Tomas choosing me for Givenchy and selecting something I created.”

“You’re a natural. You soak up anything thrown at you, and if you don’t know it, you work hard until you do. I’m amazed at you, kid; you never give up.”

Hearing Dad’s encouragement reminded me of what I had to do with Monaco. This was the chance of a lifetime, and I wasn’t going to pass it up, even if things may not go well.

“I’m heading to Monaco today for a fashion shoot.”

“Rich men’s toy cars,” he joked. “What a life you live. Go jet-setting. We’re fine here in Wisconsin.”

“Okay, Dad. Talk to you later. Love you.”

I didn’t tell him I wasn’t wanted on the shoot. It bothered me that Hayden had made a promise and took it back. *Had he really blocked my opportunity for turning him down?* I, like Tomas, doubt it. Ben stopped the car, and we were about to go inside the house when a new message came in from Tomas.

Tomas: Toto changed the start time. They are all leaving now on a plane, and they won’t be able to wait for you. You can still go. The shoot is at The Monte Carlo Casino. Call Josephine when you get there.

Everything pointed to skipping the photo shoot. Still, I wasn’t ready to give up. I told Ben what happened.

“We’ll get you there. Don’t worry.” He made some calls while I went inside to get my overnight bag for the hotel. When I returned, Ben took it.

“Paul has a friend heading to the Formula One race. We can ride with them, but we must hurry.”

Ben drove to the airport and parked on the tarmac. “Someone else will pick up the car. Let’s go.”

I rushed out of the car with Ben, who helped me up the few steps to board the small plane. We shook hands with the young woman and older male, who immediately returned to his phone.

“That’s her dad.” Ben showed me his typed message on his phone.

I gave him a nod, and he handed me my noise cancellation headphones. After putting them on, I gazed over Paris as we lifted high into the air. Within minutes, I could already see that I’d only visited a tiny part of France. There was so much more, and I wanted to explore every part.

Away from Tomas and the office, I also had time to think about the way he spoke up for me on the call to put me back on the photo shoot. An uneasiness churned in my stomach. Would I regret it?



CHAPTER 22

After we landed and thanked the couple for the ride, we climbed aboard a helicopter to fly from Nice to Monaco. My life was full of privileges that I used to get my way. Even going to this shoot when I was no longer wanted seemed rude. But on the other hand, Tomas encouraged us not to allow people to block opportunities. *I will do my best.*

There were barricades along the street for the Formula One race, with guards blocking the front entrance to The Monte Carlo Casino. One security person approached the car. “Are you a guest?”

“No, but I’m on the crew shooting for Givenchy.”

He adjusted his headset and took out a placard. “Your name?”

“Nadia Sokol.”

The security guard shook his head. “I’m sorry, you’re not on the list.”

My heart sank, then I remembered Tomas said to call Josephine. She came jogging up and spoke with the security person, who moved the barricade back. “Nadia, you’re aware the set-up has changed for today?”

I nodded. “Yes, Tomas told me.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Great. We’ve got a lot to do. Let’s go.”

I turned to Ben and waved. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Text me when you’re done.”

“Two assistants have been dismissed by the photographer. One of the supermodels missed the change in time and is stuck in London. We are improvising with who we were sent. Just follow along and do what is asked,”

she rushed in a low tone.

I nodded firmly. “Great. I’m ready.”

We walked together to the front of The Monte Carlo Casino, the grand iconic building I’d seen many times luxuriously presented in film and television, and today was no different. Three Formula One race cars were parked in the drive, with models wearing the latest glamorous Givenchy Haute Couture Collection created by Hayden and Tomas. They were striking running poses with fans blowing to add speed by creating movement to the garments. It was all in activity, with a director filming and a photographer moving around them and taking photos. A few feet away was a computer set with a few assistants I’d seen back at Givenchy. But Josephine and I headed to a small trailer set up with models still wearing regular clothes and stylists doing their hair and makeup. Ellie was fitting a woman who broke the zipper on the back of her gown.

“Oh, no,” Josephine exclaimed. “Get a corset, Ellie. We sew her in. Quick. Quick.”

Ellie rushed into the trailer, and I quickly unhooked the garment as carefully as possible. At the same time, Ellie came back with an old-fashioned string corset. Josephine expertly laced her in and pulled while the model grimaced. We put the dress back on, and I sewed while Ellie refastened the gown. We had just put on her heels while the stylist and makeup artist retouched her flawless face.

“What the hell are you doing?” A sharp bark erupted behind us. “We’re waiting for this? She looks messy.”

“What should we change, Mr. Reeves?” Josephine asked politely.

Toto didn’t answer, but he came to stand before me. He was five feet tall with blue hair and wearing a white embroidered kurta. He sneered as he stared me down. “You’re the brat intern who threw her bottle out of the pram to force her way onto the set.”

I squared my shoulders. “I was scheduled to work, so I came—”

“You pushed. So you’re here to work, you work,” he snapped.

I opened my mouth to speak again, but Josephine elbowed me, and I knew she wanted me to remain quiet.

“No special treatments, *intern*,” he mocked, then turned to Josephine. “Put her on the trailer and out of my sight for the rest of the shoot. And why are you standing here? Send the model over now. Move.” Toto stomped off.

I stood back and was relieved to see no visible issues with the dress as the

model walked behind Toto with an assistant.

I huffed. *Yeah, send her over because we didn't ruin the dress.*

Josephine gave me a sympathetic look. "You helped save the dress. I'll make sure Tomas knows it, but you'll need to work the trailer. You organize and help assist the models and stylists inside. Okay?"

I rolled up my sleeves. "Okay."

She smiled. "Thank you."

I went inside the trailer, and it looked like a tornado had gone through it. *Oh, well. I can do it.*

"Can you help me now? I'm Mags, the head stylist." A middle-aged woman introduced herself, and I helped her pack what she didn't need that was in the way. Then, when things were neater, the models started to come inside again. I moved with them, taking their names and helping dress them in the garments.

One man came forward with a smile. "Josephine said they want me in the pleated skirt and boots. Mags, they want less hair." He motioned over his wild head of long curls. I returned to the back and quickly found the skirt and didn't blink when he stripped down to nothing, put it on him, and gasped. *Threads all over it.*

"Sorry, Nadia. I need him now," Mags called, and I followed him with tweezers, gently tugging on the loose threads.

"Yeong!" someone yelled.

The model raised his hand. "That's me."

We watched him walk out, followed by a curse. "There are threads here. Is that girl blind? Get her to fix it!" Toto screamed near the door.

Yeong returned, and I rushed over to him, removing the three threads that were left. He squeezed my arm. "Don't let that asshole get you down. He changed the time at the last minute and fired a few assistants who showed up this morning. He's the reason things are a mess."

I smiled at him. "Thank you. I'll be all right."

Toto was an ass, but I was dressing top models for an international film campaign. Tomas was right. *Go into the fire and rise to the occasion.* I went back to work, dressing, adding accessories, and working with the stylist and technicians. The models left the trailer looking amazing. After a while, we finally reached the last model, and once done, I picked up my bag to watch the rest of the photo shoot.

Ellie appeared, her face pinkened. "They want you to stay in the trailer

case something is needed.”

“But I thought we had no more models.” *Toto again.*

“I’m only the messenger. Sorry.” She shrugged and left.

I sat back down and sighed heavily. “I guess I’ll see it online.”

Mags snorted. “This shit happens on rare occasions. You just have to let it all roll off your back. Toto has a Napoleon complex; he has to hurt someone to feel better. I’m not his favorite either. He banished me, too. And he specifically asked for me.”

I blinked. “Wow, he asked for you and put you here? This is my first one.”

“First?” Her voice elevated, and she laughed. “Good on you. You’ve done an incredible job keeping up the way you have. I’m impressed. It’s hard to stay calm throughout the storm Toto creates.”

“Thanks, Mags. I appreciate that.”

“They get better, and since we have nothing to do, I’d love to play with all that gorgeous hair. Sit, please.”

Mags motioned for me to take one of the chairs before the mirror, and I let her curl my hair and do my makeup. When she was done, we both admired her work.

“I look like a star ready for the Oscars,” I enthused.

She beamed approvingly. “You do. I’ve worked on many.”

“Wow, what is it like?”

“Chaotic. Brilliant.” She put her feet up on a free chair. “I roll with it all. *Titan* is going to break the box office. I can handle staying away from Toto’s ass, especially since his photos will be a part of my portfolio later.”

I hunched my shoulders. “It still would have been nice to see it all in action.”

I took a selfie to send to Xander. Then a bunch of models walked in.

“It’s over,” someone announced, though it wasn’t over for us. I helped them out of the garments, and Ellie came in to help with another group of assistants with the cleanup. She packed up the clothes and labels once the other assistants arrived to help break down the trailer.

“I’m sorry you missed the photo shoot, Nadia,” Ellie said in a gentle tone. “I don’t know why you couldn’t be there. I’m an intern too, and there were other assistants available to help with the trailer.”

I waved my hands dismissively. “It’s not your fault.”

“I know, but I feel bad. You did a great job, though.”

“You too,” I told her.

“We’re all heading to town for some shopping. Would you like to ride with us?” she offered.

I shook my head. “I’m going to lunch. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Her eyes widened. “You missed lunch? Sorry.”

“No worries.” I texted Ben.

Nadia: I’m tired. Do you think we can stop for lunch somewhere?

Ben: You can have room service in the suite and rest. Then later we can take a helicopter back to Paris? Whatever you want to do.

I could see a huge tub and a big plate of food in front of me.

Nadia: Sounds perfect.

Though, if we were heading back to Paris, Paul couldn’t come, and that made me sadder than missing the photoshoot.

I met up with Ben, and we walked to the Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo. I put on my sunglasses and passed the paparazzi along the steps who were taking photos of anyone who walked in. Formula One and Hollywood brought out the big stars.

The lavishness of the casino continued to the hotel. I eyed the marble and gold lobby and touched one of the columns as we passed. My attention floated over a separated seated area, and I spotted Hayden. He was chatting in a circle of people, and at the same time, his gaze went to me. I turned my head and noticed Ben had stopped walking. “Nadia, I need to tell you something.”

My brows rose, and I followed him into the elevator. When we reached the top and were alone, he spoke. “I told Paul how you were being treated at the shoot. Toto bragged about it until he heard—”

“That I’m with Paul.” I bobbed my head.

“Paul made a rule that if anything bad happens to you, we are to report it back to him. I like to keep your privacy, but with what happened on the boat —”

“It’s okay. In fact, thank you, Ben, and honestly, it wasn’t your fault what happened on the boat.”

His jaw clenched. “I was friendly with Isabelle, even took her out on a date. She fooled me—”

“I’m sorry, Ben. She fooled the both of us, but we’ll get through this.”

“We will. Paul will make sure of it.”

As long as I'm with Paul, people will treat me differently. So Toto changed his attitude once he thought I was connected to someone of influence. Was anything or anyone real with me? I wasn't upset with Ben for telling Paul, at the end of the day, it was his job. This was my new life, and the special treatment would only continue if we stayed together. Like Dani told me, I would have to come to terms with it.

We went inside the suite, and I kicked off my heels and let my feet sink into the thick carpet. Ben handed me a menu, and I padded over with my phone. There was a new text message from Tomas.

Tomas: I heard about the shoot. How are you? Call me.

I ordered a sandwich, soup, and cake. Ben pointed to the door. “I'll leave you for your privacy, but if you need me, just call.”

“Thank you, Ben.”

I sat on a chair on the balcony and called Tomas.

“Hello, Nadia. I know the shoot is over. How are you now?”

“I'm fine. It went well, right?”

“Yes. I've seen some proofs, and they're fantastic. Josephine said it was because of you and Ellie. You both helped the staff and assistants, and you saved the shoot.”

My heart warmed. “I'm happy I had the chance to go. It was exciting to be a part of it all, but...” I tensed. *I have to ask.* “Did you send me because of Paul?”

“No, I sent you because I believe you could handle it,” Tomas replied simply. “Paul's protective of you. I expected some issues with his fame when we agreed to have you on board. We took you because you are talented and proved yourself dedicated and hardworking. Even today, you did well.”

“Thank you, Tomas.”

“Enjoy your time off. See you soon.” We ended our call.

Ben returned. “I'll get the car and everything set. Do you want something while I'm gone?”

“I'm going to eat and take a nap. Thank you, Ben.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Ben opened the door just as the room service arrived and set up a lovely lunch on the cloth-covered table and chairs. They set up the lunch for two. *But Paul's not coming.* My shoulders drooped, and I turned away and sighed.

I took a bath in the sunken tub and added the flower petals left on the counter, imagining Paul taking it with me. My phone chimed. *Paul?* I climbed out and cinched a towel around my waist. It was Xander. I finished up and put on a tunic, then called him back.

“How was the shoot?” he asked when he answered.

“Intense.”

“Hayden?”

“Even less charming this time around. How was Italy?”

“Ah-maze-ing,” he drawled out, and my spirits lifted as he sent me shots of his presentation and Italy. He had assistants, too.

“Wow, Xander. Assistants?”

“That’s right. I can’t do these things cold. Clients expect a lot these days. You got to be A-plus, you know?”

“Yes, I believe I’m beginning to know.”

“Why waste time slugging at the bottom when I can start in the middle? And honestly, I owe so much to Paul. I swear, he only saw some of my work and was certain I could do more. I mean, his vision is not limited. He sees potential and doesn’t think about price or cost. I want to achieve that mindset one day.”

“I like that. I could use that mindset, too.”

“How was the *Titan* photo shoot?”

I groaned and caught him up on all that happened.

“Fuck those assholes on the set; they are all complicit. I hope Paul makes their lives go to hell.”

“It wasn’t all bad. I got to learn the ropes. Although I would have learned more if I was allowed to watch the shoot.”

“That was completely out of order. Oh, Wyatt wants to tell you he would have stood up for you.”

I grinned. “So, how are things?”

“Good. We’re going to see a concert tonight in Milan.”

“Okay, go for it and have a blast.”

“Thank you, and enjoy yourself. There has to be a party there in Monaco; go have fun. Listen to us Wisconsinites sitting around talking about being in Milan and Monaco. What a wild ride.”

“It truly is. Talk to you soon.”

Xander was going for his dreams. It was truly remarkable how quickly he was gaining success. Was that in the cards for me? My time hadn’t come to

an end in Paris, but I knew I was far from ready to return home. There was still so much to learn and see and experience. Tomas was impressed with my work, even proud of me for how I handled today. *Would he extend the internship?*

Knock. Knock. Knock. The taps were loud and forceful. *Ben?* I padded over to the door and opened it. My mouth dropped open. *Hayden.* He was in a designer suit and buttoned shirt that was well-tailored and pressed. *It suits him well, but what's he doing here?* “Uhm...yes?”

His broad grin wilted around the edges. “You came anyway...I’m glad you did. You did a great job.”

“Thanks,” I plastered on a smile. *No thanks to you.*

“*Ca va?*” he asked.

“*Bien.* I’m fine...did you know the photographer was rude to everyone on set?”

He shrugged. “That’s Toto. He’s a beast, but he’s the best. You made a choice, and it was the right one. You did your job, and you’re stronger for it. That’s what it takes to move forward.”

That was when I understood Hayden completely. I was a flirtation, maybe even a muse, but at the end of the day, I was only an intern. He saw himself as a mentor to teach me lessons. Paul wouldn’t allow me to be mistreated or grow a thicker skin if he knew someone had hurt me. He’d skin the person alive for hurting me.

On the other hand, I did appreciate the praise from Hayden about the work. “*You did your job, and you’re stronger for it. That’s what it takes to move forward.*” He was right. I was so glad I’d pushed and had today. I was determined to move forward as he suggested.

“All right. Thank you, Hayden. Good evening.” I touched the knob on the door.

“Wait.” His brows pulled together. “Why do I feel like an asshole now? I had promotional press for the movie to do, and I didn’t have time to coddle anyone there. I also didn’t treat you like everyone else at your level. Interns don’t get to come when a client and photographer don’t want you there. We could still have made you leave—”

“Yes, I know. Thank you for allowing it,” I said, in an even tone. “I have no regrets, and as it turns out, you were short-staffed, and my help was beneficial. It’s over now.” Hayden took me off, and I could have called him out on it. But I’m new in this business and some decisions may not always go

my way. I had to keep my professional relationships. *Tomas was disappointed, but pleased at my restraint.*

Hayden gazed around the suite and smirked. "It's hard to impress you if you can walk into a suite during Formula One week in Monaco. You seem like a sweet, down-to-earth woman, but you are in luxury here. I keep getting you wrong. I wish I could figure you out."

"There is nothing to figure out, Hayden. I love Paul. That's all, and I don't feel bad that I'm here. It's part of the life that we share together."

Ben appeared and walked inside the room, he eyed Hayden coolly. He didn't speak to us, but stood near the side of the door.

"And where is he?" He looked past me into the room again. "Not here. Bodyguard is. He keeps you locked away to pick up whenever he wants."

I clenched my jaw. "You just can't stop insulting me, can you?"

"I'm not thinking badly of you. It's him I have a problem with."

"You know nothing about our relationship." I crossed my arms. "I wish you'd stop assuming the worst."

His expression softened and he gentled his tone. "Then tell me. Make me understand."

I blinked. "What is there to explain? *We are in love.*"

"This." He gestured around. "Isn't love. It's material things. Love is being there. It's putting you first. *Je veux te montrer tellement de choses...*" His last words were as soft as a caress. I understood he meant that he wanted to show me so much. But his arrogance made it hard to believe him. I didn't want to hurt Hayden, but the love I knew wasn't easy. Love was in the longing, and it only grew stronger.

I tensed as pain spread in my chest. "Hayden...I know what's in my heart, and I love Paul. Not because of this place, but because of the man that I know he is. The strong, loving, and kind man I fell in love with."

Hayden's nostrils flared. "I don't know if I'm angry or sorry for you."

I heard footsteps on the tile and turned my head towards the sound. Laurence appeared a few steps behind Hayden. His eyes widened and turned backwards. That was when I saw Paul. Our eyes connected, and my pulse sped up, and my stomach fluttered.

"Speak of the devil, and he appears," Hayden quipped, bringing my attention back to him. The smile on Paul's face evaporated, and he stood tall in front of Hayden.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Paul asked him in a sharp tone.

Shit.



CHAPTER 23

Ben came over and stood behind me.

Hayden stared at me, but my throat closed, and I didn't know what to say. Only what I already told him. Paul and I were together, and I loved him. He blew out his breath and glared at Paul. "Nadia's a beautiful, kind, and talented woman. She's also sad and frightened. Treat her better."

"Get the fuck out of here," Paul hissed between clenched teeth.

"I'm leaving. Sorry, Nadia. I call it like I see it."

I frowned at him. It was so rude. Was that just Hayden's way? Insult someone or something you didn't understand? I didn't think I could cope with his pointing fingers. *Not today.*

"You've said enough, Hayden. Thank you for coming by to discuss the photo shoot, but please go now." I pressed my lips together.

Hayden squared his broad shoulders and slowly turned. Paul slammed the door behind him.

"What the hell was Hayden doing here with you?" He ran his hands through his hair as he glared over at Ben. "We need to be alone, thank you both."

Ben left, and Laurence quietly shut the door behind them.

"Hayden had come by to talk about the shoot. I'm...I'm fine," I choked.

Paul came over to stand in front of me. "You're not fine. Tell me the truth, not what I want to hear."

"I...I...." A sob erupted in my throat. Paul wrapped his arms around me,

and I let go of the tears I held inside. I thought I'd been doing okay. I thought I'd been handling living in a different country, having Laurence and Ben around. But Paris was the city of lovers, so each day, as I'd gone back to the house, it was couples in love I saw constantly. Possibly Xander and Wyatt hooking up had also amplified those feelings. Because Xander had been right. I wanted fun. I wanted love. But what I didn't want was to feel so constantly alone. Paul was living his life, busy with all his commitments, and despite his words of missing me, I barely heard from him. It made me feel...it made me feel as though I wasn't enough. *He has work*. But he can work anywhere...If I was enough...he wouldn't want to be away from me. And there were Hayden's words.

"Nadia's a beautiful, kind, and talented woman. She's also sad and frightened. Treat her better." And I realized then and there that I wanted that. I was alone and had suffered trauma. Paul wanted me to live and experience everything Paris had to offer. *But at what cost? My loneliness?* If there was one thing I was learning, it was that I had to use my voice. I had to speak up.

"No. You're right. I have told you what you've wanted to hear, but here's the truth. I'm not fine without you, Paul. I've been happy in Paris, and I've kept busy, but no, I'm not fine. I still struggle with what happened on the boat. It still gives me nightmares, and you are never there when they happen. You are who I want in my life; that's real to me. That's a full life, being with the person you love. And I love you, Paul."

He wrapped his arm around me and kissed my head. "I'm so sorry, Nadia. I thought giving you time away from me was the right thing to do. But I was wrong. I just wanted you to have a choice."

"Then you have it right now. *You* are my answer. I want *you*. I choose you. I choose us."

Paul gazed at me with a yearning that ignited my heart. Its beats pounded at a soul's depth. *Soulmate*. I believed it with all that I was. And as I stared back, I didn't just see the handsome man who swept my life off its feet; I saw the dark corners he shared. His sadness and fears. The man who brought me into his trust, hoping I'd choose him, and I do.

Paul was always my answer. We fit together as fate would have it since we met. We were the pieces missing from each other. There never could be a lasting barrier because the force of our bond would never allow it.

"I love you, Nadia. I'm here, and I won't leave again." His words poured into the wound inside me, healing the broken places that burdened my spirit.

I am enough. He came back to stay.

His strong hand moved up my neck, his fingers tingling my scalp as he held my head. His mouth covered mine in passionate possession, sending a wild swirl of desire down to my core. My arms went around his neck, and I pressed closer, molding myself against him. Lust was there, and my body heated, craving his touch. We broke our kiss to catch our breath. There was also tension I carried to keep me together that loosened. It made me heavy, and I held on to him to keep myself steady. "Paul..." I couldn't explain, but he knew what I needed. He took my weight, holding me up in his arms. My hands held the sides of his face and stroked his jaw as I stared into his eyes. *Paul's mine.* My heart swelled at the warmth and tenderness in his gaze. I touched his smile. "I love you so much." He kissed me again, and we staggered back to the bedroom, unwilling to part. I reached up to undo my tunic, and Paul covered my hands.

"I'll take it off." He unzipped the front, revealing I only had a thong underneath. His stare lit where it fell on my skin. My nipples tightened, and my clit throbbed with his attention. He closed his lips around my nipple and traced it with his tongue. I felt the grip of his hand on my thong as he moved it down my legs. "You're so beautiful. And you're all mine." He called me his before, but this time his claim sang a melody to the spark that created me. It connected to the place inside me that waited, dormant for its other half to merge with it.

"Yes, I am." I moved in for another kiss, and he took my lips with a ferocious hunger that curled my toes. He lifted me to the edge of the bed and placed me down. "I missed you, baby," he whispered as he dropped his hand. "Please understand, I didn't want to be without you."

"I do understand."

He took off his clothes, and my pulse went wild just seeing his strong muscular body and hard cock waiting to fill me. He came to the top of the bed and went to his knees, bringing his hard cock level with my face.

"Suck it," he commanded, and brought the thick head to my mouth. I opened and moaned as he slid his cock across my tongue. I closed my lips around it, and he shuddered, clutching my head as he pushed further in. And I went to that space where he commanded, and I surrendered to his will. Where there was never a thing I'd ever deny him. I gagged and inhaled as he slid his cock to the back of my throat. My eyes watered, and I inhaled through my nostrils and swallowed. "Fuck," he groaned. "That's so good."

Paul went further still, and I gave it my all, taking more of him in my mouth than ever. “Oh, Fuck, Nadia.” His cock eased down my throat. Slowly, he slid his thick, hard shaft out, and I drew hard, making it exit with a sensual pop for his pleasure. He cupped my face as I panted, refilling my lungs, his thumb tingling as he pressed it across my swollen lips.

My arms opened, and Paul was back on me. And I stared at his muscular body’s strength and weight on me. The desire in his dark gaze as he pressed his lips on my mouth, my neck, and then my breasts, swirling his tongue over my nipple. He drew hard on the tip, enough for me to gasp, but soothed the pain with laps of his tongue. Every stroke, he marked by moving his hot erection on my thigh. He was merciless under his sensual control. I swelled and throbbed for him. “You’re so good, Nadia,” his voice praised, thick with desire. He moved down my body. His kisses were gentle on my stomach, his expression a quiet yearning that reached in and took my heart.

Paul slowly lifted off of me and the bed. Then, he picked up his trousers and pulled out a condom.

“No, Paul. Please, I don’t want anything between us.”

Paul looked at me, and I shook my head and smiled. Our gazes locked, and his eyes shimmered. His defenses were down, and I could feel his longing and pain, but I knew we could heal it together. I reached out for him, and he dropped the condom. His head lowered and his jaw tensed. “You bring me to my knees, Nadia,” he whispered.

Moving on top of me, his muscles were firm and taut beneath my palms as I slid my hands over him. The bulk of his weight on me made me feel overwhelmed with emotions. His warmth and scent had been sorely missed. “I never want to be without you again,” I choked.

He kissed my forehead. “You won’t.”

We kissed each other hard and ran our hands over each other’s bodies like we were starved for touch. But I needed him inside me. Wrapping my legs around him, he rocked his hips, teasing his hard erection between my slit. “I make you so wet.”

I squirmed. “You do. Fuck me, please fuck me.”

“Fuck, keep begging me, baby.” Paul let out a groan as he thrust his cock in. I moaned and begged as I sucked in air, my flesh stretched to take him. He didn’t wait to adjust; he pounded into me hard. “Fuck, you give it to me right.” Every stroke sent pulsating sensations of pleasure through me. I clawed his back. “Oh, oh, God. Take me harder,” I urged. He needed to give

it to me, rough and raw. He grunted as he grounded in, and I could feel my inner muscles grow tighter. "I'm going to come."

He pulled out and went up on his knees and placed my legs on his shoulders, then thrust in to the hilt.

Oh, my God. I panted as I stared at him. His firm grip on my thighs, the flex of his muscles beneath them, and the fullness of him inside me overwhelmed me with pleasure. He moved faster, and my body shook. I was close.

"Look at me."

I watched his face. His eyes were dark with desire, and his jaw clenched with the intensity of his building climax. I was lost in the bliss of the sensation of his deep thrusts, the smell of our scent, the sweat on our bodies, and the sweet connection of our souls opening up to each other.

I let out a cry as Paul rubbed my clit. I gasped and quivered, digging my nails into the sheets as I unraveled, giving over to the ecstasy of orgasm. *Ohh, yes, Paul.* My inner walls gripped, milking him, and he groaned. "Fuck, I'm going to come." He plunged in faster, squeezing my ankles and flexing hard as he lost control. And it was glorious.

Our gazes fused together as much as our hearts, and I could feel his heat as he came inside. We stared, panting at each other with his hands on my ankles, keeping me elevated.

"I love you so much."

He pressed a kiss to my ankle. "I love you too, my love."



CHAPTER 24

“Nadia.” Paul’s voice called to me the next morning. I felt a brush of his soft lips on my shoulder, and I opened my eyes.

Paul had changed into a dark shirt and a pair of slacks. His hair was damp from the shower, his expression grim. “We have to leave for New York City.”

My pulse jumped. “Right now?”

“Yes. The District Attorney has scheduled the depositions in the criminal case. The defense needs yours in five days—”

“Five?” I croaked.

He sighed. “Yes. The timing is fast, but Gunnar will have you prepped and ready. You have the truth, and that’s all you have to share.”

“What’s a deposition?” I scrunched up my face. “Sorry, I have no idea.”

“It’s when you share what happened, and the prosecution and the defense get to ask you questions. However, there are other things going on with the press, so we need a full team meeting. It may mean putting the internship on hold, but we’ll wait to see what Gunnar has to share.”

Paul wouldn’t have mentioned it if it wasn’t possible. While I wanted to stay and finish, this was temporary. I needed to win the case for our future. “I’ll call and explain it to Tomas. Professor Elan—”

“She would know. The criminal case has been at the top of U.S. news. I’ll have Nicole contact all of them. It will be fine...I know these cases will not be easy for you.” He took my hand and kissed the back of it. “But I will be

with you.”

I sat up on the bed, and he kissed my lips. If there was a way to avoid a hearing or my involvement, I knew Paul would have made it happen. My mind and pulse raced. *Will the trial be televised? Will everyone in the world know everything about my life?*

“Nadia. We gotta go.” Paul caught my attention, and I left the bed.

“Do I have time for a quick shower?”

Paul nodded in consent.

I went in and cleaned up. When I was done, Paul was waiting outside the door with a towel.

“I thought we had to go,” I murmured playfully.

“I make time for you.” He kissed me and moved the towel over my body, then handed me a set of lingerie that included a cami to wear under one of my tailored suits. I twisted my hair into a chignon. “Is my bag still here?”

“No, Laurence has it in the car. Let’s go.” He took my hand, and we left.

We had only made it to the lobby before Paul stopped us. “One more thing to do before we go.”

I was puzzled, but spotted Toto sitting alone up ahead. *Has he been waiting here all night?*

I folded my arms. “Paul, what are you doing with Toto?”

His chin lifted. “Everything gets back to me. No one treats you like that on my watch.”

“Paul, you can’t always protect me from the world.” I frowned.

“I can from that fucker. I am a backer for a lot of art, including film. He doesn’t get to act like an asshole. Besides, it’s good for him to realize he has limits. I won’t compromise on this one.”

I blew out my breath. “If it has something to do with you, fine, but in some situations, I’ll have to be treated like everyone else.”

Paul went still for a moment, and I knew he was struggling with his instincts. He was always protective. But he gave me a nod, and my hands relaxed at my sides as we walked to where Toto was left waiting for him.

Toto quickly rose to his feet and rushed forward with an exorbitant smile and widened hands. “Mr. Crane, it’s so good to see you again. Um, well, I wanted to personally apologize to you—”

“To Nadia,” Paul said in a clipped tone.

Toto moved to face me and flashed his bright teeth. “Of course, Nadia. I had just flown in from London; I was jetlagged and over-caffeinated. I

shouldn't have taken it out on you or the crew. I want to apologize and personally invite you to my next shoot. Uh, you did a great job."

A small smile formed on my lips. "Thank you, Toto. But I wasn't the only one who was there."

"That's right. You should formally apologize to everyone," Paul added.

Toto's smile tightened. "Yes. Of course. I will. Thank you."

Paul gave him a curt nod, and placed his hand low on my back. Laurence took his side, and we all moved with fluidity past the hotel door and into the car. While I had to answer to Toto, he would have to answer to people like Paul. There always seemed to be someone higher on the food chain. It was good for all of us to remember that.

I squeezed Paul's hand and placed my head on his shoulder. He leaned over and kissed my forehead, and when he exhaled, my insides warmed.

The ride from the hotel took longer with all the prep for the Formula One Race. When we finally reached the helicopter, we flew to Nice. Laurence and Ben helped transfer us into the waiting car, and we rode to the private air hangar to one of Paul's planes. We were about to board, but I saw someone else on the tarmac.

Ingrid?

I stiffened. "What is she doing here?"

"No idea."

I'd expected Paul to ask me to wait for him on the plane, but he held my hand as we moved toward her. Her eyes shifted between us on approach, and she gave us a wave in greeting.

"Hello, Paul, Nadia. Glad I caught up with you. I hoped to pick Paul's brain a little longer on the ride back to the city." Her tone was cheery.

"You agreed to work with my team in Germany."

"I did." Ingrid shifted her hips and jutted her chin. "But we worked better together on the project. I'm sure you understand, Nadia—"

"I don't," Paul interrupted her.

"Can we at least talk alone?" she asked as her gaze flicked my way.

Paul frowned. "We don't have time, and I'm spending the ride back alone with Nadia. You can fly with us back to New York, but I'm not returning to the project when I get there."

"But it came together better with you on it..." She waited, but Paul stood stoically next to me. Her face fell. "Okay, I know you're busy with your legal case...I'll still take the ride back to New York, though. I can get things I need

there and leave you with a list of ideas?”

Paul blew out his breath. “Okay.”

She beamed at him. “Thanks.”

“What about Bobby?” I asked.

She squinted and stretched her lips into a broad smile. “He’s coming later.”

“Oh, I see,” I mumbled. *I thought you didn’t leave your dog behind.*

“All right. Come fly home with us, but you know this is insane.” Paul’s tone held a hint of amusement.

“I’ve done worse.” She snickered, and they laughed.

Ingrid was careful not to push Paul. But why show up at the airport in the South of France? *To stay present in his life.*

Paul kissed my cheek. “Let’s go, Nadia.”

We headed onto the plane, with Ingrid following behind.



When the seatbelt light went out, Paul motioned for me to follow him back to the private room. I walked down the aisle, passing Ingrid and spared a glimpse her way. From her pouty expression, things hadn’t gone as expected. Paul was straightforward with her about our relationship, but she didn’t seem to care. *She’s obviously anxious he left Germany to be with me.* My suspicions may be unfounded, but that was another worry for another day.

Once in the suite, Paul was already on the bed, propped up on pillows with his iPad. “I didn’t know Ingrid would be at the airport.” His tone had a twinge of annoyance.

I removed my suit jacket and shoes. “It’s fine, Paul. We were going to New York, anyway. Right?” I stretched out on my back beside him.

“Yes. Ingrid means no harm. It’s a new project about her family, and she wants to get it right.”

“Okay.” I tugged my hair clip out and shook my hair.

He grinned. “No fighting?”

“No. I trust you, and you trust me. Just like when you saw Hayden talking to me.”

“Yes, I hadn’t expected it.” His tone was even, but there was tension in his jaw.

I shrugged. “Ben was there.”

“He was. But was there more between the two of you?” His tone was calm.

I smiled at his interest. Maybe it was because he gave me the freedom to choose, which Xander was sure Paul meant he consented to sex with another man. Something I never wanted to do.

“Not really. We talked, and I found out we have a similar upbringing. He also dresses women with my body type.”

“Hayden’s interested.”

“No, just a very mild flirtation. That’s it.”

“I think it was more than *mild*,” Paul huffed. “He was downright hostile. Were you attracted to him?”

My cheeks warmed. “Am I being interrogated?”

“No, but you’re quite touchy about it. It’s fine if you were.”

“I...I was more flattered. He’s risen from nothing to become a top designer, and I was impressed by that.”

“Hmm, okay. Anything else happen?”

I covered my face with my hair. *He kissed me and tried to get me to leave you for him.* Even that I wasn’t sure of. Hayden moved on impulse. He probably had many passions and lovers he leaves in love with him. Telling Paul would only make him upset. *Besides, I don’t want Hayden.* Therefore, I told Paul, “I told him I love you...I missed you.”

“And that you were sad,” he said in a gentle tone. “It hurts knowing I caused that.”

“The break was hard for me. I know why you did it, but I already know my life is better sharing it with you.”

He put down the iPad, leaned over, and kissed me.

“Okay, so now you can answer my questions. What’s up with you and Ingrid?”

“Nothing.” He sighed. “We had some on-again, off-again times years ago. She contacted me about the documentary, and I was interested in the project. We reminisced about our teenage years. I enjoyed Bobby, Berlin, and I got the work done, but I needed my Nadia.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “I also meant it when I said these hours alone are ours. We have a lot coming our way, and we need to take these moments together whenever

we can. I know we were excited today, but we can wait.”

His eyes searched mine. I wasn't on the pill, and that would mean I could get pregnant again. “I know, Paul. But you also said we didn't need to put our lives on hold. As I told you when we were together after what happened to me, I want to have our babies.”

Paul grinned broadly. “Babies.” He lifted my shirt, kissed my stomach, and rested his head on it. I rubbed his head, my heart too full to speak. We could wait, but we both didn't want to. Dad's cancer had taught me to not take time for granted. I hoped our child would get to know him. My plans changed, but I could still reach my goals. And better still, I wouldn't be alone. I'd have the man I loved to share my life.

Paul kissed low on my stomach, and I laughed. “What are you up to, Mr. Crane?”

He unclasped the front of my slacks and growled. “Correcting your mistake, Ms. Sokol. Since when are you allowed clothes in bed?”

I laughed. “I'm not sleeping.”

“You will after I make you come.” He removed my pants and thong, and I tugged off the camisole, leaving me naked.

He moved between my legs and stared. “You have such a pretty pussy.”

I covered my heated face. “Paul.”

“It's the truth.” He ran his fingers through my slick folds, then tongued me, swirling around my clit. I shivered and heated up. “Paul....”

“Mmm. Your pussy tastes so sweet. Spread those sexy legs for me so I can feast.”

Oh, fuck. I parted my legs, and he moved them wider, placing his hands underneath my ass and tilted my hips. My eyes fluttered in utter bliss as Paul teased my clit with smooth, hot strokes of his tongue. I ran my fingers through his thick, wavy hair as he lapped, delved, and sucked. He buried his tongue inside me, and the pleasure was almost too hard to take, and I trembled while gripping his head. “Ohh, this feels so good.”

“Mmm,” he moaned, and let my ass go, and two of his fingers slid inside me and caressed when I lost myself. My body tightened more, and my breathing turned harder. “Ohh, my love.” I shuddered in pleasure as his fingers pumped faster as he stroked me with his hot tongue. My back arched, and I held on to his head as pressure built. My body stiffened. “Ohh, Paul. Ohh. Ohh, God. God.” He groaned and sucked my clit, and I cried out as I shook, the ecstasy of the climax taking me. He clutched my thighs to keep me

down as he lapped my clit, making my orgasm longer. “Ohh, God...ohh...” I squirmed, but he was ruthless, lapping and stroking my pussy as I quivered in his grasp.

“Oh. Shit. I didn’t—” a female called from the door.

I gasped. *Ingrid!*

But Paul didn’t stop, and neither did my orgasm. I moaned louder.

Slam.

Paul didn’t miss a stroke in his sensual demand. I squirmed as he lapped and stroked, quivering as another orgasm sent shocks of ecstasy coursing through me. He kissed my bare mound, then lifted his head. Our breath moved in staggered pants until we calmed, and I came more into my senses.

“What the hell?”

“Ingrid’s never been one to knock first. You didn’t lock the door?”

“I didn’t think I needed to.”

He shrugged and moved off the bed. “Well, she definitely won’t return now.” He undid the buttons on his shirt.

I grimaced. “She did it on purpose.”

“Probably. I’ll deal with her later, but right now, we’re not done. Turn over,” Paul commanded as he pulled off his shirt.

I moved onto my stomach, no longer caring about the intrusion. Paul had just made it very clear who he was with. As much as I hated that she’d just walked in, I hoped that she’d get the picture. *One she wasn’t a part of.*

Paul and I were finally a team.

No, we’re not done.



CHAPTER 25

The lights of New York City came closer as we lowered towards the airport. Goosebumps broke across my skin, and my pulse moved to an erratic pace. The last time I was here, we left each other. Paul took my hand and kissed the back of it. We touched down and there were only a few feet before we were in the car, but Paul was already speaking with Laurence, who checked before we disembarked.

“There’s press.”

Ingrid didn’t say a word, but she left the plane first. She disappeared inside a BMW without a glance back. I guess she didn’t think Paul would spend every minute with me instead of brainstorming with her. And maybe the fact that we kept having sex after she tried to interrupt upset her, too. I was happy she left, but was prepared for her to resurface. It was our time next. There were photographers and many security guards on the tarmac, and some were shouting questions.

“Are you going to settle your lawsuit against Landon Styles, Mr. Crane?”

“Nadia, are you aware that Landon’s lawyers have shown us proof of your deleted profile as an escort seeking a rich man on the Lollipop website?”

“If the case moves to trial, will you testify in open court?”

“Do you care to comment?”

Paul moved at a relaxed pace and didn't answer, and I also kept quiet. My skin flushed, and my body broke out in a sweat. *What proof?* But I knew the answer. I applied to be a sugar baby on the Lollipop website. *And everyone in the world knows.* Paul had taken care of removing me, but this was a lawsuit against the wealthy and connected. *They probably have their own investigators, no doubt.* I wanted to crawl away and hide, but I could only move within the tight circle toward the car.

I stumbled next to the door, and Paul took my waist and helped me the rest of the way into the backseat. Laurence closed the door, and the security guards held the press back as he took the driver's seat, and we sped off.

“Everyone is waiting for us in the office, Paul,” Laurence called back.

“Great. We'll meet with them now. Thanks, Laurence.”

Good. I didn't believe my nerves could withstand waiting to know what we would do. I licked my lips and stared at the passing traffic on the highway.

The world knows I was seeking a rich guy? No one will ever believe I love him. *But I do so much.* My eyes watered, and Paul took my hand and squeezed it. “It's going to be okay.”

“Is it, Paul?” I rasped.

“Yes, Nadia. We will get through it.” He took out his phone and made calls.

He'd done it before. *And we may find ourselves here again.* As Dani, Paul, and even Gunnar told me, lawsuits were a part of their lives. But for me, it felt intrusive. They knew my name and probably more about my life than I ever wanted to be made public.

I took out my phone, and Paul placed his hand over it. “Don't look at social media.”

I hunched my shoulders and put it back in my bag. *What about my parents? Dad never wanted me to worry, but I had to know they were okay.* I pulled out my phone again and mumbled, “Calling my parents.” Both phones went to voicemail. I frowned and checked the time. It's not that late in Milwaukee. I checked my phone again, seeing there was a new voicemail from Xander.

“I've heard the news about your case moving to a hearing. Wyatt said they announced at Givenchy that you had left for New York City. I canceled my flight back to stay longer

over here with Wyatt, but now I'm rebooking through Nicole to return early. Fuck them, they don't know you. I do, and I'll tell them all to go to hell. See you soon."

I was grateful for Xander's support, but hearing Givenchy brought an ache in my chest. I couldn't imagine what Tomas had to tell everyone. In Paris, I mostly lived freely. The staff was kind and helpful. No one even brought up the scandal back in New York City. And just arriving here brought the cruelty of the press and public back. *Would Tomas even want me to return with all the controversy? Would I even want to, knowing people may believe I was a gold digger or an escort?*

I covered my mouth with my hand as my stomach twisted in knots.

The car stopped, and Paul ended his call. "We're here."

I hadn't been to Paul's office in Midtown. However, I knew Crane Holding and Enterprise's main U.S. office occupied most of 53rd Street in Midtown Manhattan. Photographers were stationed at the main entrance, but Laurence and Ben parked and went inside for more security before we went through the glass doors.

A guard held the elevator open, and we went inside and rode to the fifty-fifth floor.

I'd forgotten how much more invasive life was in New York City for Paul, and now, with the case, we would have even less privacy. *Good thing we had some time together.*

Paul kept my hand in his as we walked past rows of glass windows. Inside, I could see Gunnar, Nicole, and a row of people in suits who had to be part of the legal team. My heart warmed seeing that Doctor Casey and Doctor Foster were also there. *All hands on deck.*

Gunnar squeezed Paul's shoulder, then came around to me and grinned, pointing at his Summerfest T-shirt from Milwaukee. "I was hoping I'd get a laugh. Agata sent one for you, and Great Harvest bread."

"Thank you...Thank you for helping my parents." My voice shook and my chin trembled. Paul rubbed my back.

"That's the part of my job I enjoy. I also out dad-joked your dad." He shook his head and laughed. "Don't tell him I studied a few books to prepare." He winked at me.

Some tension eased inside me, and I took a deep breath.

He smiled. "That's better."

"Thanks, Gunnar," I murmured.

“Now, shall we sit down because I have the good, the bad, and the ugly to share, and we need to get you all up to speed.”

Paul sat at the head, and Gunnar and I walked to the other side. I took the chair next to Doctor Casey, who reached over and squeezed my hand. “It’s going to be fine.” She tried to assure me, and I was grateful, but Gunnar never sugarcoated anything.

“We’re meeting today, and I expect you all to make a plan on how you can help the case,” Paul spoke in a commanding tone. “You are to do whatever is necessary to win. Gunnar?”

“Let’s start with the ugly. Nadia, your application to Lollipop is in discovery. The defense found a couple of girls who attended a mixer, and all are willing to testify you were there. Sophie’s affidavit, and Isabelle’s, both attest that you were there. The previous owner, Rita Maxwell, confirms you were there. Bottom line, your application to Lollipop will be a part of the questions in the criminal case. It will be judged by the media and public.”

I hunched my shoulders and nodded.

Paul reached over and squeezed my trembling hand. “What do we have to counter it?”

He smiled. “Doctor Foster?”

“We have turned over CCTV footage of you entering the clinic unwell the same night of the incident. With your consent, we can release copies of our drug screens and medical tests, assault kit—”

“The evidence proves you were a virgin and drugged. Sorry, Nadia. I’m going to fill in where everyone is tiptoeing.” Gunnar tapped the table.

“That’s right.” Paul leaned close to me and whispered, “Everyone here has worked for the Cranes for over twenty years. We’re all sworn to privacy here.”

I swallowed and lowered my head, but nodded in agreement. “Go on, Gunnar, please. Thanks.”

“The previous owner of Lollipop, Rita, I already mentioned, is also on our list of clients to testify for us. She can confirm you were locked in the office and sick. Our investigator has turned over evidence of a prescription for oxycodone in Sophie’s name, which we have planned for the civil suit. We also have Isabelle’s affidavit that Sophie admitted that she gave you what you believed was an aspirin. She also confirms you were sick.”

“We also have your application for surrogacy and more medical tests,” Doctor Casey added.

“Those came before the mixer, so we will hold back on that,” Gunnar said. “We’ve also sent our discovery of The Design School’s Academic Dean’s record of Sophie being placed on probation after admitting to ‘inadvertently’ giving you an oxycodone. While they can place you there, they have no record of you with any men. We have evidence that you were drugged and sick, and Rita removed your profile. Alex, you’re up.”

“Hello, I’m Alex,” a woman with an alto voice spoke out. “I’m part of the social media cleanup. I’ve got articles on the predatorial nature of human trafficking disguised as dating sites, the high cost of medical care and insurance, et cetera. This will give another insight into their smear work. Here are some photos and articles of Nadia in Paris.”

The papers were passed to Paul, and I could see images of me at the fashion show, hotel party, nightclub, and even pictures of me walking through the lobby in Monaco.

My stomach took a dive.

“We have your dad’s medical issues—”

“I don’t want to use my parents,” I interrupted.

“Paul?” Gunnar and Paul exchanged glances. Paul nodded for him to continue. “If you don’t, the defense will use your parents. It’s best we get ahead of it. They are painting you as after money. It adds a humanity element to your public profile. People struggling with medical bills are relatable. A few men have provided information on human trafficking in exchange for immunity on the boat incident. The criminal case is progressing. Your deposition and all the others will strengthen the case. Sugar Cookie has been shut down. Trevor is being forced by his shareholders to return to the United States, and will get fired, I am sure about that. Landon has been removed as head of his company by shareholders, but he’s not giving up. He’s countersuing for two hundred million, and I’m proud I delivered that with a straight face.”

There were outbursts of shock and disgust around the table.

“Quiet everyone,” Paul said. “We need to get back to the discussion, Gunnar?”

The staff immediately went quiet, and Gunnar continued.

“We have proof with the medical records. There is more evidence coming out every day, including partygoers’ phone footage of you at the boat party —”

“We will not speak about that today,” Paul cut in.

I trembled, and Doctor Casey took my hand. Images of me on the boat. *Did they have me following Landon? Did I look sick?*

“Okay.” Gunnar cleared his throat and gentled his tone. “The deposition will also include the coast guard medical team, the nurse on board, the test from the hospital in Nantucket, and the police statement.”

“I’ve also committed to testify on your psychology and treatment,” Doctor Casey offered.

“The criminal case is strong, and our civil case is a slam dunk once the guilty verdicts come in. A few of the men are pleading guilty and are turning in evidence. We’ll find out more about that. The criminal case has been assigned to Judge Mann.” Groans sounded from around the table.

Gunnar held up his hands. “She’s a fair judge. Dale, the District Attorney assigned to the case, has filed motions against cameras and the press. She has ruled against cameras but has agreed to allow the press. We will have to deal with whatever spin will come out from the men still fighting their charges. You will have to sit for a deposition. You will be cross-examined, which is essential for the negligence charge for you.”

“It is your story to tell, Nadia, no one else’s. We will support whatever decision you make, and it will be the right one,” Doctor Casey said.

There was only one choice. I had to take the stand and give my truth to the world. I had to do it not just for myself but for my future.

“I want to prepare for the deposition.”

A woman came in and leaned over Gunnar’s ear. She handed an envelope to him, and he cursed.

“What is it?” He motioned for Paul to follow him outside the room, and they left.

I blinked, looking around at the surprised faces. Whatever happened wasn’t business as usual. Paul came back, his expression grim, and gestured for me. “Nadia.”

My pulse jumped, and I hurried out to meet with him. “Is there something wrong? My parents?”

“No, Nadia.” Paul placed his arm on my back. “Go ahead, Gunnar.”

“Your...birth mom Nora, or should I say, Celeste Ebbings, has been identified in the press.”

“We think it would be good for you to know everything about her,” Paul added.

Gunnar handed me a thick folder. “The old folder I gave you before was a

summary, but this is more of what we collected from the private investigator we hired. The press will more than likely try to embarrass or use your birth mom's life to paint a negative picture of you. She...also offered you a chance to speak with her if you'd like."

A tear dropped off my chin. I hadn't realized I was crying. *Nora. She has a new name. She wants to meet me, after all this time.*

I nodded a few times, but my throat closed, and I couldn't say another word. This was even more overwhelming than I'd thought. I didn't feel confident I'd do well under cross-examination. All of this...it was so awful. It felt like I was drowning, and I couldn't find the surface to take a breath.

Paul handed the folder to Gunnar and hugged me tight. "I'm taking Nadia home." He whispered only to me. "We will see the other side of this. That, I promise."

We walked out, and even though it saddened me, I was anxious to find out about Celeste Ebbings, the woman who walked away and didn't look back.



CHAPTER 26

The large folder with Nora's, a.k.a. Celeste's, information burned my hand. Her life was a puzzle piece of my story that had been missing, and now all the answers were at my fingertips. Where did she go? Or better still, why did she leave and never come back? Just thinking about it reduced me to the little girl in the trailer standing on the stairs, reaching and pleading for her to not leave me behind. But she closed the door in my face. No goodbyes, no returns. Even when my mom gave her a chance when she was in jail, she could have seen me again, but she didn't. But if she did, I'd have that hope. Nora never wanted me to hope for her. She never wanted me at all.

Paul held out his hands for me to hand the folder over, which I reluctantly complied. "If it was up to me, I'd burn that file. I don't want you hurt again by her."

"I know, but it's up to me, Paul. I want to know. I'm sick of not knowing."

Laurence put it in the trunk, and no one spoke about taking me to a separate place.

Paul took my hand in his. "We're heading home."

My heart skipped a beat. *Home with Paul.* I placed my head on his shoulder and sighed.

"From what I do know about...Celeste..." I rolled the name through my mind. Nora's new name was just as foreign as she'd become in my life. She existed as a phantom on the outskirts of my memories. The ones that had left

me crying in my sleep. But the life I knew with her was hard. “Her life wasn’t easy—”

“That doesn’t excuse her. She made her choice.”

Nora went through a lot, being pregnant at sixteen. She traveled around the U.S. with a charismatic rockstar. Justus was part of her story, too. And all the bad experiences with Nora had already happened. It ended seventeen years ago with my parents.

Photographers and television crews were on the street in front of the building when we arrived. They recorded us as we drove past and into the underground parking lot. I rubbed the back of my neck and temples. *Will it always be like this?*

Inside, the house held memories. It was where Paul and I argued before Texas. Our goodbye. But now we had a chance to start over.

Laurence placed the folder on the coffee table in the living room. I hugged him and sat down in front of it. Paul came and sat next to me. “Are you hungry?”

“Later, please.”

He glared at the folder, and I understood why. He saw it as pain and never wanted anything to harm me.

Still, the decision was my own, and my pulse picked up as I pulled out a stack of papers and a memory stick.

“The private investigator is old-school. He has video clips.” He called Opal to get a laptop and thanked her while I stared down at the top image. It was a photo of Nora labeled Celeste Ebbings.

The image was so different from the one I held in my mind. That was of a young, fashionable woman with long brown hair. Now it was more of a dark blonde and hung in a long braid over a shoulder with a woven scarf. But it was still her. She was thirty-nine, and her skin was weathered by the sun, with lines around her eyes and lips. What stood out was the deep scar from her eyebrow to her nose. It appeared old but held a dark story of its own. And for a moment, I felt sad for her. My attention moved on to the smock dress that went to her ankles and her boots. They were covered in dirt. Behind her was a red barn and field.

I blinked. “She lives on a farm?”

“She does,” Paul confirmed. “I’ve been briefed on her.”

I nodded, and moved to the next photo. It had a tag that read Earl Ebbings. He appeared much older, with salt and pepper hair. There was

another photo attached, with him wearing a sheriff's badge. It had a note on it: Retired sheriff of Lewistown, Montana. Earl Ebbings. Divorced. Remarried to Celeste Ebbings.

"She lives in Montana," I mumbled. "She's married."

Paul didn't answer, but studied me.

I flipped to the next page, and my heart stopped. Two classroom photos were taped to a piece of paper with a typed note: *Twins, Luna and Bear Ebbings. Daughter and son of Celeste and Earl Ebbings. Fourteen years old.*

Nora had more children after me. I have a half-brother and sister. My vision blurred as I flipped through more photos. They were surveillance-styled clips of them around their farm and store. There was also more paperwork.

Paul rubbed my back. "Do you want to stop?"

"No, I want to see the video," I rasped.

Paul sighed heavily as he clicked play. My pulse raced as I stared at the screen. Celeste picked apples with a group of farmhands, and Earl was on a tractor tending a field. Bear had a buzz cut and beads strung around his neck. He had a sly expression in his clip as he gazed at a computer screen in what appeared to be a library. It made me smile despite it all.

There was Luna, coming out of the house. Her face was delicate, heart-shaped like the young Nora I remembered. She wore a smock dress just like Celeste had on. Then it dawned on me. *Nora made it.* She walked to the back of their porch with a basket of yarn, sat on the steps, and started knitting....

A match lit under my ribcage, burning the ball in my chest to ash. I covered my mouth to keep in the scream. Tears flowed like a rushing jet down my face, but they could not put out the fire. *Luna knits like me. She looks like me. But she kept her.* She was my half-sister, and I had a half-brother. *No, I don't. They are Celeste's family.* One she never wanted me to know. *How can she live with her family knowing I exist? Why doesn't she even care?*

Paul pulled me into his lap, hugged me, and the fragile wall holding in my pain broke like an overflowing dam. The sobs flooded out of my control. "Celeste doesn't matter. She missed out on a beautiful, talented, sweet daughter. She doesn't deserve you. You have your real mom and dad. They love you. I love you." All he said was true, but still I grieved. The little girl I once was needed to mourn.

When I calmed, I returned to the remaining contents of the folder. Nora

had been criminally charged with prostitution, theft, and drug distribution. She was incarcerated for three years in a Wisconsin jail—that had to be when Mom last saw her. The mugshots were severe. Her skin protruded as if she was malnourished, and her eyes were dull and lifeless. There were needle marks on her arms and bruises. Her life had been hard, but it changed. A picture of her in a group at Bridgeways Halfway House. A high school diploma and a degree in education and textiles. There was only a note that she was selling knickknacks out of a van across the country and settled in Montana. But Mom told me she had wanderlust. Then there were a few new-age groups, her with the twins, and a name change. She had recreated herself and let go of her past. And that's when the truth was glaringly obvious. *She'd deleted her past...which included me.*

There was information on the farm at the end. One page was wrinkled, and I spread it out. It was an old loan for the farm, and I was about to put it away with the rest, but something about it caught my eye.

Parker and Ralls Holdings.

Ralls.

I wrinkled my nose. "Huh, funny."

"What's funny?" Paul asked.

"Christina Ralls had been hostile to me at the hotel in Paris. Her husband is Louis Ralls, but he's a CEO of some pharmaceutical company."

"You didn't tell me," he said abruptly.

"Because I handled her on my own."

"Still, anything having to do with the boat must be shared. No secrets, Nadia. That's how our lives work."

"Sorry."

"It's okay." He took out his phone. "I'll make sure the team checks into this."

I felt terrible because I hadn't thought it was a secret, but now I know everything matters.

I went through the rest of the folder. The farm was rural, and so were their lives. And they didn't want to destroy what they had built there. I waited for more tears to come, but they didn't, and I searched my conscience. Relief. I didn't want Nora to be in jail or hurt, and that was because of the Sokols, my parents. They raised me to care about others.

"How do you feel now?" Paul asked and put his phone down.

I took a deep breath. "Relieved. Happy that she has a life. Rejected

because she has a new family, but I'm fine. The best thing she ever did was give me to my mom and dad. I have the best parents in the world, and I'm grateful. I have her story, and honestly, she's not important to me. And even if she does come forward, it doesn't matter. She doesn't know me or I, her. I...I did things to help my family and have to live with it. But there is something I'm worried about."

"What is that?" Paul held my hands.

I hunched my shoulders. "This isn't going to be easy for you. Your brand. The scrutiny. Being with a woman who was after money—"

"And I gave it to you even before you agreed to be with me." Paul squeezed my hands. "Hell, I knew everything in your past and didn't care. I'm more worried about how it will affect your well-being."

"I'm not backing down. No one gets to dictate my story. My life is defined by me."

"Hearing you ready to fight is so damn sexy." He kissed me. "So what about meeting with Celeste?"

"I think I should. It's just more closure, but after the deposition. I think if I'm going to be a mother one day, then I want to have the answers to share with our...."

"Our children, Nadia." He kissed and hugged me, and I snuggled in his arms.

Buzz. My phone vibrated in my bag. I checked the message and tensed. *Tomas.* It was great to feel confident, but seeing his name set my nerves on end. While I was sure about going forward with the case, he would have heard many negative things about me, including the Lollipop application.

"Why are you not answering?" Paul asked.

"It's Tomas. He knows and is the creative director. He'll have to consider the brand."

"You can only answer."

I took a deep breath. "Hello, Tomas. I'm sorry I didn't call."

"Not at all, Nadia. I know you're back in the United States for their shaming circus," he scoffed.

"Yeah. I'm sorry about the troubles having me and my life associated with Givenchy—"

"Stop it. I know you. You're a designer and a good one. I have already released a statement in support of you to the press and the New York School of Design. You are welcome to return without an internship."

My eyes filled and my heart soared. “What? Are you serious?” My fingers tightened on the phone. *Is this real?*

“*C’est moi, Nadia. I don’t joke about work.*”

A sob bubbled up in my throat and tears flowed down my face. “You want me to stay on? You’re making me cry.”

“*Non, you’re emotional. And I already miss you here. Get it over, and then come work in Paris. We love you here.*”

“*Merci, Tomas. Je t’aime.*”

Paul raised his brows, and I grinned at him.

“See you soon.” Tomas didn’t like goodbyes.

“Okay, see you soon.”

I put down my phone and stared at it in disbelief. *I’ve been offered a chance to work in Paris...Tomas chose me.* I trembled.

“What happened?” Paul asked, even though he heard most of it.

“Tomas said I could return to Paris. He wants me to continue to work there with him.”

Paul stood up and held me at arm’s length, smiling. “See? This is the reason I wanted you to do this on your own. For this moment. It’s yours, Nadia. *You did this. You went to Paris and met the challenges head on. Tomas saw your talent, potential, and hard work. He wanted it for Givenchy.*”

I wrapped my arms around him.

I’d felt weak after the boat party, but I was forced to go forward. I took on a challenging fashion internship at Givenchy. I worked within a language I only took in high school. But here I stood. Yes, I had all the comforts of Paul’s home and staff, but the work was *all mine. Tomas was never easy on me, even though he liked me.*

I stared at Paul and remembered Aurora’s words at the vineyard in Italy. “*Women who last with a powerful man don’t try to harness his energy. They move on their own. Be you, Nadia. Don’t try to be what he wants.*” *I am who I want to be.*

To be able to continue at the prestigious house under Tomas’s mentorship was a generous opportunity I couldn’t pass up. It was more than I ever hoped for, more than I ever believed possible. But if I stayed in Paris, would Paul move there? *I want us to stay together.*

“I love you.” I held him close, and kissed his face and neck. “But what about—”

Chime. The doorbell sounded.

I grimaced. "What now?"

He smiled. "We'll find out soon."

I furrowed my brows. "We never get a break."

He lifted my chin, and his eyes bore into mine. "I will take you away. Soon." There was a tenderness there, and it was filled with love and promise. He kissed me deeply and grabbed my ass, pulling me closer to him.

But the doorbell rang again.



CHAPTER 27

“Nadia, Paul.”

We both turned and Dani appeared with a man in a Kurta and sandals. He had round glasses, shoulder-length hair, and a beard. It was as if he stepped out of the sixties. He came over with a warm smile and greeted us. “So nice to finally meet you, Nadia. I’m Alan.”

“Nice to see you again.” Dani placed her hand on my back, and Paul kissed her on the cheek. Paul also didn’t seem surprised. *What’s going on?*

Gunnar entered the room and walked straight over to Celeste’s folder. “I’ll just put this away. Oh, and there is someone here to see you.”

“Who?” I asked him.

“Me.” Mom came in, and I excitedly rushed into her arms and bounced on the balls of my feet. “Mom, you’re here in New York City. I tried to call you, and I couldn’t reach you.” My voice rising octaves.

“We were flying.” She kissed my cheeks and peered at me, her hand on my chin. “Have you been crying?”

“I’m fine now. I’ll tell you later,” I whispered. “Oh, wait, you said we? Daddy...Dad’s here?” My jaw unhinged. The hum of his wheelchair told me before he appeared in the room. I rushed over and bent down to hug him.

“You sure you’re okay to travel?”

“I got doctors and nurses all over me. And a bed to lie down in on the flight. I’m fine, and I had to come. We are here for you.”

I swallowed hard. They all came here to support me. I looked over at

Paul, who was watching us. I could tell from his expression he had planned this. *Oh, Paul.* I swiped under my eye and smiled at him.

“Now that you have us all here, are we having a wedding?” Dad asked, with a twinkle in his eye. A light, though uneasy, laughter erupted from everyone but Mom, who gave Paul a hard stare.

My skin warmed. *Best not to mention we’re trying for a baby.*

“Without my dad, stepmom, sister, and Xander?” Paul cocked a brow.

Dad wagged his finger at him and grinned. “Smooth move. Okay. You have a reprieve, for now.”

Marriage was something I wanted with Paul, but he didn’t want to remarry. We were in love and committed to each other. And right now, the deposition was our priority.

“I’m hungry. Indian food?” Dani asked and stared around.

“How about I cook?” Alan announced.

Dani, Paul, and Gunnar all said, “Yes, please.”

“I’ll help,” Dani headed towards the kitchen.

“I’ll eat,” Gunnar added.

The three of them followed Opal into the kitchen, leaving Paul with Dad.

“Honey, can you help me put my stuff away?” Mom asked me.

We both knew the housekeepers were already unpacking their bags.

Paul went over to Dad. He must have felt my eyes on him and looked over. He smiled and mouthed, “It’s fine.” He walked next to the chair as they moved down the hall to his office.

Mom squeezed my waist. “Paul will be all right. Your dad’s a softie through and through. He can handle it.”

We went to one of the guest bedrooms on the main floor. There was a housekeeper putting their clothes away.

“So, are you okay with us here?” she asked, reading my mind. We sat on the chairs and Opal came in, giving us tea. “Thank you.”

When she left, I answered, “I’m always happy to see you both, you know that. But if the case moves to a trial and I have to testify, I don’t want to share what happened on the boat in front of you.”

“Gunnar said it would be hard, so I got him to show us the police statements—”

“No! Why did he do that?” Bile rose in my throat, and my skin heated. I didn’t want my mom to know every detail of what happened to me.

“You’re our daughter. I am not interested in what the press says, I needed

your words. I needed to hear what you wouldn't share with us in Texas. And I...I have so much hate for them. The counseling?"

"Is helpful," I murmured.

"Good, but I still feel guilty. It all happened because I burdened you with our problems." Her voice trembled.

I shook my head. "That's not true. I regret trusting Sophie and Isabelle. I regret not sharing with Paul that I might have been pregnant earlier. But I never regret helping us. I would do it again...Paul saved Dad. I'm grateful."

"I am too, but please don't be mad at Gunnar. I like how he doesn't hide things. He's been good to us and made Dad's treatment easier. I feel like the enormous weight I carried trying to keep it all together is lighter because of him." I studied her then. Her dark circles were gone, and so was the tension in her body. She appeared relaxed, calmer. *Mom deserves that.*

The weight also shifted off my conscience. I always worried about Mom and Dad before, but thanks to Paul, I didn't anymore. I trusted he was getting the best care. And that alone allowed me to let go of my anger for Gunnar. After all, Paul warned me there would never be secrets between us. *The more we know, the more we help each other.*

"I'll leave Gunnar alone...Oh, there is some other news. I...I know all about Nora."

Mom's eyes widened, and I shared what I knew from the information collected by the private investigator.

Mom lowered her head. "If you want a relationship with her—"

"I don't; I just want some answers. That's it. Celeste did what worked for her. She neglected me and gave me up. Had she not, who knows what would have happened to me? I count myself as extremely lucky, Mom. I've had you and Dad, and I couldn't have better parents. And you know, I'm glad she's been blessed with a second chance to do it right. And for the sake of her kids, I hope she does."

Mom shook her head. "I just can't believe she has a whole family, but I'm grateful she left you with me. You are our world, Nadia. We couldn't love you more, and we tried our best."

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. "You and Dad are the best; I don't need anything else."

Celeste did hurt me. It hurt to learn I have siblings I never would have known about. She was forced to reckon with her choices now that my life is public. I could go on without her or receive a few answers.

The Beatles' "In My Life" filtered into the room, and we left to rejoin everyone. Alan, Dani, and Dad were all watching Paul play, and his impromptu playing had become one of my favorite things that he did. I went over to Dad, and he looked up at me, his eyes watery.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"Yes. This song always gets me all sappy. How are my best girls?"

"Good." Mom squeezed his shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Oh, Paul can you play, "Steppin' Out" by Joe Jackson? I always imagine running away to New York City after seeing that video on MTV."

"Hey, you never told me that I almost lost you to Joe Jackson," Dad said in false hurt tone.

"Lucky you took me to homecoming, or who knows," Mom joked, and kissed him.

"For Agata," Paul announced and started to play the song.

Mom started doing her wild hand swings and foot shuffles that had us all laughing, but surprisingly Gunnar knew the moves, and joined her. The joy on Mom's face let me know Gunnar had really bonded with her. And that made me like him a lot more. Dani and Alan joined in, and I bounced around next to Dad.

Paul moved on to Neil Young's "Harvest Moon" next. Alan and Dani started dancing a waltz. Mom held Dad's hand and swayed his arm.

I started singing, and Paul's head turned. Our eyes connected, and my heart skipped a beat.

I came over and sat down next to him. He turned to me, leaned over, and kissed me.

"I love you."

"I love you more."



CHAPTER 28

“Hey,” Xander drawled out. We greeted each other with cheek kisses, then danced in place.

“Damn, we’re goofy. I thought you’d be in meltdown mode. But look at you glowing.” He cocked a brow and gestured down my body, and I struck a fashion pose.

“Am I?” I pressed my hand to my chest. “I’m keeping busy.”

My parents were here, and so was Paul. Between the three of them, I stopped looking through social media and reading the news so that I could keep a clear head for what was to come. Ignorance was truly bliss.

“Excuse me, miss?” Two delivery people came up to the door behind him, wheeling the wrapped mannequins I had ordered. “Where would you like them set up?”

“Upstairs in the room at the end of the hall. I’ll be right there. Thank you.”

Xander’s eyes widened as he walked further inside and saw the sunken living room, piano, and patio that led to a pool and jacuzzi.

He whistled. “Okay. This place rises to the level of The Hudson. So, you’re officially living together?”

I smiled and bit my lip.

He touched my arms. “Spill.”

“We haven’t confirmed it, but Paul brought me here to stay with him, and he ordered equipment for my studio. So at the moment, yeah. Oh, and you

have to see my knitting set-up.”

“Back to knits, eh?” He grinned.

“Yep. Tomas loves my knits now, so I’m giving him more knits to love.”

“So Givenchy isn’t over?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Depends on what happens after the deposition tomorrow.”

Gunnar said the discovery deposition will lead to trial. If they’re prosecuted, there’s a great chance the civil case will win. *Tomorrow. Oh, my God.*

My pulse went erratic, and my stomach twisted in knots. I furrowed my brows and rubbed my temples.

Xander squeezed my arm. “Hey, I didn’t mean to stress you out.”

“It’s just so wild that I’m involved with court cases.” I trembled.

“Well, let me get you relaxed so I don’t upset your man. Where is his sexy ass?”

“Working today so he can go to the deposition with me tomorrow.”

“Sweet. Parents?”

“Laurence and Ben are giving them the ultimate New York City tour. I believe they’re at the Statue of Liberty today.”

Xander wrinkled his nose. “Why are you not suffering through those tours?”

“Because people recognize me.” I grimaced. “The last thing I want is for my parents to be confronted by some stranger telling them that I’m an escort gold-digger who’s trying to destroy good men.”

Christina Ralls did it at a fancy party in Paris. Even though I wasn’t looking, I knew the press still ran stories about us and social media warriors were weighing in with their judgments. And I didn’t need Mom and Dad recorded saying something to amuse their followers and cause more trouble.

Xander grimaced. “Yeah, fuck that. Those nasty predators deserve all the badness in their lives.”

We walked up the stairs to the large room at the end, where I sent the delivery.

It had a wall of brick that was mostly shelving, and windows that showed the skyline. I’d put in a workstation and sewing machines.

Xander touched the sewing station and looked at the fabric in the cupboards. “I can definitely work here in a pinch.”

“You definitely can. You can also make knit hats.” I showed him the

knitting machines and the wall of yarn. The delivery guys finished setting up the mannequins and handed me a clipboard to sign.

I did and handed it back. "Thank you."

Xander squeezed the yarn spooled on hooks and closed the fabric cupboards, then went to the knitting machines. "Now you're moving into my territory with accessories. Show me your programs."

I turned on the computer and monitor and showed him the design programs and tutorials.

"I swear, that man needs a spoiling you intervention."

"Would you like a drink?" I went to stand by the counter that had an espresso machine and small fridge.

"Now you're just showing off. Espresso. Merci," he said with an exaggerated French accent.

"Wyatt teach you that?" I teased and pressed the button to grind the beans.

Xander plopped into one of the oversized chairs by the coffee table. "Maybe. How's Paul handling having Agata and Darek around twenty-four-seven?"

"You changed the subject. We're not finished talking about Wyatt. But well, Dad's told the same joke a few times. Mom's giving him dirty looks because Paul hasn't proposed." I pressed the button for brewing and filled a cup.

Xander snickered and took the cup of espresso. "I love Agata being a momma bear. I think I want something harder. How about we do cocktails?"

"Not for me."

"Why not?" he asked.

My cheeks warmed, and I grinned.

He gasped and clutched pretend pearls. "Girl, come on."

"We want to try," I whispered. It felt like a big secret.

Xander pretended to faint. "I'm going to leave that baby stuff for now because you got enough on your plate. But you both need to slow down and breathe."

We had slowed down since my parents showed up. It felt too weird to have sex while Mom and Dad were here. Paul had complied since we have so many other things going on, but I knew after tomorrow, he'd want sex. *And so do I, even if it's in the car.*

"How was Italy?" I asked.

Xander fanned himself. “Insane. I’m living abroad. It’s more my speed. I have more business that will ruin my social life with all the orders I have to fulfill. And Wyatt is...exceptional.”

I wagged my brows. “Oh, is he now? So, I take it you had sex?”

He took a sip of his drink. “Of course we did, and it was even better than expected.” He crossed his legs. “Well, *I* was even better than I expected. I put in the effort, you know? Oh, you probably don’t.”

I snorted. “Whatever. I know about putting in effort.”

“Oh, do you now?” Xander teased. “You make sure your man leaves the bed satisfied, or are you a selfish lover?”

“Ha. Paul never leaves the bed unsatisfied.”

“That’s true,” Paul’s rich voice called behind me.

I narrowed my eyes at Xander. “You set me up.”

Xander held up his palms. “Hey, I didn’t make you answer.”

Gunnar came into my sight. “There’s never a dull moment when I visit you, Nadia. Bikini lunches, sex bragging. Love it.”

Xander smiled at him. “You must be Gunnar.”

Gunnar shook his hand. “I am, and no longer the enemy. Right, Nadia?”

“We’ll see,” I joked.

Paul bent down and kissed me. “We need to talk.”

We’d been doing update meetings on the case regularly. However, Paul preferred to get them out of the way early so I could enjoy the rest of the day.

“Okay...but?” I glanced at Xander.

“We need to borrow Nadia for a while. Would it be rude to ask you to entertain yourself?” Paul asked Xander.

“Oh, I believe there are plenty of things around here I can get into.”

“Thank you, Xander,” I told him.

Paul, Gunnar, and I went into his office, and Paul closed the door. Paul chose the table, and I took a seat next to him. Gunnar sat across and took out a folder.

“Your deposition is still set for tomorrow. You only need to take your time, make them repeat the question if you’re unclear, and stick to the facts like we practiced.”

It was good to be so prepared, but there was tension in the room. Gunnar was giving Paul that same look he gave him when they kept my dad’s cancer treatment from me. Even if it was at my parent’s request, it hurt.

“Paul, I know you have something important to share. Please tell me.”

He placed his arm around my shoulder. “You know me. I want you happy.” He kissed my cheek.

My insides warmed at his concern. However, I faced a lot in my life and was still standing. *I can handle it.* “I’m tougher than you think.”

“I know. Okay, Gunnar,” he said in a low tone.

Gunnar’s jaw tensed. “What I have to tell you left us livid. But you must know everything because this leak came out from someone in the prosecution’s office, and you need to be aware if it comes up tomorrow.”

I moved to the edge of the seat. “What is it?”

“The boat was always a setup. Nothing happened there by chance.”

“I know that. Isabelle said the boat party was for her birthday, but it was really a mixer.”

“Yes, but there is more to it.” Gunnar opened the folder and handed me a few pieces of paper.

I blinked rapidly as my eyes darted over the pages. They were text messages from Sophie, Landon, and Trevor.

Sophie: Hey, Land. Isabelle delivered. Nadia is on board. What do you want us to do?

Landon: Nothing right now. Wait until we leave the port.

Sophie: Bonus

Landon: Yep

I gripped the page tight and read the next message.

Landon: Delivered. Your prize is here.

Trevor: Nadia?

Landon: I told you I always deliver. That’s 80G for the trip. Stick to the rules this time.

Trevor: I would have paid more.

Landon: You will.

Trevor: If I have her now, I won’t need a next time.

Landon: LOL

I covered my mouth.

Landon: Found her. She’s acting up a bit.

Trevor: They all fuss. I'll deal with it. Bring her now.

“I remember when Landon texted,” I mumbled.

“There is also video footage of you and Landon on the boat. It showed him texting with you. One of the young ladies recorded it on her phone,” Gunnar added.

I turned to the last page.

Trevor: She's sick.

Landon: So what. Tried to act sick with me, too. Just give her molly and tell her

it's an aspirin. That'll calm her down. Sophie left them in the cabinets.

Trevor: Get your ass down here. What's this shit about Crane?

Landon: On my way.

The text rolled like a film in my mind, and I replayed every detail. I hated how vivid everything seemed now, though. I didn't want to relive those moments. But now, I could see them so very clearly.

And Sophie...I remember when I first met her. She'd never been particularly warm or welcoming and very begrudgingly shared her room at college. She had always been the very definition of “mean girl.”

But what's scaring me? It's that Sophie was much more involved in Landon's business. *For how long?* Was she a procurer and helped bring poor women in from the college? Did she set up Isabelle as well? By the looks of these messages, the drugs were all part of the plan from the start. *Probably at the first mixer party, too.* Sophie was a cunning person, connected, clever. And me, a Midwest farmer's daughter, a virgin—*green*—was I simply too easy to pass up? *I wasn't even a challenge, really.*

I had no idea what I'd been up against the whole time. I was such a fool.
Not anymore.

Paul rubbed my back. “I'm sorry. I couldn't risk you finding out another way.”

“I understand.” I pursed my lips and handed the papers back to Gunnar. “Trevor and Landon don't deserve plea deals.”

Gunnar smiled broadly. “You're becoming my favorite person.”

“She's already mine.” Paul leaned over and kissed my lips. When we parted, he lifted my chin. “You're going to be fine; I'll make sure of it.” He

spoke with determination in his tone, but his eyes were soft, and my insides warmed.

What Sophie and Isabelle never counted on was that Paul Crane would love me, that he'd stand by my side.

"I already am." I smiled.

We stood and left the office. Mom and Dad were back and had gift bags from their trip to see the Statue of Liberty, and they were showing their finds to Xander in the living room. *Foam crowns and #1 Fingers. New York Skyline T-shirts with sparkles.* Xander gaped in horror.

"Oh, Paul, want to hear a joke about paper? It's *tear-rible*." Dad grinned.

Paul groaned. "Please, no more jokes, Darek."

I hugged Paul's waist. "Sorry Paul, but Dad's just getting started."

Dad rubbed his hands together playfully. "That's right, Nadia." He took pleasure in torturing Paul, but he handled it well.

"You're taking a nap before dinner, troublemaker," Mom said to him.

She went over and hugged Gunnar, and he kissed her cheek. "Are you enjoying New York?"

"Too busy for me," Mom told him. "I baked last night. Will you try my monkey bread before you leave?"

His grin broadened. "Yes, I will. And I'll even take some home, too."

She beamed. "Please do. I'll give you enough to share with your friends at the office."

I looked around at them all and was truly fine. In less than twenty-four hours, facts and testimonies were going to be bandied around me. It was going to sound ugly. I was going to sound like a desperate, hopeless girl. But I wasn't. Not anymore. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a team. I wasn't alone fighting in my corner. *I had people who believed in me.*

Whatever tomorrow brought, we would move on. Together.



CHAPTER 29

We expected the press, and there were a few news vans and photographers set up near the garage and outside the defense law firm, Pierson, Pierson, and Bolling. I'd submitted an affidavit and gave a police interview, but that wasn't enough, and there didn't seem to be an end in sight. However, Gunnar had prepped me over and over with practice questions. Helped me articulate my truths. Of course, it was easier when I had time to stop and think. My testimony would be recorded and given under oath.

I turned to Paul. "What if it takes hours?"

"Then I'll be here for hours."

Paul kissed the back of my hand. He never wavered for a minute in his decision to stay and support me. I loved that he would be there, but this was a time he couldn't protect me. I'd have to answer alone.

The car stopped in front of One Vanderbilt, a massive tower in Midtown. It was only eight-thirty in the morning, but the area was already crowded with office workers, shoppers, and tourists. Laurence came around and opened the door, and my pulse jumped in my throat. The camera shutters flashed, television cameras filmed, and cell phones recorded as we grouped in a tight circle toward the front lobby.

"Mr. Crane. Mr. Crane. Ms. Sokol. Are you prepared for the trial?"

"Have you heard about the text message leak of Landon Styles and Trevor Livingston?"

“In Mr. Styles’ statement, he claims you never told him about the pregnancy, Ms. Sokol, care to comment?”

I kept up with Paul’s confident stride. He took the air of calm strength. Secure. Winner. Sadly, this was business as usual for him since he was sued often. Would I ever be as unaffected?

“Did you hear about the arrest of Louis Ralls this morning? It’s alleged he tried to evict your mom, Celeste Ebbings, from their farm if she didn’t speak out against you.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my expression neutral. But the image of Christina Ralls’s cross face came to mind. She’d been so certain her husband wasn’t guilty of anything. Then again, the arrest wouldn’t have come for someone as elite as Louis Ralls was without a mountain of evidence. *Right?* Regarding Celeste, I didn’t know how to process the news. Only that she made a choice not to speak out against me and that alone soothed my spirit. It also surprised me. *Maybe she’s changed?*

After passing through security, Gunnar led us up to the fifty-fifth floor. The steel sign of the firm was encased in oak next to high polished steel and leather seats. A man seated there stood and shook our hands. “I’m Dale Briggs with the New York prosecution office. I’ll let them know we’re ready.” He went to the front desk.

Gunnar came close to me. “This is go time. Short, clear answers; don’t embellish. Answer the question only, and truthfully, even if it hurts. Okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

“Are we all here?” A woman’s voice filled the front area. She appeared middle-aged and had on a pantsuit with a silk shirt. Her brows were penciled in an arc that gave her a constant look of surprise. “Mr. Paul Crane’s here. I never thought I’d see the day.”

Paul looked right through her. But the woman appeared indifferent.

A handsome older man in a suit came through the door and over to Paul, and they spoke softly. He turned to me. “This is Ian Unger.”

I shook his hand.

He turned to face the middle-aged woman. “Hello, Brenda,” Ian said in a polite tone. He went to the front desk. “What office are we using for the meeting?”

I raised my brows. *What meeting?*

Before I could ask Paul about it, Gunnar touched my arm and gestured for

me to go with him to Brenda. “We’re ready to get started.”

“It’s not going to be quick, so get comfortable,” she quipped and let out a hoarse laugh as she shook our hands. “Hello, I’m Brenda Pierson. Even though I’m the defense lawyer, we can be polite. I’ll be asking you questions today, and might I say, you look stunning in person.”

I plastered on a smile. “Thank you.” *Did the defense attorney just try to flatter me?* That I had not expected. We walked down a corridor and into a medium-sized boardroom where three women were already seated with shorthand typewriters at a conference table. One Gunnar greeted, letting me know she was from his firm. There was a table with a video camera on a pedestal before it.

Gunnar tutted at Brenda. “This isn’t a video deposition.”

“We record *all* our depositions.”

“Not without a court order request. Do you have one?” Dale asked in a clipped tone.

Brenda smiled. “It’s just for training purposes, but fine. We won’t use it. Your client will have to make herself available for testimony at trial.” She glimpsed me.

I shifted on my feet. *I hope not.*

“This is Tabitha.” She pointed at another woman seated at the table. “She’s the court reporter. We’re ready.” An assistant handed Brenda a folder, and she went to stand next to the desk. I followed her and sat down.

Gunnar moved the camera away from in front of me, then sat next to Dale.

My leg trembled under the seat, and my pulse sped up. I glanced over at Gunnar, who mouthed, “Relax.”

I took a couple of cleansing breaths and folded my arms in front of me.

Tabitha spoke as she typed, “This is the defendant’s deposition of Nadia Sokol for use in The State of New York vs. Styles Corporation criminal cases...” She read off a long list of charges, including criminal negligence, racketeering, assault, prostitution, and human trafficking. I’d heard the charges before, but this time, it was official. “Are you aware you are being deposed for these cases, Ms. Sokol?”

My pulse jumped. “Yes.”

“Are you also aware your answers are under oath? This subjects you to the criminal charges of perjury for willfully giving false, misleading, or incomplete testimony?”

“Yes.”

“You are allowed to ask to repeat a question, explain, but if you answer, it is assumed you understood the question. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Pierson, you may begin your questioning.”

“What make is the suit you are wearing today?” Brenda asked.

I blinked. *Why is she asking about my clothes?* “I’m not clear on the question. Are you asking what type of suit I have on?” I glanced at Gunnar, who smiled.

“Are you a fashion design student?” Her tone was light.

“Uhm, yes.”

“What type of suit are you wearing today?”

My ears warmed. “It’s a custom-made suit.”

“Do you have a job, Ms. Sokol?”

I licked my lips. “No.”

“How did you pay for a custom suit?”

I hesitated. “Can you repeat the question?”

She glanced over at Dale. “This is a question, and you have no objection.”

“You can answer the question, Nadia,” Dale said, and Gunnar nodded.

I cleared my throat. “I didn’t pay for the suit; it was a gift from my boyfriend.”

“Who is your boyfriend?”

“Mr. Paul Crane.”

“Mr. Paul Crane, the billionaire.” Her tone was even, and I wasn’t sure if I should confirm, but I answered. “Yes.”

“Did you sign a non-disclosure agreement with Mr. Crane—”

“Objection. Relevance. Mr. Crane and Ms. Sokol’s relationship is not within the scope of this case,” Dale cut in. “It has already been proven Mr. Crane was not a member of the Lollipop or Sugar Cookie Dating web service from Mr. Styles deposition, exhibits of client list, and Mr. Crane’s sworn affidavit.”

Brenda smirked. “I’ll move on. Are you aware of your mom, Nora Winkley, A.K.A Celeste Ebbing’s criminal history—”

“Objection. Relevance,” Dale interjected.

Brenda squared her shoulders. “Next question. Did you fill out an application on the Sugar Cookie website?” She went to her folder and

brought papers back to the desk.

I blanked my face. “No. I didn’t fill out an application on the Sugar Cookie website.”

“Apologies. Did you have a profile on the Lollipop website? I have in here a copy of a profile, NadiaNY22. Is that you?”

“Yes,” I mumbled, my face warmed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you?” She raised her brows.

“Yes.”

“Were you aware that the website was for young women seeking an older, established man to sponsor her financially?”

“Lollipop was a dating website.” I bit my lip.

“In Sophie Wilks’s deposition, she disclosed that she informed you that sex was part of the agreement for the dating website?”

“Yes. She mentioned it happened for her—”

“You answered yes. Thank you, Ms. Sokol.” She grinned.

I glanced over at Gunnar, sure that I’d given away too much, but what she asked was the truth. I did know what Lollipop was about, and I did go for a wealthy sponsor.

Brenda walked over and picked up a piece of paper from the desk. “So, Ms. Sokol, did you know Mr. Styles?”

“I met him once before the boat party.”

“So you knew who he was?”

I paused. “I didn’t know him personally. Mr. Styles introduced himself.”

Her brows lowered. “That’s not what I asked. Did you know him?”

“I didn’t recognize him.”

She scoffed. “You can’t answer yes or no that you knew him?”

I shrugged. “Please clarify, ‘know him.’”

“I mean, did you know who he was?”

“I recalled his name.”

“You knew the yacht was his boat?”

“No.” I pressed my lips together.

“Whose boat did you think it was?”

“East Coast Cruise.”

“Did you see a sign for East Coast Cruise?” Brenda squinted.

“No.”

“Did you board the boat?” Her voice raised an octave.

“Yes. I boarded the boat, but I asked a crew member to leave. I didn’t

know it belonged to Mr. Styles.”

She frowned. “Please, only answer the questions asked, Ms. Sokol. When did you know it was a party mixer?”

“On the boat. Mr. Styles told me.”

“Did you ask to get off?”

“I did ask before the boat left the dock.”

She huffed. “Fine. Next question, did you ask Mr. Styles to leave?”

“I told Mr. Styles I was sick and needed medical assistance.”

“What did Mr. Styles do when you told him you were sick?”

“He...he said he had a room....” My hand shook, and I moved them under the desk.

“Yes. So Mr. Styles tried to help you by giving you a room on his private boat to rest?”

“No. I asked for a doctor. The room wasn’t private.” My voice wavered.

“Were you offered a room, Ms. Sokol?”

“The room wasn’t empty.”

“I only asked if you were offered a room to rest?” she asked in a sharp tone.

“I...I told Landon the room he opened was occupied. I asked for a doctor, and he told me I was fine. When...when I discovered Mr. Livingston was there, I tried to leave, but Mr. Styles locked me in from the outside—”

“Ms. Sokol, I haven’t asked another question. Yes or no, did Mr. Styles offer you a room to rest?—”

“Mr. Trevor Livingston slapped my phone out of my hand. I begged him for help and for a doctor. I vomited—”

“Motion to strike—”

“Objection,” Dale cut in. “Ms. Sokol is answering your question in the manner of making her answer to your question accurate.”

Tears welled in my eyes.

“I’ll rephrase the question. Were you given a room, Ms. Sokol?” Brenda asked, gentling her voice.

“A room with Mr. Livingston hiding in the bathroom. Mr. Styles locked me inside.” I choked and wrung my hands.

She frowned. “Moving on. Did you tell Mr. Styles you were pregnant?”

My eyes stung. “I didn’t know at the time. I asked to see a nurse or doctor on board the boat.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I asked you. When did you find out

you were pregnant?”

“The doctor told me at the hospital.”

“So how could Mr. Styles be expected to act when *you* didn’t know anything?”

“Is that a question?” My eyes darted to Gunnar and Dale, but they remained still and silent.

“I’m questioning whether you were aware of your pregnancy.” She handed me a still image of me on the boat talking to Landon. There was a circle around a small stain on the front of my pants.

I cringed. *That’s part of an exhibit?* Tears rolled down my face, and I shook my head rapidly. “I begged...I begged, but—but Mr. Styles yelled at me to not vomit. He—he texted—”

“I didn’t ask you a question. Please stop speaking.”

I sobbed into my hands.

“Ms. Sokol. Did you tell Mr. Styles you were bleeding?”

I shook and cried harder. “I told him I was sick. I begged for a doctor. Mr. Styles told me to stop complaining. Trevor told him I was sick. He told him to get rid of me.” I hiccupped.

“Add to the record, no question was asked,” Brenda said to Tabitha. She glared over at Gunnar and Dale. “Manage your client. We’ll take a break. Ten minutes.”

I went over to Gunnar, and he poured me a cup of water. “Drink.”

My hands trembled as I accepted the cup. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I couldn’t keep it together.”

“You answered very well, Nadia.” Gunnar spoke just above a whisper. “I’m very proud of you. It’s not a matter of being perfect. You got out what needed to be said. You conveyed your humanity while Brenda came across as aggressive and cruel. She knew questioning you would be bad and tried to limit her questions, and it still didn’t work out well for her.”

“She’s not getting anything good enough to help her client,” Dale added.

It dawned on me then they allowed Brenda to push me hard to help their case. *What will happen with a jury? Or if it’s televised?* I shuddered. “Dale, do...do you think you will need me for court?” I stammered.

Dale sighed heavily. “We have a case without you, but I feel your testimony so far is very strong. It’s never easy to take the stand, but you have the truth on your side with expert witnesses to back up your claim. Brenda knows it’s a loss. I can’t promise you anything, though. I’m sorry for what

happened to you.”

I bobbed my head and wiped my eyes.

“Brenda’s tough, but you’re tougher, Nadia,” Gunnar said. “If you don’t tell your story, she will provide her version as public fodder. That’s the truth.”

I hated being a witness, and none of this was my fault. However, the questions Brenda asked painted me as the bad person. Who better defend me than myself? *Even if I hate it, I have to do it.*

I took a deep breath. “Round two?”

Gunnar grinned. “Hell yeah. Round Two. Let’s go.”



CHAPTER 30

Four hours later, and we were done. We walked out, and there was Paul. He closed the distance and cupped my face, his gaze scrutinizing me. “It was awful.”

“Yeah. It sucked big time, but I’m going to be okay,” I said, my voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m proud of you.” He gave me a tender kiss, and I closed my eyes, resting my head on his chest as his arms closed around me. *It’s over for now.*

I answered with my truth, and that was all I could give. Gunnar and Dale didn’t promise me anything. I only had to wait and hope the men were charged for their crimes.

Paul’s hand warmed my back as we walked out of the building. The press had remained and sent more questions our way.

“Did you hear about the arrest of Mr. Livingston?”

“How do you feel, Ms. Sokol?”

I smiled inwardly. *Trevor arrested? I feel fantastic.*

Are you aware Justus Black has gone into rehab? Do you think your legal problems caused his relapse?

I bit the inside of my cheek. Yeah, blame the person that only met him once for his problems.

“That’s enough,” Paul said in a clipped tone.

Laurence stepped in front of us. “Back off.” Building security joined and helped us reach the car. We climbed inside, and I blew out my breath when the door closed.

Paul removed his suit jacket, and I went into his arms and snuggled into his chest.

We were on the road and missed the turn for the highway that would have taken us uptown. “Where are we going?”

“Away,” Paul said cryptically.

I lowered my brows. “What about my family?”

“Mom’s taking them back to her place for dinner and to rest. They will fly back to Wisconsin tomorrow. Xander is Xander and is always fine.”

I laughed. “True. But maybe I should call them—”

“Later,” Paul stopped me. “Trust me, they know and think it’s good for us. We need some time alone. So will you go away with me, Ms. Sokol?”

My heart skipped a few beats. “Yes.”

Wherever you go, I want to be there with you, Mr. Crane.

The drive ended at the airport hangar, where Paul kept his planes in NYC. I rubbed the back of my neck and rolled my shoulders. We were outside waiting to board, and Paul spoke with the pilot while his staff brought suitcases from the trunk. Mom and Dad never mentioned the trip, but there was a clear bag with the straw boater hat Mom had bought me. She must have been involved in packing. So where were we going?

I caught up to Laurence, who was transporting his bag to a BMW.

“You’re not coming with us?”

He closed the trunk. “Not this time.”

My brows raised. “Oh, why not? Where are we going?”

“I don’t ruin surprises, but I do take hugs.” I groaned playfully and gave him one. “Enjoy your break, Nadia. You deserve it.”

“Thank you, Laurence.”

Paul walked over and gave me a dazzling smile that warmed me all over. While I enjoyed having my family around, I wanted our time alone. We never seemed to have enough of it together, and every time we were alone left me longing for more.

“Guess who tried to ruin her surprise?” Laurence told Paul.

“Nadia,” Paul scolded teasingly. “She’s out of control.”

“She is,” Laurence joked.

I laughed. “Oh, come on, I deserve a hint at least?”

Paul lifted his arm. "You'll find out soon enough."

I went into his embrace and squeezed his waist, accepting his kiss.

"See you soon, Laurence." He shook his hand.

"Have fun," Laurence said and returned to the car.

"We're leaving in five minutes." We climbed onboard with the pilot, who left for the cockpit. We belted into our seats, and a few minutes later, taxied down the runway.

Paul reached a hand behind me and massaged my neck. "You need rest, Nadia. When we can move around, go back and sleep."

"I'm not tired." I yawned, and he kissed the side of my head.

"You are. You didn't sleep well."

It was more because I didn't know what to expect from the deposition. *Now I know it's awful.* I felt bone-deep exhaustion. There was no other word for it. Brenda grilled me and not only was it confusing to have so many questions rapidly fired at me, but it was difficult to limit my answers to simply answering her questions. But I learned as I went. In some instances, the more succinct I was, the less evidence she gained. I was fairly certain it was adrenaline that had kept me going.

But now? With Paul with me? I felt that mixture of exhaustion and peace.

It hadn't been easy, I was sure, for Paul either. He'd shown such thoughtfulness and kindness in bringing my parents to NYC for the few days prior to the deposition. They hadn't exactly gone easy on him, but he'd been chivalrous throughout.

"Thank you so much, Paul. I know you're not used to having family around."

He kissed the pucker between my brows. "Look at you, already trying to find something else to worry about."

"I'm not, I just...I want to make sure you're okay."

"I am, Nadia. I'd never do something if I wasn't absolutely certain. Now, go to sleep. And that's an order. We will be flying for a while."

"Oh, how many hours?"

"A hundred," he deadpanned.

I poked his chest, and we both laughed. "Fine, don't tell me." I stood. "Are you going to join me?"

"Soon. Just reviewing a few things for work to stay on track."

I sighed and walked back to the bedroom. Taking off my clothes, I showered, then put on a robe. When I returned to the room, a quiche and

salad were left for me in the small dinette. I turned on the television before I sat down and ate.

The on-screen headline read: “Trevor Livingston’s arrest.”

I grimaced, but left it on.

There was a video of Trevor walking stiffly in handcuffs between two policemen at the New York JFK airport. He had on a baseball hat and sunglasses. He also had two businessmen in suits walking behind him that may have been his lawyers.

A news crew called out, “Care to comment, Mr. Livingston?”

“There is nothing to share. It has all been a misunderstanding. I will be suing, and you can quote me on that.”

The screen filled with copies of the leaked text messages between Trevor and Landon that Paul and Gunnar had shown me. Then, the screen switched to two beautiful women behind the news desk.

“This is Alexis and Tricia with the latest news.” One of the women announced. “At the top of the hour, more news about the ongoing criminal cases against Landon Styles and his Sugar Cookie Dating website. Multi-millionaire Trevor Livingston is the latest arrest in the probe. But today, the defense had Nadia Sokol and Paul Crane under their microscope as the case catapults to trial. That’s right, the Paul Crane sat for an interview today.”

The screen was filled with images of Paul. Handsome. Talented. One picture was him holding an Oscar, and another of a cover of *Vogue* with the tagline: *The Most Handsome Man We Don’t Know*. It switched to a video of Paul and me walking into the law firm this morning.

I shrugged. *At least I look good*. I dropped my fork. *Hold on. Paul gave an interview today?*

Then I remembered the “meeting” that the lawyer Ian had mentioned at the firm. *Why didn’t Paul tell me?* Of course, I knew why; he didn’t want me to worry about him and lose focus on what I had to do.

“It has been a wild case since the start,” the anchor said. “The bombshell news keeps breaking, and some of what leaked today will break your heart. Paul Crane describes what happened that night on the boat as, ‘The worst day of his life since his wife died.’ It was revealed that he was trying to conceive and was searching for a surrogate to carry his child. That makes Nadia Sokol’s miscarriage hit closer to home for the mysterious bachelor. Alexis?”

“Yes, Tricia. I’m surprised, as is everyone else, that Paul Crane sought a surrogate. Paul Crane had been to the same clinic Nadia Sokol applied to become one. But we must also remind the audience that Nadia had a profile on the infamous sugar daddy website, Lollipop. She was also allegedly drugged by her roommate at a party and had to be rushed to a clinic. Her profile was deleted after that.”

How did they find out about the drugging at the Lollipop mixer? *Oh yeah. Gunnar said something about the social team leaking information to help me.*

“I would quit, too, if that happened to me, Alexis.”

“Me, too, Tricia. I mean, whoa. Nadia’s life reads like a tragedy.” She held up a piece of paper. “Her mother, Nora Winkley, a.k.a. Celeste Ebbings, who was sixteen at the time of Nadia’s birth, gave her up, and rockstar Justus Black, that was revealed to be her father, had nothing to do with her. Her adopted mother has been downsized out of a career as a nurse, and her adopted father may die of cancer. I think we all could relate to her desperation for money.”

“We can, Alexis. It was reported that she broke down in tears at her deposition when showed—”

I turned the television off. My stomach lurched, and I covered my mouth. *How dare they pick over my life? Would I ever be able to return to obscurity, or would the bad things in my life always come first? Or Paul?*

Paul. He sacrificed his personal privacy, too. The world now knew that a powerful man like him didn’t have everything. That knowledge left him vulnerable and open for more personal questions and inquiry, not that Paul would disclose more. But it was his private life, and his willingness to help me touched me immensely.

And it wasn’t the sum. What they had was just a part. But did it matter right now? I was on a private plane with a plush bed and heading off to an exciting destination. I had what I most wanted, Paul. *Almost.* I could hear Mom’s voice in my head. *Why won’t he marry you?* Still, Paul loved me, and there was no doubt about that.

I finished eating and sank into the soft mattress. *Mmm.* I closed my eyes and drifted asleep.

Mmm. Paul.

Paul’s hand smoothed my hair above my neck, pressing on my shoulder

in a soft caress. My back arched closer, and I rasped, "Paul."

"Mmm, Nadia." He nuzzled in, his nose brushing along my neck. His inhale was a sensual hum, calling my body to his, and it answered with a jolt, awake with need. His skin was hot, and the stiff muscles on his body were flush against my back.

I arched my hips to press his erection against my ass and let out a moan. "Oh, my love."

My pussy was wet, and he went down between my thighs to make it wetter. He took a long lick, and his eyelids lowered as if he savored the taste of me. He traced his tongue over the opening, then tunneled it in. "Oh, Paul. That feels so good." Light teases of his tongue licked my clit to aching, making me hotter, eager. But not to come. I lifted and moved my hips in a shameless plead for more as he lapped my clit, tangling my fingers in his hair. "Ohh...ohh, yes."

"Mmm." He pushed in two fingers, licking and sucking.

"Don't come," he warned. But how could I not? My thighs shook as I fought against the delicious strokes of his tongue and fingers moving in and out of me, making me swell and ache.

"Please, please, Paul," I pleaded breathlessly.

"You want to come, you come on my cock." He mercifully moved back up behind me. "Mmm, you want to get fucked?"

"Fuck me," I whispered, and he pressed his cock hard between my ass cheeks. He hitched my leg over his muscular thigh to get more access. His cock slid through my hot arousal, and my inner walls clenched empty, needing him to fill me. He moved my hand and kneaded my breasts, squeezing a nipple as he sucked on my neck. I bit my lip and pushed back as he moved his hips to slide his cock against the swollen lips of my sex, stroking my throbbing clit. "Please...please, Paul."

He pushed inside me. He felt bigger and went fuller at this angle, and I relished the soreness that would stay with me. I gripped the sheets and his thigh as I moaned, riding that edge of pain and pleasure as it spread through me with each glide of his slow, rhythmic thrusts. "You give it to me hot, baby." He ran his tongue back and forth against my neck, just like when he licked my pussy. And with the glides of his cock, wave upon wave of pleasure flooded me. My breathing was a hot pant. "Mmm. You make me weak," he groaned in reverence. His cock stroking inside me, deep and pulsing.

My body vibrated with pleasure and clenched around his long, thick cock. “Ohh, yes.” His fingers dug into my hips, and he sank inside me to the root. I could feel his balls against my ass, and it made me even hotter. “Ohh. Ohh, my God.” He glided in and out in sensual ease. His hand clasped hard on my leg, the sound of our pleasure filling the space.

We were hot, our bodies straining as Paul pumped. My pants grew heavier, and my inner muscles tightened. “Nadia,” Paul commanded, “don’t come.”

“But I can’t... I can’t stop it.” The sensation was too much as his hips bucked faster, and the orgasm I couldn’t restrain took me. I trembled and shook as he continued to fuck me.

“Nadia.” He drew out. His voice sensual and admonishing as I quivered from the orgasm. He grabbed my hips, thrusting in fast and hard as I spasmed and shuddered. “Ohh. Ohh. Ohh. Fuck.”

“That’s right.” He rolled his hips as he thrust in and out of me, and the sweet friction sent me right back on edge. He reached my slippery clit and rubbed it, and another climax came. I grabbed the sheets and cried out.

“Fuck. Fuck. Nadia. Fuck.” He grabbed my hips hard and shuddered as he came spurting inside me. Our breaths were hard together, and we were slow to break apart. He let my hips go, and I stretched out on my side with him molded behind me, his arm around my waist. We didn’t speak; we just held each other in bliss.



CHAPTER 31

The summer sky was full of pink, orange, and purple hues on the descent. I peered out at the billboard at the airport. “*Bienvenue à Nice Côte d’Azur Airport.*” We had returned to the South of France.

“Are we returning to Monaco? I thought the Formula One race was over?” I held the straw hat and the bottom of my gathered midi skirt against the gust of wind. I loosened my hold to adjust my purse, and the hat lifted off. It rolled away like a tumbleweed.

Paul chuckled. “We’ll get you another hat with string to tie under your chin.”

“Ha-ha.” He kissed my smirking mouth.

“To answer your questions, Formula One is over, and no, we’re not going to Monaco.” He took my hand, and we moved to the classic car parked nearby. Paul signed a form for the man who handed him the keys. I ran my hands over the silver birch finish on the vehicle. It was a two-door coupe classic, one that seemed familiar. “Where do you get these cars?”

“I have a garage here; I’ll show you it another time. We got to go.”

Paul held the door open, and I climbed inside. The car had an old-fashioned dashboard, but the interior was pristine. “Why do I feel like I’ve seen this car before?”

“It’s an Aston Martin DB5. It’s been in numerous James Bond films.”

“Ohh. I’ve watched a few. They’re great, but this car isn’t your normal choice. Is this part of the surprise?”

“Maybe.” Paul’s lips spread in a teasing smile, and we drove off.

“Paul,” I drawled out playfully. We drove through a bustling city with an array of high-rise buildings as vivid as a box of crayons with their blues, oranges, yellows, and greens. They were stacked on hills with shops below and intermixed with various types of palms. The warm breeze off the water was a comforting blanket and induced a calm in my spirit. Once away from the airport, Paul moved the car like flowing water over a hill, as if he anticipated every crack and groove along the narrow passages. We were close to the sea, and the scent of salt and sand mingled with every breath.

He’d turned the car off the main road into a more residential area lined with tall shrubbery. However, we could still make out the beautiful mansions tucked behind them.

“You should tell me more since we’re here now.”

“Okay, Nadia. We’re not just going away; I want you to choose a home that will become ours. It will be a place to relax that is only for us.”

“No one else?”

“Sometimes we’ll have visitors, but most of the time it would just be for us. We need our own time. My parents did it during their second marriages, and it helps.”

“How so?”

“Less fighting, for one. It kept their love alive. As I’ve said before, they’re better as friends. Anyway, Mom and Alan’s home is in Mumbai, where they do meditation retreats together. Dad and Lily go to Florence—Lily has a romantic attachment to a movie set there.”

“*A Room With A View*.” I sighed dreamily. “That’s in the top ten of every woman’s fantasy. A handsome man giving a passionate kiss in the middle of an Italian poppy field.”

“You want that, Nadia?” he asked, turning down a narrow street.

“I’m good. I have a winery on the Amalfi Coast.” I smiled, remembering when we drove down the coast to a friend’s winery. We were so caught up in each other that we pulled over and had sex in the vineyard.

Paul reached over and squeezed my thigh. “That’s a good memory for me, too, but we will make more. This place was in a James Bond film.”

“Oh, really? Wow. Which one?”

“*Never Say Never Again*.”

“Hmm, I don’t remember that one, but I did see *Gold Finger*. That’s my favorite.”

“I love that one, too, but, well, here we are.”

Paul turned down a winding paved drive and parked. “We’ll walk from here.”

He took my hand as we left the car and walked down a sandstone path along the edge of a cliff that dropped into the sea. *The sea!* I gasped as I took in the azure blue stretching out from the white sand beach of the Mediterranean Sea. There was a wooden dock with a speedboat. “We can use that here or take the sailboat or yacht at the marina nearby...and there’s more.” Paul and I walked farther along the path to a yard with a circular pool. I went up to it and placed my hand in the water. The perspective of the pool lined up with the cliff made it appear as if you were swimming in the sky. *Beautiful.*

“There’s another pool inside.”

My jaw unhinged. “*Inside* the house? Oh my God.”

We walked up the stone stairway to the beautiful villa of pale stone covered in wisteria vines and beautiful crawling flowers.

“Wow. This is so beautiful.” My knees went weak, and a warm tingling expanded in my chest. “You found this place for us?”

“Yes, but it’s only ours if you want it.” He embraced me, and I held him tight.

Staff came out, and Paul greeted them warmly with kisses and fluent French conversation. There was an intricate iron gate we walked through at the entrance of the home, and the view was breathtaking. Floor-to-ceiling windows brought in the last rays of the sun over the water and mountains, and Paul wrapped his hands around me from behind and kissed my neck as I admired the view. *It’s perfect.*

Paul gently tugged me forward to view more of the rooms.

The furnishings were modern and minimal, with pale-toned curtains, couches, and chairs. There were muted abstract paintings on the walls and carved wooden and metal fixtures and tables that gave the rooms a stylish touch.

“You and I will choose how we want it.”

“I love it. It’s not cluttered; it’s relaxing.”

Paul took my hand and showed me the stone patio where custom lounge chairs with umbrellas were arranged. “We can sunbathe here and have a fire pit put in with a grill. We can add more plants and get a decorator to use the space more.”

I slipped off my shoes and walked along the wide plank parquet flooring. A baby grand piano and a long, C-shaped custom couch were in the living room. Paul moved to the cabinets on the wall and pressed to reveal a television screen that projected on the wall like a movie theater. “I have a thriller we can watch later.”

“Oh? What movie?” I smiled and checked over the settings. It also had a computer to use. *Insane.*

He next went over and sat on the piano bench. “*Interscope.*”

“That’s not out yet, is it?”

“No. I have a pre-screen copy,” he replied as he began to play a melody.

I walked up and placed my hands on his shoulders. “You always have a piano.”

“Yes, I do. I test the sound everywhere to make sure it’s right. This one is pretty good.”

Paul rose, and we walked through a formal dining room and kitchen that had plenty of space and a chef cooking a meal that smelled so good.

I looked up at Paul. “I want to cook for you.”

“Maybe at the next place.”

We went to the indoor swimming pool just off the living room, which also had a changing room and sauna. “We can swim or take a steam to relax.” Paul squeezed my hand.

“This could be an office or a studio for you.” He pointed at the empty bedrooms before he led me to an elevator to the top floor, where there was a large master bedroom with a standalone bath and separate closets. Walking deeper into the room, I saw a housekeeper emptying our bags.

“Thank you. Merci.” I told her, and she smiled. She pulled out a Polish headscarf I had asked Mom to send to me, but forgotten about it. Paul had made a joke once about being turned on if I wore the head scarf. *This could be fun.*

Paul eyed it curiously, but I blanked my face, and he dropped it. We turned and moved further into the bedroom.

The king-size bed had the most beautiful patterned white lace bedding that I couldn’t help but touch. I massaged my cheeks as I sat on the bed. “I’m smiling too much.”

“Never. There’s more.”

“More?” I shook my head in disbelief, but followed him back into the hall. “I never can get over this part of your life.”

“*Our* life, Nadia. Together.”

I lowered my head. My heart was too full by his boundless generosity and kindness. “You don’t always have to go so far and over the top for me, Paul.”

“But I *like* over the top,” he mused.

“You know what I mean.” I blinked at him. “I love you. I don’t need a fancy house. I just want to be with you.”

He took my hands and pulled me into a passionate kiss. “Baby, you have me.”

We walked up to the top floor, which led to the terrace with comfortable seating and more views of the superb Mediterranean. “It’s beautiful, Paul.”

Yet, I couldn’t help but think of The Hudson. He started there with me, and I was swept away into his magical world of wealth and power that transformed my life. This time felt different. Was this a new step or what he did when he committed? *If it is, do commitments last?*



CHAPTER 32

“How about a quick stroll through *Cours Saleya*, the Beating Heart Market?” Paul asked.

“I love the name, but what about the public?”

We walked back downstairs to the living room. “It’s one of the reasons I chose here. No one knows us, and even if they do, they don’t care.” The joy and ease that permeated from him spread to me, and I felt a weight lifted off. We were away from the big cities and our work. There were still staff around, but we were as alone as we’d ever been. “Yes, let’s go.”

We walked out of the house and over to a garage. There was another convertible parked there. “The weather is too nice to have the window up.” He opened my door, and I belted in the seat. Once he was back behind the wheel, we were down the drive.

The sun was lower, and its heat warmed my skin as we moved down the narrow roads toward the central area lined with pastel buildings. Paul parked the car, and we walked towards the square, which was filled with outdoor seating for restaurants. The aromas made my mouth water. “I’m a little hungry.” Paul stopped outside an ice cream cart. And I laughed when he bought me a scoop. “It’ll spoil my dinner,” I teased.

“You’ll find your appetite again.” I held it up, and he bit it playfully, and I laughed, then kissed him. I was surprised the vanilla had cardamom and coconut. “Delicious, Merci.” I praised the seller. The promenade was full of tourists shopping at the hundreds of tented booths lined in front of us. The

chatter passing was in a variety of languages. Mostly French. There were many dressed like they walked right off the beach in colorful prints and sandals. The smells of cooked food, fruits, and vegetables assailed my nostrils before we reached their carts. Even fishmongers with fresh fish were out on display. And all of them had buyers with bags and money out to purchase.

“Can we bring some back? Maybe for breakfast?” I hesitated before the cheeses and sausages, but Paul shook his head.

“We will insult chef Helene if we bring food back. She’s prepared a special meal for us.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to hurt her,” I said. “I’ll make sure I thank her. Can we bring her a gift?”

He grinned and hugged my waist and kissed my cheek. “You’re so sweet. I can eat you up.”

“You do,” I whispered.

He chuckled, “And not a blush in sight.” He took my hand, and we continued on to the flower market. The smell of gardenias and lilies caught my senses. I stopped before a bouquet and took a deep inhale. “I love fresh flowers.” Paul spoke with the seller and bought one. “A man should never pass flowers without offering them to his lady.”

My chest fluttered as I accepted the beautiful fresh blooms. “Thank you.”

“We’ll pick this up on our way out.” He gave her a tip to store it for him. “Merci,” we both said, and we linked arms.

Eyeing the section of the market ahead, we both could see it was busier. Paul held my waist tight so that we wouldn’t separate as we move through the crowds gathered around craft booths of pottery, paintings, handmade soaps, and tourist trinkets.

I picked up a colorful sketch of boats along the harbor. “What do you think?”

Paul rubbed his jaw. “It’s bright.”

“It’s something we can hang up in the house as a talking piece if someone visits. We can say, ‘Hey, we bought this on our visit.’”

“We can visit a gallery?” he suggested, but he was smiling at the photo and bought it. I kissed his cheek. We moved on to more of the stalls, one with floral-printed fabrics. I hummed as I picked out a few to buy. “This is lovely.”

“Mmm, I’d prefer to hear you sing,” Paul murmured. I kissed his cheek.

He took a step and stopped; his brows knitted.

I puzzled.

His eyes widened. "I can't believe it. The haunting fire."

He took my hand and walked us faster, weaving past the people in the aisle between the booths at the market. I could hear the sound of music ahead. The closer we got, it was clearly a violin and piano. The song playing was familiar, though I couldn't place it. Paul slowed to where they were set up on the corner of an avenue next to a restaurant. The young female played the violin, and a male sat before a keyboard. A few people were standing nearby, listening.

Paul became absorbed as they continued to play the obsessive melody.

"I've heard that song before," I whispered to Paul. "Do you know what it is?"

"It's "Absolution", a song I wrote with Aubrey...she never played it the same way. It's our song that never ends." Paul's gaze remained riveted on them, though a bit wistful. There was beauty in the blend of piano and violin, a haunting marriage, as the music swirled together in sync like birds murmuring in the sky. The song was indeed a magnificent creation and as compelling as other songs I'd heard from Paul. Yet, the music clung to a melancholy that stifled my mood. Had Paul and Aubrey's original intention of the piece be this sorrowful? I didn't want to spoil it. Only stood humbly with him, appreciating that in the billions of people on this earth, we were brought together at this moment for Paul to have his love with Aubrey honored. And for that, I was grateful.

The song came to its end, and Paul reached into his pocket and emptied the money into an open hat. The performers thanked him and eyed him curiously.

He came back to stand next to me as they moved on to play another song. I placed my head on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He kissed the top of my head. "I am. Aubrey and I played together like this once on the Charles Bridge in Prague."

"Really? That sounds like so much fun."

"It was...." He lowered his eyelids, a small smile on his face.

"You can talk about Aubrey anytime you need to. Your love for her matters, and it shouldn't be suppressed."

"Thank you. It just caught me off guard. I'm surprised to hear the song, and I'm more surprised I'm not sad about it this time. It felt good." He sighed

and hugged me to his side.

They started to play Carly Simon's "Nobody Does It Better" from *The Spy Who Loved Me*. I started to sing softly. The musicians stopped and gestured for me to continue.

I smiled and shook my head.

"No, keep singing." Paul took my hand.

"Yes...you sing," the pianist said, and violinist nodded in agreement. "We'll start over?" They all look at me expectantly.

"Can you let Paul play?" I asked them in my broken French.

The pianist and the violinist looked at Paul again, and their eyes widened. They walked to him and shook his hand as they spoke French. I understood from the conversation that they told him they loved his music and thanked him for his kindness.

The man motioned for Paul to sit before his keyboard, and Paul reluctantly agreed. He sat down and started to play, and his expertise was evident. I knew the song, but I hadn't sung it before strangers.

"Nadia." Paul started to play the beginning chords, and our gazes locked, and everything faded away. The song was pure poetry, pure emotion. It was about loving an extraordinary man. I tapped into how captivated I was by him and everything he did. How he made me fall so helplessly in love with him.

Paul's expertise flourished as he skillfully played the song and guided my voice. And to my surprise, the violinist took up her instrument and joined in. I never sang with a violin. The strings mirrored my vocals in harmonies, which brought on an eager strength and haunting vibration to the piece. I added embellishments as I sang, and their accompaniment followed. It was enlivening. I swayed freely, but my attention never strayed too far from Paul. I serenaded him, my hand over the center of my chest. His soft gaze on me brought tears to my eyes. The song ended, and people around broke into applause. Paul gave the musicians handshakes, but he always kept me in his sight, and sparks charged between us. He came over and pulled me into his body, and his lips crashed against mine as he engulfed me in his arms; I gasped and tightened my hands on his neck.

Paul took my hand, and we broke into a jog, rushing us down narrow streets until he stopped outside a closed shop and held me close. He kissed me again, with a commanding passion that took my breath. My adrenaline surged and my pulse spiked. I was surrounded by his scent, his heat, his lust. "Fuck, look what you do to me." His knee pushed between my thighs, and I

writhed against it, but it wasn't enough. I wanted more, and so did Paul.

His hands moved inside the top of my dress to touch my bare skin. *Yes. Touch me. Touch me all over.* His head moved between my breasts, where he kissed and licked. I gripped his head and arched my back, moving my nipple to his mouth to suck, and I shivered as he suctioned on it.

"Just strip me here, fuck me," I said breathlessly.

Paul moaned between breaths as he warned. "I'll do it." He kissed back up to my neck and sucked. I arched closer, moaning and pleading. *Do it, Paul.*

His hand went under my dress and inside my thong, stroking my pussy. I opened my legs wider, inviting him to do more. "I'm so wet."

"You are, my love." His fingers rubbed in circular motions, then pushed in. He let out a guttural groan. "You need my cock." I moved my hips as he fucked me with his fingers. But it wasn't enough. He ripped the fabric and yanked it off. Our tongues tangled together.

Reaching down between us, I clasped his hard erection in his trousers, stroking him harder. "I need you, my love."

"Damn it, Nadia." He cursed, kissed me, undid the front of his trousers, lifted me, and placed me on the top step before he thrust inside me. *Fuck.*

I wrapped my legs around him as he drove his dick in hard, brazen. My fingers scraped his shoulders. "Oh, fuck, take me hard."

"That's how I give it, baby." The stone steps abraded my buttocks, but I clung to Paul. It was crazy. But he made me crazier. I shook, twisted, and grabbed his ass, pulling him deeper as he drove his throbbing cock in and out of me. My body surged with pleasure at the mere thought of being seen with Paul inside of me. Our breaths were shallow. The pleasure was immense, and I was drowning in it. My inner muscles squeezed, and I shuddered hard. He pressed his lips to my mouth, swallowing my orgasm. He fucked me faster, and he grasped me tight, his cock flexed inside me as he came. We fought to bring air into our lungs as he put me down and quickly fastened his trousers.

"Lucky, it's dark," I murmured, pushing my bra back in place and fixing my dress. My ass ached from the stone platform. *Ouch.* I could feel his cum drip down my thigh.

"Someone probably saw us. Maybe even recorded it." Paul's hand scrubbed down his face, and in the glow of the streetlamp, he gave me a dark, heated stare that made me hot for him all over again. "I'm losing my fucking mind."

We looked around, and a few people were near, but no one approached us.

Laughter bubbled up inside me, and I couldn't stop. I laughed louder and louder. After a few seconds, he joined me, shaking his head. "You know what? I just don't care right now."

"Oh, yeah?" Paul pulled me to my feet and hit my buttocks hard.

"Ouch," I winced. He chuckled and tucked me to his side. "I'll kiss it better. I love you, naughty."

"I love you, my love," I whispered.

"Mmm, my love." He kissed me and sucked on my bottom lip. "Fuck. I need to hear that all night."

We hurried back to the car and back to the house. Once again, we took in the view. I relaxed, yawned, and Paul took me upstairs to the master bedroom.

He veered me to the bathroom and helped me out of my clothes. Dropping to his knees, he examined the scrape on my buttocks. "Does it hurt?" He pressed a kiss above, where I felt some pain.

"No, you kissed it better," I half-joked.

He took off his clothes, and we went into the shower. He gently washed me with a soft sponge. "Does this bother you?"

"Does what?"

"The showers together. I never asked you."

He didn't want to bring up our arrangement.

"No. I think it's sexy."

He kissed my shoulder. "You are." He cleaned himself, and we stepped out, then he took out some cream from a cabinet and rubbed over my scrape again and I winced.

"See? No more fucking on steps," he teased and kissed both cheeks on my buttocks, and I playfully whimpered.

We finished drying off and climbed into the bed. I rested my head on his chest and fell asleep.

Later, I rose, showered, and put on the lace thong Paul had left for me and a white sheath mini dress. The sound of Paul playing a slow, soulful melody floated up the stairs. I recognized it as "Romance in Spring". I went to find him playing. Wearing a button-down shirt and trousers, his eyes met mine, and electrical energy charged the air—so was our connection, and it never wavered. He called the housekeeper, speaking to her in French. I cupped his

head and brought it to my mouth for a kiss. “Have you been up for long?”

“No. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

Paul stood and placed his hand low on my back, then led me out to the patio, where I saw the table was set with candles and the flowers from the market. The air was a cool breeze and smelled of the sea. I sat in the chair he held out for me. “Thank you. This is so lovely.” He poured the wine, and I took a sip. It was one that I liked. My stomach fluttered. *He never forgets a thing.*

His phone buzzed, and he sighed. “One sec.” He stood and walked a few steps away, but I could hear the word “documentary,” and I knew it was work-related. He ended the call quickly as the food came out—fish in a madras curry with asparagus and honey. “So, where was I? Oh, what do you think so far?”

“I think it’s beautiful. Romantic.”

While I loved the home and his reasons for having it, it made it even more odd that we were building a life together with a baby, but not marriage. I wanted to be Mrs. Crane, but it was a decision that had to come from both of us.

“You’re quiet now.” He moved his chair closer to me and took my hand. “We have a lot going on right now.” He lowered his eyelids. “I’m...I’m already having a difficult time thinking about you being pregnant. My instincts tell me to take you far away and protect you....”

I stood and put my arms around his neck. “I know you love me, and it’s hard after what you saw happen to me, but I’m strong. I’m still here. And we’re fine. Okay?”

“Okay, Nadia,” he whispered.

“Good.” I sat and smiled at him. “Now tell me more about your time in the South of France. You’ve been to Cannes?” My tone was light, and I took another bite of my food and waited for him to move on.

He didn’t answer right away, and my pulse picked up. “Hmm. Cannes Film Festival. I don’t spend as much time at parties, but I did spend one wild weekend with Tate Maxwell.”

My jaw unhinged. “Wild and Tate Maxwell, seriously? I thought he was the goody-good type.”

“In public, he is. Most of the people there were famous, and some of them were married. Anyway, music started playing, drinks and drugs were around,

and clothes started coming off.”

“Oh, my God. Anyone I like?” I asked, and we both laughed.

“Athena, Sherri, Soho, Aaron Silver.”

I fanned myself. “Whew, Aaron Silver.”

He squinted. “Seriously?”

I laughed. “You’re actually jealous?” I scoffed. “You shouldn’t be. You’re way hotter.” His face morphed into a bright smile, and we kissed.

“And you didn’t participate?” I cocked a brow.

“You know me. I love to watch.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah, I know. Now, that surprised me.”

“Glad to know I can keep you on your toes,” I teased. “You know, Paris has a lot to see.”

“Oh, does it?”

“Yep, you missed out. You should have stayed in Paris.”

“You’re a terrible tease, Ms. Sokol.” The plates were cleared for *salade niçoise* that was similar to a cobb salad, but with grilled fish. It was delicious, and after eating the curry meal, I was sure I couldn’t eat another bite. “*Merci beaucoup, Helene*. I was enthused when she came out to ask us about our meal. But then she brought out *tarte tropézienne*, a brioche cake with homemade custard and strawberries. “I’m glad I didn’t fill up at the market.” I moaned in delight with each delectable bite.

“This dessert has a story, and it was particularly made for you.”

“Oh, it does?”

“Yes. A polish chef named Alexandre Micka brought the dessert to Nice. But the legendary tale goes Brigitte Bardot fell in love with the dessert while filming *And God Created Woman* and gave it the name.”

“Great story. I suppose we can fall in love with a dessert,” I mused, “It is very similar to what Dad used to have in his bakery.”

“Are you claiming the chef stole the recipe?” he teased.

“Not at all, it taste like home. And I’m especially touched that she made it for me.”

Paul leaned over and kissed me. “Taste even better on your lips.” I laughed.

We finished eating, and I held up my hand. “Be right back.” And I left to find Helene. I gave her a hug and thanked her again for the lovely, thoughtful meal. Paul was only a few steps behind me when I turned, shaking his head

and grinning.

“Merci,” he called to Helene, and took my hand and kissed my wrist. “So, what’s our plan now, Mr. Crane?”

“Are you ready to watch the movie?”

I scrunched up my face. “Yes, okay. I guess.”

“You don’t sound too enthused,” he mused. “I’m also not sure about watching a sci-fi thriller, but I’m told it’s a must see, at least once.”

“Sounds like a blockbuster,” I mused and took a seat on the couch.

Paul put on *Interscope*, and in the beginning, it was clear it was a dystopian, futuristic film. It had the telltale wasteland of war-torn remnants of a big city. The aliens ate the humans and became them.

“This is a body snatcher rip-off,” Paul complained. But then the alien blew out the person, and it became another alien. Every rip of skin graphically visual.

I let out a yelp and grabbed ahold of him and buried my head into his chest. “Is it over?”

“Yes,” he cuddled me.

I sat up, and he was holding in a laugh.

I grimaced at him. “That’s why you wanted to watch this with me.”

“I don’t need films to cuddle you.” His fingers traced the side of my neck and I shivered.

“No, you don’t, but this is scarier than I thought.”

“Then you should stay close so I can protect you,” he teased.

I moved across his lap, and he kissed my forehead to watch the rest.

After another hour of me startling and being cuddled, the movie ended, but it was clear there would be another.

“So, what did you think?” Paul asked and turned off the television.

“I’ll watch the sequel,” I told him. He laughed and kissed my forehead. “Okay. It’s a plan.” I was about to pick up the tray with our drinks when he stopped me from leaving the seat.

“Let’s talk.”

I tensed, but smiled. “Oh, every time I hear let’s talk, it’s never good.”

Paul chuckled. “No, it’s not bad, but it needs to be said...I’ve been alone for a long time, Nadia. I had friends and family, but personally alone. Most of the women in my past wanted things, money, fame, recognition, sex.”

“I needed money, too, Paul.”

“Yes, I know, and agreements made things easier. I didn’t have to care;

there was no pretending. I paid the woman. She followed my rules, or I let her go. Our lives were separate. We didn't love each other. Hell, I don't even know if they knew me. I never shared too much of myself because I didn't trust them not to use it to hurt me or my family."

"I'm sorry it was like that for you." I squeezed his hand and kissed him.

He tucked my hair behind my ears, his gaze soft. "You're so gentle and warm. I've been able to be myself. You let me care for you in a way that makes me feel needed and wanted. You're not spoiled or pretending. I brought you to my family, and they found the same thing. They fell in love with you, too."

"I love them, too."

I missed Lily, Jonas, and Darling. I'd love to get away with Paul again to see them. *Maybe soon.*

One of the nicest and affirming things to have come out of spending time with Paul's family was the fact that I felt I understood Dani better. Having been terrified of her and her insulting tongue, I now saw more clearly how protective she was of Paul. She hadn't been *hating on* me necessarily, but trying to guard her precious son's heart. And now that we both had that intention, we'd formed a close bond. I hoped she saw me more as an ally now and not a foe. Not to mention that Dani and Alan had been really great at entertaining my parents. *Gunnar, too.*

"You were who you claimed to be. You held on to me that first night and never stopped. When you left, the light in my life was gone, and I knew I couldn't be without you. I know marriage is something you want but haven't said anything to me about."

"I'm not going to pressure you," I whispered and swallowed.

"I know, but I also know we are planning to have a baby together. There is nothing more permanent. I wouldn't plan on a child if I wasn't sure about us. So when I say you have me, baby, I mean it. You have me."

I straddled his lap and hugged his head to my chest. That was a lot for Paul to share, and I could feel him tremble in my arms. Knowing him so well now, I believed him and also believe we belonged to each other. He no longer mentioned our age difference or the possibility that I'd want something different. I stood on my own, and during that time, I achieved some success. But even if I hadn't, I was living in Paris without him. But now even he believed we could have it all together. Ultimately, he needed me as much as I needed him. And our lives would only get better.

“You have me, Paul. I was worried when Tomas offered me Paris, but now I see it’s not at all something we can’t share. We can have our careers and go for our dreams. I believe that, and most of all, I love you and I want our children and the family, however we choose to have it together.” He pulled me in his arms, and we held each other for a long time. “I miss your hands on me, Nadia. I miss the softness and smell of your skin. The kindness in your eyes, and your tender embraces.”

“I missed the strength in your arms, the ease of your presence. The feel of your lips,” I whispered into his ear. We sealed our love with more, sharing the pieces we missed and mended them with more kisses. *And to think I was worried about this place.* The Rose House had magic of its own.

“Hold me,” he whispered. I hugged Paul’s neck, and he lifted me, carrying me over to the pool.

“Where are we going?”

“For a little night swim.”

He took off my dress and kissed me. “How are you?”

I placed my arms around him and kissed him. “I’m happy.”

He removed his clothes, and we dove in.

We swam below the surface, and I touched the lights. I could see his body move next to me—strong, perfect, *mine*.

We resurfaced and climbed out, taking the towels left for us to dry ourselves. Then Paul laid out a blanket, and we stretched out on top of it to hold each other under the night sky.

“I love you, my love.”

“I love you, too.”

Because there was only love, and that was all that mattered.



CHAPTER 33

“Just one more photo, please,” I drawled out playfully, tugging Paul’s arm. We put our heads together for a selfie. “Oh, I forgot to take one with us at the entrance.”

Paul groaned as he walked over to stand in front of it, but he smiled for my picture. Before I could take another, though, he picked me up and placed me over his shoulder.

“Oh, my God, I’m going to drop the phone.” We were both laughing as he carried me down the driveway, then placed me on my feet by the car.

I straightened my shirt, my brows furrowed. “It’s creased now.”

“Here, let me fix it.” He cupped my breasts.

“Hey. That’s making it worse.” *But it feels so good.*

“Not to me.” He kissed me and groaned when he let go. “But no more selfies. We’re on a schedule and need to get moving.”

“I thought this was a vacation.”

It turned into more of a staycation. We stayed in, swam, ate, had sex, and mostly talked and laughed. *I never want any of it to end.* But after spending time at the Rose House, I knew Paul put a lot of work into making our time special, and I didn’t want to miss whatever he wanted to share with me next.

With that, I climbed and belted into the seat, and Paul got behind the wheel. Paul was deliberate in his choice of the yellow Ferrari Spider convertible, and I suspected Italy was our next location.

“I know where we’re going.”

“You do? Okay. Maybe you should drive.”

My brows lowered. “You’d really let me drive, Mr. Crane?”

Paul gave me an incredulous look. “That was a joke. Maybe in the United States on a backcountry road in a small town.”

I huffed.

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I didn’t say no.”

“I’m going to learn to drive in Paris.” I grinned. “I’m getting a Vespa.”

Paul tutted, but I ignored his protest. Turning around in my seat, the Rose House quickly disappeared, and I sighed. Honestly, I couldn’t think of any place that would top it. It held my most precious memory so far with how Paul told me how much I meant to him. And I was already spoiled thinking about another escape after my internship.

Or apprenticeship. I thought of Dani making a name for herself in the art world. There was so much more I could do than I ever thought months ago.

The ride ended at the airport, and Paul was slow to leave the car. “I never have enough time....”

I stopped walking and our eyes met. “We have right now, and it’s perfect.” He hugged my shoulder, and we boarded the airplane.

Italy was my guess, but we didn’t go to Rome. We flew to Naples and were immediately transported to a car that drove us down to the port.

“The next location is best reached by boat. Lake Como.”

“Lake Como,” I repeated. The only thing I knew about Lake Como was that it was a place for the rich and famous.

We sat on the boat, and Paul placed his arm behind me as we sped off. The port grew smaller in view as we moved farther out into the water and down the coastline.

“I have updates on your parents.”

“How are they doing?”

“They are safe and back in Wisconsin. Your dad had a health check and is doing much better. He doesn’t need oxygen.”

I pressed my hand to my chest in an attempt to contain the overwhelming joy that burst inside me. *Daddy.* “That’s great news.”

“Oh, your mom said she hopes you use the hat.”

We both laughed since it flew away. “You really don’t want me to call them?”

“No. Your parents are wonderful, but they spoil surprises. They even admitted it to me.”

“True. Sokols are bad at hiding something we’re excited about.”

“I’m giving them updates on you, though.”

I grinned. “And what are you sharing?”

“That we’re fucking every chance we get.” We laughed.

“That’s true, but I know you didn’t tell my parents that.”

“No, I told them I’m trying to keep you smiling every minute because I love to see it.”

We kissed deeply, and I snuggled into his chest. A light mist of water damped our clothes as we sped on the lake, passing beautiful gardens and vibrant shaded Italian *palazzi* with lush greens that skirted the peaks and valleys of the mountains. I was immediately swept up in the lake’s magic and understood why Paul chose it as both houses had the *Secret Garden* ambiance, a dreamland away, but not entirely distant from quaint towns to explore. But I wasn’t sure where we were going. The more we traveled, the more opulent the estates became, until the boat stopped at a port below a grand Venetian villa.

My eyes watered, and I shook my head in disbelief, my hand pressed to my chest. “We could live here?”

“Yes, we can.” Paul took my waist and lifted me out of the speedboat. “This is house number two.” He lifted my hand and kissed the racing pulse on my wrist. “I want you to relax and treat it as yours, just like at the Rose House. Put yourself here and see what you could do.”

He shook hands with the captain and switched to Italian before we left. I called out, “*Grazie*,” which made Paul smile at me.

We walked along the planks of the wooden dock to a stone staircase with an elaborately decorated balustrade. I held on to the banister at the top, which opened into a fenced-in courtyard. It had rows of boxwood hedges and topiaries with rosemary and lavender, and I paused to inhale the fragrant scents. We moved on to a row of fruit trees, which were all figs, lemons, and oranges.

I ran my hand over a fig. “I could use these to make fresh meals for us.”

“Yes, you could,” he agreed.

I was in awe as we took in the stone terraces and gorgeous fountains with brass nymphs in romantic poses. We took a seat on one of the stone benches. “This is beautiful...I already feel inspired just by looking at everything. I feel like sketching.”

Paul took out his phone and texted. “I’ll make sure you have whatever

you need.”

We walked around a path to a stone pool that ran the length of the estate’s side, with a line of bushes and flowers over more of the stone wall. We walked inside the glass extension that was situated next to the arched, floor-to-ceiling windows, which were awash with sunlight when I stood inside. There were marble baroque tables and cushioned chairs, with small crystal chandeliers and oil paintings on the wall. There was a stunning view of the mountains and the lake. Paul opened a door and inside was a sauna with benches, new robes, and a towel closet, as well as a walk-in shower and a few lounge chairs.

“It’s unreal,” I whispered.

“There’s still more.” Paul took me up a curved, decorative stone and marble stairway to the second floor. It had a white piano at the top, and more of that amazing lake view. Unlike the Rose House, this home was more formal. The décor was all traditional baroque-style antique furniture, with oil paintings between brass wall sconces and large woven rugs over marble floors.

“I know you prefer contemporary, like me, and we can get an interior designer to add to it.”

I touched my warm face. “Wow. I’m just trying to take it all in.” There was a billiards room, exercise room, another indoor pool, a library stocked with books, a fireplace, and a half-moon custom seat below a window with a view. I could already imagine lying there and dreaming. “This is my favorite room.”

We went down to the well-stocked wine cellar. Paul chose two bottles, and we returned upstairs to the dining room, where I found the largest mirror I’d ever seen. He left the bottles on a shelf, and we went up a curving staircase to the bedrooms. One had a skylight above. *A nursery.* My hand brushed my stomach, which I’d been doing since we agreed to try. Paul hugged me from behind and kissed my neck, his hand splayed on my stomach. “I’m thinking of children, too.” My throat closed, and I couldn’t speak.

There were numerous empty rooms for a studio and an office with a modern computer and monitors on a large oak desk.

He saved the kitchen for last—a modern chef’s kitchen. Paul opened the huge double refrigerator, and I saw it was fully stocked.

“Now I’m anxious to cook for you.” *Meat, tomatoes, cabbage?* The items

in the refrigerator looked like my parent's refrigerator back home. My lips parted. "Did Mom and Dad give you a list?"

Paul's smile was impish. "Yes. They told me what you need to cook."

I hugged his neck. "You're so romantic."

"Getting ingredients is romantic?" he mused and held me.

"It is. Serving food is serving love. Dad won Mom over with food."

"Hmm. My dad told me Mom won him over because she gave great head."

I swiped his arm. "Jonas? No way. You're lying."

"Am I? Ask my mom."

"No way am I ever going to ask her that!"

"She and Alan practice tantric sex. Alan will brag at some point about how many hours he can go without coming."

I covered my ears. "No more. I don't want to know because I'll have to see them sometimes, and you know I can't hide what I'm thinking."

His gaze went soft on me. "That's also something I love about you."

My heart skipped a beat. "I love everything about you." And I did. It wasn't just that he was extravagant. He was generous to a fault. But it was *how* he chose the houses we'd looked at so far. *Although, one cannot really call them "houses."* He'd looked for places that suited both of our artistic and emotional needs. He'd ensured that each place had the potential to grow and become *ours* with our different and eclectic styles. I knew he'd bring my parents over for a visit to any of the places. *And each place so far had blissful privacy from the pressures and stresses of life...and a place for our future family.* I was in awe of the man's thoughtfulness and care.

I went back to the refrigerator and took out the ingredients and placed them on the counter. "I'll make us dinner."

"Can I do something?" he asked as he ate a small tomato.

"You can play something on the piano?" I cocked a brow.

"Oh, so it's like that, Ms. Sokol? The kitchen is your domain?"

"My dad has the same rules; he wants no distractions. It won't take long, and I'll come back and see you while it's cooking."

He kissed me. "All right."

I went upstairs to change in the large bedroom that had decorative crown molding on the ceilings and more chandeliers and sconces. It had a balcony with a stone and iron railing and more views of the water and mountains. A part of me just wanted to relax there, but I changed into a striped scoop neck

shirt and linen pants that were in the closet, then returned to the kitchen. Searching the cabinets and drawers, I took out a few mixing bowls, and took out the meat, vegetables, and eggs, and started cutting them to make *flaki* stew—something Paul had shared he wanted me to make for him. In a drawer, I found some cookie sheets. But what caught my eye was the crescent moon cookie cutter. *Dad's moon cookies*. I found a rack of spices and nuts, as well as the other ingredients I would need—courtesy of Mom, of course. *Almonds. I'll make almond crescent cookies*. I mixed up the dough and thought about the years with my parents and how loving they'd been. I never asked if I had Polish ancestry, but I believe I was Polish. That was how they raised me, and I was proud of it.

I seasoned the meat, chopped vegetables, and took out more bowls, utensils, and pans. Then I started making Paul's *flaki* stew. Once they were all on, I left to find Paul. He was on a lounge chair in the living room, fast asleep. I tucked a blanket over him and removed his shoes.

My eyes filled with tears, and my throat closed. *I want to take care of him every day. I want a long life with him*. I said it as a prayer, a wish of the heart. It wasn't because of what he'd done; it was him. His kindness, compassion, and care. There was no one else for me.



CHAPTER 34

I set the table in the dining room and checked on the food. My mouth watered as I smelled the aroma, and I tasted each dish and was sure it was perfect.

Then I went to the lounge where Paul was sleeping and crawled behind him. He immediately turned and pulled me on top of him, and I fell asleep in the comfort of his arms.

Sometime later, the sound of music coming from a stereo roused me from my sleep. Paul was no longer there. I stretched and went to check on the food in the kitchen. *Not burnt. Good.*

I found Paul in one of the offices, listening to music and reading. “Dinner’s ready.”

He came down with me and took a seat at the head of the table. I uncovered his *flaki* and cabbage I made. “Voilà.”

He took his first bite and moaned. “This is delicious.”

I smiled. He ate one plate, and I served another. “We’re going to run out of food.”

“If you keep cooking like that, we will.”

“Mom and Dad really miss their bakery, but they seem happy with their time off. Mom looks younger, less stressed out.”

“She wasn’t too fond of New York City.”

“She loves her small towns, but she did enjoy Texas.”

“I want them to keep that home; that’s their vacation place.”

“My parents will never accept it.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“They moved because of security, but they don’t want to change who they are. You spending time listening to Dad’s jokes and talking to Mom about the eighties; they love that stuff. That’s more than material things.”

Paul went quiet, but I could see the wheels turning in his head on how he could still give my parents that Texas house. *He’s too much.*

We ate more of the food, and I had to admit, I’d out done myself. Delicious.

“I have a song I’d love to hear you sing and record.”

“Me?” I wrinkled my nose. “Let’s leave singing for Justus.”

Paul huffed. “Fuck him. Rehab? Everyone knows he hasn’t had any drugs in years.”

I also doubted Justus had relapsed. He more than likely couldn’t handle the hard questions about impregnating a teen.

“He’s hiding out. He only cares about number one—himself. I don’t care.”

“But Justus doesn’t get to choose what you do. I’d want you to sing at my concerts.”

“In front of thousands? No way.” I cringed.

“I just want you with me. I don’t want to spend a long time away from you.”

“Well, if you put it that way...no,” I joked, and we laughed.

“Think about it, please, Nadia.”

“I will, but it’s time for dessert.”

I had a plan, but gestured to Paul to remain seated while I cleared all the dishes. “Let me do this for you.”

“Okay, just this time.” His gaze followed me as I left the room.

I went into the pantry and quickly removed my clothes. Then came out with the traditional Polish scarf around my hair that Mom had packed. “Surprise.”

Paul’s gaze was intense and sent a shot right to my clit. He moved his chair back. “You sexy temptress. Get over here.”

I went to him, and he clasped my face and kissed me. My lips parted, and his tongue swept in, stroking against mine.

“Mmm,” I straddled him. My hands slid against the soft stubble on his jaw, to the undersides of his hair above his collar. I locked my legs behind

him to press the front of my body against his. He pulled me further onto his lap and grabbed my ass. I shuddered at the feel of his hard muscles through the fabric of his shirt, and the strong one between his legs that was thickening. My breasts swelled, and I could feel my clit ache. I rocked my hips for friction and moaned into his mouth. I could never get enough of his taste or the feel of his body on mine. As it was with Paul, he was taking over. His lips moved down my neck, his hands traveled down my breasts and between my legs. He pushed two fingers in and rubbed my clit with his thumb.

“You’re so hot. Is this cream my dessert?” He pumped his fingers inside me and had me burning up. I could feel my arousal climbing. But this time wasn’t for me; I wanted it to be for him. I lifted my hips and climbed off his lap.

“What are you up to, sexy?” He sucked his fingers, and I shivered. He could see I was already turned on and would have gladly let him do whatever he wanted, but I went down on my knees between the gap in his legs. “Pleasuring you.”

“Oh, fuck.” He opened his trousers and removed his cock. I took it in my hands and stroked it.

“Mmm, that feels good. Rub it against your lips, and stroke it with your breasts.”

He groaned as I rubbed my lips over his shaft, then I cupped my breasts and positioned his cock between them. Paul moved his hips as I used my breasts to stroke it. “Damn, keep it there and suck on it. Watch yourself sucking on me.”

My eyes shifted toward the mirror and watched myself, naked on the floor between his gapped thighs. My eyes were glazed with want, my skin flushed, and my breasts were swollen. Paul was just as lost in desire, his thick, swollen dick in my small hands. I gripped the base and ran my tongue up and down his shaft, fluttering over the spongy head that was already wet with pre-cum. I tasted him and moaned before sucking him into my mouth.

“Mmm, Nadia. Fuck, that’s good. Suck harder.” He grabbed the scarf and eased himself deeper, feeding his cock to the back of my throat. I swallowed hard and gagged as he moaned and freed my head. I gasped to refill my lungs and drew on him harder.

“Bathe my balls. Run your tongue over them.”

With a *pop*, I released his cock from my mouth and cupped his balls,

caressing them as I licked timidly. They tasted like his scent and sweat, and that made me wetter. I lapped them and slid my tongue behind them. He shuddered and grabbed my head. “Fuck. Whoa. Nadia.” I ran my tongue up and down his shaft, then swallowed him again. His thighs flexed, and his breath came out in faster pants. “Mmm, baby, you do that so fuck...so fucking good. I want it in that tight cunt. Give it to me.”

He pulled me to my feet and sat me in his lap. Facing the mirror, I watched his hands move with certainty, touching every part he knew would make me lose myself. He kissed my neck and shoulders, moving his hands around my waist and up to my breasts, squeezing and teasing my nipples. His hands ran down my hips and rubbed between my legs. His cock was hard as stone as it pressed into my ass. And I grew wetter and wetter, and I could see it with his fingers teasing my clit. *Oh, this is hot.* He lifted my hips, and I opened my legs and touched his cock as I slowly lowered, clenching my teeth as his thick head stretched my channel wider. It felt so good I could weep.

I didn’t stop until my buttocks hit his thighs.

Paul grabbed my hips and commanded. “Ride me, Nadia.”

He pulled me up and down, dragging along his throbbing steel rod. “Fuck, Nadia. I can’t get enough of you.” I clenched around him, and we both moaned. He reached around and touched my throbbing clit. I arched my back and lifted as he held on to my waist, easing me to move my hips, to keep taking his deep thrusts. *Ohh, Paul.* Nothing felt as good as his cock. Up and down, I rode him and watched us in the mirror; we looked so damn hot. The pressure built, and I slowed to savor it, but I could feel my body clench.

“Ohh, my love.” His breath came harder as he gripped my hips to force our rhythm, and every glide hit that spot inside me, pulling me toward orgasm. I started to move my hips faster.

“Fuck,” Paul cried out. His pants turned heavy and fast. I could feel his cock pulsate inside me, so close to coming. Reaching down between his legs, I took hold of his balls and lightly squeezed.

“Harder, baby.”

I firmed my grip and squeezed my inner muscles, trying to hold him inside me as I quivered and my sex spasmed around him. He thrust up hard, losing complete control, twisting and shuddering, letting out a roar. I cried out and shook as we came apart together.

Paul let me go, gasping and still spasming from the climax and the adrenaline. He lifted me up to pull out, and I straddled his lap. We were both

breathing hard, both so lost in pleasure.

Paul clasped the side of my face. His lidded gaze settled on me, and a smile spread across his face, causing a shiver down my body. “Nadia, you’re all I want.”

My heart leapt in my chest, and I hugged him tighter. “You have me.” *Forever.* We slowly stood, but kept our arms around each other.

“Do you want to go to bed?” he whispered against my head.

“Later, I have another dessert for you.”

“It can’t top that one,” he joked.

“No, it’s a family recipe that I hope you’ll love. It’s the first cookie I remember my dad giving me as a child. A moon cookie. He used to paint them to look like a happy moon...” I didn’t continue because my heart was so full. I’d been starving, and it was my first meal that day.

He squeezed my waist. “Of course, I already love it.”

We found a bathroom, and I turned on the spray. Paul removed the rest of his clothes and went with me into a shower. His hands moved all over me possessively as he washed me. I washed him and he kissed me again. There were robes in there and with a glance back inside the living room, I spotted Opal cleaning up. Paul only kept around those he trusted. I waved at her, and she smiled before we headed upstairs to change. Paul went for a button-down shirt and linen slacks. I chose a printed jumpsuit. “You look lovely. I should take you out.”

“I’d rather stay in with you,” I said softly.

He kissed me. “Then this is where we’ll stay.”



The dining room was back to its original elegance, and once again, I asked Paul to take a seat. I left for the kitchen and took down the pretty bowls and tray I had set out to wait. I put in a few almond crescent cookies and a small dish of ice cream.

I returned and presented it, then waited as Paul took his first bite. His pleasure was clear in his happy expression, but he still said, “They taste delicious. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I lifted a spoon from my bowl, and he licked it suggestively off my spoon. “Now, I’m jealous,” I joked.

“I’ll make it up to you later.”

We went into the living room, and Paul went to the piano. Soon, the room filled with Beethoven’s *Pathétique*. Something I hadn’t heard him play since we went out to a birthday party for a friend of his in Paris.

“Why did you choose to play Beethoven tonight?” I asked. As I recalled, it was hard for him to play because he played the song at his wedding to Aubrey.

“As you know, I’ve always loved this music. It’s part of my soul, my heart. But I’ve felt so...empty. And now, with you? I have life. Hope. Joy. So it feels right to bring it back into my life now. You are the muse for my joy.”

My heart soared at his romantic sentiment. He had a peacefulness about him that I had been seeing more of, and it warmed my insides. It was also one of the most romantic pieces I ever heard before, and I had a front-row seat to enjoy his brilliance.

I went to collect my sketchpad, and I sat on the floor next to him. The stars and night were ours, and we used every minute together, creating and loving each other.



CHAPTER 35

A wet heat molded my body like rubber to glass in the sun. Steam rose in spurts, crackled like a snake's hiss, and mingled with the soft classical music that rooted my brain to the present. The wooden bench beneath comforted and allowed me to stretch my long legs fully. I drifted at a timeless pace.

Zing. The timer went off after ten minutes in the sauna, and as if in slow motion, my legs swung from the bench to place my feet flat on the tile floor. I sat up. The steam had lessened and revealed a naked Paul Crane on the bench across from me. *Gloriously naked.* He propped himself up on his side and grinned. "Good afternoon."

"Yes. Another late start," I mused.

Perhaps it was the time difference, but we slept longer. *I love that too.*

We stood and moved to the walk-in shower. Paul turned on the spray, and a cool stream of water pumped out of the massaging jets. His hands wrapped around my waist. I closed my eyes and smiled. I loved his hands on me.

I turned and washed Paul's back with a sponge and pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. "I don't think I ever want to leave here."

"So, you choose Italy and this house?" he asked.

"I'm still not sure."

The Rose House had an intimacy to it. It felt like a getaway for two. However, this home felt like a place to share with family. I could already see my mom working in the garden. My dad cooking in the kitchen with me. Even Dani painting, and Alan maybe playing a sitar around the stone garden,

had entered my vision. I'd swim with Lily, and Jonas would play chess in the sunroom with Paul. Darling could scuba dive. Even the children I hoped for could stay here. *If I can get pregnant.* Mom had a few miscarriages before her hysterectomy. Could my miscarriage be a sign of infertility? What about Celeste? *She has twins. That's promising.*

After drying off, I put on a swimsuit and a thin jacket. Paul put on a T-shirt and linen pants. He stopped me to smooth on some sunscreen. "How do you feel?"

"Like I can go back to sleep."

"Have you used a sauna before?"

"No. It was always too busy at the gym, you know? I never see you work out; how do you stay so fit?"

"I have a trainer that comes to the gym at my office a few times a week. Cardio, lifting."

We padded outside to the beach chairs and stretched out under the umbrellas.

"I'd stay here forever."

"You'd get bored just like me. You love to work and create. But if you choose this place, we can build studios."

"You know, with everything going on, how do you have this time away?"

"I always schedule time away after a project is complete."

"The documentary is done?"

"Mostly. We finished the location shoots, and anything left, I trust, will be covered by my head manager on site. Our work is now studio, editing, audio, music, which I can work on in Paris with you."

I nodded. "Good, I hoped you'd say that. The internship in Paris wasn't all work. Tomas encourages his staff to take time away from the office, so we stay current and don't burn out."

"I like that too. When I was alone, I had my work. Now I want to enjoy more of life."

"I love that you have the freedom to do that. Do you always build studios?"

"I do. I have offices worldwide."

It still shocked me that Paul had studios around the world with hundreds of employees.

"What is it like to have so many people dependent on you?"

He rubbed his chin. "Daunting at first, but I'd been put in the position to

make a decision since I was young.”

“Jonas is a titan in business. I’m surprised you didn’t follow him.”

It was something I always wondered about before I knew Paul personally. His music was amazing, and he was gifted as a pianist. Most of his music productions have been hits. However, I bet he could have quickly succeeded in business with the Crane’s name behind him.

“It’s simply that I didn’t want to. I loved music and picked up instruments easily from an early age, and that was possible because I’m a Crane. I know how fortunate I am. We can also have our passions. Dad had the venture capital angle of his business. Mom is a painter. Alan was also a businessman, but now he teaches meditation. Lily has a small print company, and she has her foundation. We all follow our own passions, too.”

“Will our child be a businessperson?” I mused through a tingle that fluttered in my chest at the thought.

“Our child will be free to decide what he wants to do, but will have family responsibilities. He or she must learn to be independent. It’s something I’m worried about with Darling.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He rubbed his jaw. “Lily is sweet as they come.”

“She is. I love her.”

“I do too, but Dad’s acting like a shepherd. It’s dangerous for Darling.”

“What do you mean ‘dangerous’? To be a doting father?”

He frowned. “No, he’s being a shepherd, overprotective. Even Lily agrees with me. She was raised sheltered and dependent by her parents. It left her vulnerable and woefully unprepared for manipulation and cruelty. Her previous partner verbally and physically abused her.”

I rubbed the center of my chest. “Lily’s so kind and gentle. I can’t imagine anyone hurting her.”

“Neither can I. The asshole got out of jail but went right back in for theft. He ever gets out again, Dad and I would be happy to make him disappear forever.”

Paul’s expression was severe. I loved how protective he was, but I didn’t want him to go to jail. “I’m sure using legal means is better.”

“Listen to us talking like we’re having a child.” I touched my lips. “It still feels like a dream.”

“Most realities start that way.” He replaced my hand with his lips and pressed firmly. “Let’s go out.”

“Not exactly what I expected.”

“And what did you expect, Ms. Sokol?”

“More sex.”

He smiled. “We can have sex while we’re out. You seem to enjoy sex in public.”

I laughed. “So did you, and you’re right. We don’t need to stay home for that.”

He kissed me, swung my arm, and walked down to the speedboat. It took us across to another port, where we climbed out. At the top of the landing was a man with a Vespa.

“Can I drive?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I placed my hand on my hip. “If you want independent children, then their mom also has to be independent, Paul.”

Paul talked about Darling, but he wanted to keep me tucked away from life, too. In some ways, he’d gotten better, but this was just as important.

He took a deep breath and went quiet, and I waited. “You’re right, Nadia. I guess I forget how precious love can be. It makes you want to hold on tight.”

I hugged his waist. “I’m not going anywhere, Paul.”

“Okay, I’ll try to compromise. But we start with professional driving lessons.”

I pressed my lips to his. “Thank you.”

He handed me the helmet, and I climbed on the back.

My head was against his back as he moved us down the steep heels of the mountainside.

And I took it all in to add to my dreams.



CHAPTER 36

Paul kissed me awake. “Nadia, come have a bath with me.”

I rubbed my eyes. “Okay, but what time is it?”

“Time to get up.” He was already in good humor, and if he woke me early, then I knew there was another trip he had planned. He pulled the covers back, and I crawled out, padded to the bathroom, and slowed. The room had a beautiful view of the mountains and lake, already bright with the morning sun. The sunken tub was drawn and had flower petals and foam on the surface. The fragrant blooms infused the air, and I had Paul all to myself, making it perfect in every way.

“This is beautiful, Paul.” He went in first and helped me into the water. The flowers reminded me of walking through the garden in Versailles, filled with jasmine, daffodils, narcissus, tulips, and roses. *It was exquisite. Paul and I should go together.* That was what I thought of everywhere. Everything was better shared with the man I love.

Paul lifted my hair and twisted it into a messy bun, tying it with a hair tie he must have left for me. He kissed my neck and shoulders and gave them a gentle massage. He lathered a sponge and washed my back, and his hands followed, branding his touch on my skin. It was possessive, but it was Paul. He thought of me as his and made me believe it, too. I was his from the very start.

I took the sponge and started to wash him. “Bath time’s your favorite time?” I teased, since it was something he told me the first time I bathed in

front of him. Only then, he was more concerned about barriers.

“As I remember it, you were upset because you wanted me to take your virginity.”

“You were all over me; I was too turned-on to wait.”

“Oh, I loved that. When I came, the only thing I could think about was fucking you again.”

The memories flowed between us, and Paul took the sponge away. Our gazes fused and our attraction charged the air. His blue eyes were darkened by desire and bore in with intensity, and my skin burned with anticipation and want. He cupped between my legs, and my sex clenched. My hips started moving against his fingers. I turned and gripped his cock, stroking it from root to tip. My eyes closed, and I savored the weight and thickness, knowing how good it was going to feel. I opened my eyes again, and Paul was staring at me. He kissed me hard and grunted into my mouth, heightening my craving for him to fill me once again.

We couldn't get out of the tub fast enough.

Paul climbed on top of me on the tile floor, and I wrapped my legs around him. He didn't hesitate as he thrust his cock in. We both moaned, and Paul whispered, “It's yours. Take it.”

I grabbed his ass hard. “Never...never take it out.”

“I won't, baby; it's all yours.” He ground his cock in balls-deep and hot passion filled my veins. My willing body begged for more.

Our shallow breaths filled my ears, and my body clenched around his thick cock as it caressed me. I could feel that sweet edge of climax within reach, and I tensed to hold on, to savor the ecstatic pumps inside of me. “Ohh, my love.”

“Fuck,” he grunted. Paul took me harder; his relentless plunges shattered my resistance, rocketing me to orgasm. My body shook, my inner walls gripped him tight, and he shuddered and let out a reverent moan. “Ohh, Nadia.”

“Ohh, Paul. Only you, my love. Only you,” I called out as I writhed against him. His body tensed in my arms, and he came with a roar, pouring into me as I held on to him. He collapsed in my arms, and I savored the weight. “Stay. Please. I need you.”

“Mmm.” Paul hummed and pressed his lips to mine, sliding his tongue with a tenderness against my own. I felt his heart in our close press, beating fast, beating for me. He was all mine.

He kept himself in until he grew soft inside me. He rolled over, propped himself up on his arm, and gave me a look that vibrated in my heart. *A look of a thousand dreams and each one starts with him.*

We finished cleaning up and dried off. When we returned to the bedroom, there were fresh sheets and a box with a ribbon on the bed.

I shook my head at him. “We have an agreement. No gifts without giving me a chance to get something for you.”

“Next time,” he whispered. “Open it.”

It was one of my floral dress designs, but this one had vines and a poppy flower pin was on top of it.

“I want every day of our life together to be as fantastical as our vineyard.”

“Oh, Paul...” I choked and embraced him.

“I love you so much.” I blinked back tears, and he kissed me deeply. “Let’s get dressed.”

Paul changed into a lightweight, dark tailored suit and white shirt that made him look sizzling hot with his new tan. I finished my daily routine, brushed my hair, put on the white lingerie Paul had chosen for me today, and stepped into the dress. He kissed up my back as he zipped it. I smoothed the lapels on his jacket. “You look so handsome.”

“And you look beautiful, Nadia.” He lifted my hand and kissed my wrist. “So what do you think of this home so far?”

“I love them both; you’ve made it impossible not to. They’re all special, even the one you took me to the first night after the mixer.”

“That was an awful night.”

“But I knew I loved you then.”

He stopped walking and gazed at me warmly. “Why then?”

“Because you held me and you cleaned me up and rubbed my back until I went to sleep. I...I knew you had a kind heart. I was still worried, but knew I would love you if you let me.”

His gaze went tender, and my chest fluttered. “You gave me everything I was missing so naturally that night. Even as terrible as it was, you reached for me, let me take care of you. Let me hold you. You were so sweet, so trusting; I wanted to keep you.”

“And you did,” I said softly.

“I did, and every day I think I love you, but you’d do something to make me love you more.” He kissed me passionately, then smiled. “Let’s go.”

“Where? Should I make something we can have brunch with, or are we

going out to eat?”

Paul only smiled and kept his secret. He didn't head to the kitchen but led me outside, and I stopped. There were flower petals on the stone path. I recognized hyacinths, jasmine, roses, and tulips.

“These flowers were in bloom during the time you were in Versailles. That was the night I couldn't find you. And when you appeared, my heart started beating again. That was when I knew you had taken it. I couldn't shut you out; I couldn't stop it. Hell, I never could stop you. You went into my arms, and I couldn't let you go.”

Tears fell down my face, and my throat closed. I touched my stomach. “Oh, Paul....”

He took me in his arms, and I cried into his shoulder. He hugged me, then let go and cupped my face. “Look at you, baby.”

“I'm a mess, I know. I can't help it....”

“You don't need to. Just be you.”

His profession was a solace to my soul. Paul accepted me as I was, and he chose me just as I was. That meant to me as much as having his love.

I was enough.

“I love you,” I sobbed.

He took a cloth from his pocket and wiped my tears.

“I know you do.” He kissed my forehead, and put his arm around me. We walked on the flower path through the garden until we reached the port. At the bottom of the stairs was a large boat with sails filled with more flowers.

“Sail away with me.”

“I'd go anywhere with you,” I choked.

I wiped more tears and swallowed hard, and my hand trembled as I clasped his. With the sweet smell of polished wood, flowers, and the lake, we boarded the boat and followed our path down a short flight into a room with a cloth table set for us. There were chairs, but Paul pulled me onto his lap and cuddled me as the boat left port.

An assistant came out and placed a dish that had a familiar aroma. To my delight, it was the carbonara pasta I had in Rome.

“I had the chef fly in and make this dish for you to eat again. You ate it with such uninhibited passion, I wanted the pleasure again.” *He flew the chef in to make this for me? I'm not sure I'll ever get used to such affluence.* It was beyond my comprehension.

He swirled a fork full of pasta and carbonara and fed it to me. I ate it, and

he crushed his lips to mine, sliding his tongue seductively against my own. The dish was just as incredible the second time around.

I took the seat across from him, and we ate the delicious meal again. And it was even sweeter this time because our hearts were one.

A server came and poured champagne, and we had a sip.

“I have a confession.” His expression turned serious.

My brows raised. “Oh, what is it?”

“Your parents weren’t flown into New York for support only. I needed to speak with them. I spoke to your dad first because your mom’s thoughts were clear.”

I licked my lips. “Mom can be tough when it comes to me.”

“She adores you...they both do. It was good to see their love and kindness. It’s what they gave to you, and you gave to me.”

I beamed at hearing I was just like my parents. Their love was unconditional. They never stopped loving me, even when I made choices they disagreed with. I was grateful to have them in my life, and even more so that Paul helped me keep them longer.

“Thank you for saving my dad’s life. He wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for the medical treatment you gave him.”

“I’m grateful to your dad, too. And when I met with him alone, I asked him about you.”

I smiled. “You did?”

“We talked, but there was only one question that mattered. I asked him if he’d let me keep you forever....”

My shoulders shook as I broke down in tears.

“He said yes.”

The sound of string instruments filled the air, playing John Lennon’s “Woman.”

“You are music and passion, my sweet, beautiful Nadia. I promise to love you forever. Through good and bad, I’m here. Always.”

He went down to his knees.

My hands held my heart because it was too full to stay in. But he eased them in his own and kissed the back of them. Then he opened a box and showed me an oval-shaped solitaire diamond ring with a violet gemstone, like my eyes.

“There is nothing we can’t do together. You are my light, my love, and my future. Will you marry me?”

Words could not express the absolute joy I felt. He said he'd never marry again, and yet...here we were.

It made me think of diamonds shining in the sunshine. And it reminded me of words he said not long ago when I asked him about Beethoven.

“As you know, I’ve always loved this music. It’s part of my soul, my heart. But I’ve felt so...empty. And now, with you? I have life. Hope. Joy. So it feels right to bring it back into my life now. You are the muse for my joy.”

“Yes...yes, I will. I love you.”

He took my trembling hand and put the ring on, which fit perfectly.

Our gazes connected and held. The love we had reflected back, and I knew that forever was only our beginning.



CHAPTER 37

I stared down at the ring on my finger and couldn't believe it. *I'm going to be Mrs. Crane.* Paul's hands were on my waist, gently moving me toward the plane.

I groaned. "I wish we could stay another day."

"I wish we could too, but we have to finish what we started." He kissed my cheek. "We'll go back soon for a longer time."

Paul was right. My internship in Paris hadn't concluded. Dale and Gunnar assured me that any upcoming testimony could be done by video communication. Paul also had his documentary to finish and a couple more concert dates in Europe in a month. Traveling would be a part of our shared life, and I wouldn't change any of it.

I took the stairs and went to my seat. Paul sat beside me. "The press already knows about our engagement."

"That fast?" I asked.

"There were people on the boat, so it would have leaked anyway. Besides, I didn't want it to be a secret." Paul pecked my lips. "I want everyone to know."

"I do, too, and I can turn on my phone now." We both chuckled at the notifications, which were mostly from my parents.

Mom: OH MY GOD!!! You're getting married!! Paul told us he wanted to propose to you and make it special. I was afraid to speak to you and give it away. But I'm so happy. He really loves you and treats

you like a princess. It was so sweet to see you together.

I touched my smile.

Dad: So, he's making an honest woman out of you after all. He had me write a list of ingredients for you to cook. I added a dessert. Did you make your moon cookies? He's a good man. He loves you, and that was the only way I'd agree. I'll never repay him for saving my life.

My chest tightened, and I dabbed a cloth under my nose. Paul hugged me to him, and the tension I carried around eased. Even though we still had many things to face, we had something to celebrate.

I remember seeing my dad cry after he returned to the living room in New York City. I was now sure Paul had asked for my hand then.

“What are you smiling about, Nadia?”

“Dad giving me away.”

“Yes, he did, and that makes you all mine now.”

Butterflies fluttered my chest, but I half-joked, “It sounds very sexist.”

“It is,” Paul said without shame, and I poked him playfully.

I took a selfie of me showing the ring and Paul kissing my cheek and sent it to both of them with a message.

Nadia: We're on our way back to Paris. We'll talk to you soon.

“We're taking off,” Jim, the pilot, announced over the speaker.

Back to Paris. The city where we fell in love.

I closed my eyes and leaned my head on Paul's shoulder and drifted, content.



The flight was short, and outside the plane window, I saw Laurence and the car. However, there were also press and cameras waiting with him.

Paul took my hand. “We're not answering questions.”

The press hadn't been kind to us since the boat incident. I also didn't want them to spoil one of the best days in my life.

I climbed off the plane and took Paul's hands as he walked past the rows of photographers and press with microphones.

"When's the wedding?"

"Are you marrying to avoid speaking under oath in the trial?"

"Will your wedding affect your lawsuits?"

I bit the inside of my cheek.

Laurence moved in front of us with a couple more security guards and helped us into the car.

"So you said yes?" Laurence called back in a joyous tone once we were driving.

I grinned broadly. "Yes, I did."

"Of course she did," Paul joked.

"So which home did you like the best, Nadia?"

"I can't decide." I bit my smile.

Paul's proposal tipped the scale to the house on Lake Como. However, he was so open and passionate at the Rose House. I honestly loved both of them.

"You have time," Paul said to me. "But once you choose, we can start the renovations." He took a call, and I went back to my phone.

A message had come in from Xander. It had a video clip of me interspersed with Emma Thompson crying in *Sense & Sensibility*.

Xander: Did you go full Thompson's Elinor Dashwood for Paul?

I texted back.

Nadia: Yep. I cried like a baby.

Xander: The man's crazy about you.

I smiled, thinking about Paul on his knees before me, asking me to be his forever.

Xander: Where are you going to get married?

Nadia: It just happened! I've been thinking about the backyard at my parents? It could be intimate.

*Xander: What? Are you unwell?? I'll wait for you to return to reality.
TTYL*

Nadia: Ha. Whatever. TTYL

Paul's phone rang again, and he answered it, mouthing, "Gunnar." I tensed. *Can't we have good news for once?* Paul frowned. *Not likely.* "I'll text you. I'll have to speak with Nadia first. Yes." He ended the call.

My brows knitted. "What now?"

"It's about Celeste. She's been trying to reach you through Gunnar since we left. Tomorrow, she's heading into a cleansing retreat that will last weeks. She asked if she could speak with you for a few minutes tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah. That woman has some nerve." His jaw ticked.

Paul's annoyance was out of love, but I knew him well enough to know there was something else that had him enraged. "What's really bothering you, Paul?"

He clenched his jaw. "Celeste...doesn't want to involve her children."

I'd expected that. If I met them, that would mean a lasting connection, and that wasn't what she wanted with me; she never did. The difference this time was I didn't want a relationship with her, either. "Yeah, please set it up. I still want to do it."

"You owe her nothing. Are you sure?"

"I am. She's not my mom, and I don't see her that way. Maybe she hopes for closure...I know I want it."

Paul went quiet for a while but held my hand. He finally said, "Okay, but she doesn't deserve any of your time. I will not allow her to hurt you."

"You'll be near me, and I will go right into your arms after." I leaned over and kissed him.

He blew out his breath and contacted Laurence. "The other place. Thanks, Laurence."

Laurence turned a corner.

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to the place you stayed at during the internship for the call."

"Why?"

"Because spaces hold meaning to you. The Hudson was spoiled, and you don't want to live there. We didn't have a great start at the new place, but with your family around, I hope it's better."

My chest expanded, and I squeezed his knee. "It is. Thank you."

Paul made a call to Gunnar. "Tonight. Okay."

Good. I didn't want to have to worry about it. It would be over soon.

Laurence parked in the private space.

We climbed out of the car and headed over to the front door, and once we were inside, Paul went over to the piano. “Let’s clear the air and enjoy ourselves, shall we?” He played on the piano. “What do we want to listen to?”

Laurence called out. “The Beatles, ‘The End’.”

Paul pounded wildly on the keys while Laurence shuffled across the floor, shaking his hands, then turned and did an air guitar. I doubled over laughing, but joined him, shaking my hips and lifting my arms. He took my hand, and we spun in a circle.

“Presenting, the new Mrs. Crane,” Laurence called out.

My heart leapt, and I turned and posed with my head over my shoulder and batted my eyelashes. I then looked at Paul, who grinned broadly as he watched us.

I did the swim over to him and shook my hips.

He waggled his brows.

“Mr. Crane, I love you.” I bent my head down next to his mouth and he kissed me.

We weren’t in the duplex, but we were home.

Paul’s phone chimed, and he ignored it, but someone kept calling. He huffed and stopped playing. “Hello?” he answered, and his eyes narrowed. “Break in?”

I grimaced, and Laurence came to stand next to me.

“Is anyone hurt?” Paul blew out his breath. “Fuck me. No, don’t call the police. I’ll be right there.”

“What’s wrong, Paul?” I asked.

“My office in Paris has been vandalized. Some things are missing.” His frown deepened. “I’m going to go see the damage.”

“I’m going with you.”

“Not yet. I have to make sure it’s safe first—”

“How is it safe for you?” My pulse sped up, and I shook my head. “No. You can’t go.”

He took my waist and smiled. “It’s okay. I won’t be hurt.”

How does he know? And no police. Why not?

The only way Paul would be so certain was if he knew who had done it. Who would do that to his workplace?

Someone with access. Someone he trusted. It’s personal.

“Security is there and has footage. I’ll know more soon. Laurence, you’re with me. Please call André and have him stay with Nadia.”

“On it,” Laurence said. “I’ll get some other security stationed outside.”

Paul stood and squeezed Laurence’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

I crossed my arms. “I’m worried.”

“I understand that, but I need to know you’re safe, and that’s here.” His tone was authoritative and absolute.

I turned away from him, hoping he wouldn’t see my fear. But he wrapped his arms around me from behind. He pressed his soft lips to the back of my neck and hummed. A moan vibrated through me. *Please be safe*. I trembled, leaning back, and he held me tighter. “Try not to worry. I’ll send for you when it’s safe.”

The security guards arrived, and Paul gave me a quick kiss and walked out the door.



CHAPTER 38

There was someone else that would steal from Paul's office, but it seemed outrageous.

Ingrid.

But why would someone like her break into his office? She was beautiful, rich, and accomplished in her career. They were collaborating on her family documentary that she seemed to care for. Paul seemed to believe they had made progress. *No, it can't be her.*

Then again, who wouldn't do something like that? We had people like Christina Ralls upset about her husband, who had been arrested recently. Landon and Trevor were likely to have friends internationally. Linux or a disgruntled artist could have done it. *Actually, anyone could have done it.*

I changed into a shirt and pencil skirt. My bags were going to the duplex, and when I went into the studio, most of it was empty. Still, there were a few dresses inspired by the Kusama exhibit I had started. I made a note for Nicole to have Opal send the knits from the apartment in New York City to Paris. I sat down and stared at her response.

Nicole: I'll have it overnighted tomorrow morning. Congratulations to you both.

Nadia: Thank you! I am so excited.

I touched my face. The options I had available were also a part of my new life.

A knock on the door had me turning toward the hallway. It was André. “Housekeeping let me in,” he said to my surprised expression. “Congratulations, Nadia.”

“Thank you, André.”

“I thought he’d murder me that day we lost you in Versailles.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I told him again.

“It’s all right now. You learning more about getting around?”

“Yes. I’m doing an internship here and practicing French.”

“Oh? Say something.”

“*Quelque chose*,” I told him “something” in French.

He wrinkled his nose, and I laughed with him. His phone chimed and my pulse picked up. “Oui. Merci, Laurence.” He ended the call and turned to me. “Time to go to the office.”

André surprised me with a Peugeot SUV. “We change it sometimes to avoid the press.”

I climbed into the front with him. The office was located in one of the Lutetian limestone buildings, which appeared uniform unless you knew where to go. It took a few minutes before I recognized the gate and plaque that said, “Crane Enterprises Studio”. There were security guards out front and a few photographers on the street. The rumors must have been out that something serious occurred there. There was no sign of broken glass, but there was a locksmith and a security guard out front. Laurence appeared and rushed me through the front door before questions were called out.

The lobby appeared the same—contemporary couches, white walls, and no damage. I followed them to Paul’s office and nothing was disturbed there. *The studio.*

I walked down the corridor and gaped at the scene behind the glass. The baby grand piano was fine, and none of the guitars or drum sets were broken. However, the recording room was disheveled, with cases and drawers opened and some of the equipment missing. Paul walked in and he appeared sullen.

“This is awful,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’ll be okay. It looks worse than it actually is. We have backups on a private server in a different location.”

I gazed around, unsure. “But the computers, the equipment.”

“Yeah. From what my studio manager shared, the recent edits to the Ludwig documentary film are destroyed but can be redone. However, some of the footage we filmed at the castle is missing from here and the German

studio.”

“Are you saying...do you think Ingrid did this?”

“Yes, I am. She didn’t hide it at all. Security video shows her looking at the camera. There were searches for her footage and copies removed. She attempted to steal her documentary so that I wouldn’t be able to use it.” *Why? Why would she destroy something so precious to her?*

I hugged him. “I’m so sorry, Paul. Especially that it was someone you thought was a friend.”

“So am I, but it’s only material things. I’m happy no one was harmed. We’re changing all the security here and replacing the equipment. It will be up and running again in a couple of days.”

“How did she get in?” I murmured.

His brows knitted. “I gave her a key. It wasn’t a break-in, but a break of trust. This is so unlike Ingrid. She’s much better than this—”

“No, she’s not, apparently,” I huffed.

“She thinks she loves me, but we’re better as friends. I thought she believed that, too.” He scrubbed his clenched jaw.

My brows furrowed. “This was her work. She’s hurting herself.”

“Ingrid destroyed it because I *own* the footage. She would have to work with me to finish it. I could, of course, sue her, but I don’t think that would be wise for either of us.”

I snorted. “So Ingrid gets to destroy your property and nothing happens to her?”

“I’ll do something, of course, and soon. There are times when lawsuits are more damaging. I don’t want the publicity or to have to deal with her again. There are many other ways to settle things with her.”

I pursed my lips. “If you say so.”

“I do. Trust me. You have a call to make, and I’d like for us to enjoy dinner somewhere, but first, I want to make sure you’re added as a security exception.”

Paul took me around and introduced me to everyone there. I was photographed and cleared with a pass to every door in the building. Paul shook André’s hand, and we returned with Laurence to the car and back to the house. We climbed out and headed to the front door.

“Paul,” a recognizable voice called from behind us.

We both turned, and there was Ingrid. “Can I please speak with you?” She sniffed, her eyes puffy.

Paul glanced at me. “All right. You can come inside.”

He kissed me, and Ingrid’s loud scoff showed exactly what she felt about us. I just couldn’t believe the extreme measures she enacted to get more time with him. Or maybe to convince him that *she* was better suited to him. We were back inside the house, with Ingrid trailing behind us.

I was about to go upstairs when Paul took my hand. “No. Please, stay.”

“But this is between you and me,” Ingrid clipped.

“We have no secrets,” he said to her, and I remained by his side.

She placed her hands on the back of her denim jeans. “We have no secrets, Paul. This is ridiculous. *You* with *her* is ridiculous. She’s uneducated —”

“Do not insult Nadia in front of me again, or we end this now,” he cut her off in a sharp tone.

I flinched.

“But, come on, Paul. You’ve achieved so much in your life, and so have I. I’m a producer with my own company. We have a similar upbringing. Sure, she’s pretty, but she’s only a child. I mean, she’s only a student at an art college. You have nothing in common with her.”

“You couldn’t be more wrong, Ingrid. I don’t have to justify myself to you, but if you want the truth, Nadia’s selfless love gave me what was missing in my life. She has more warmth, compassion, humor, and capacity for love than any other person I know.”

My chest tightened at his sentiment.

Ingrid grimaced. “But we were really happy in Germany. You can’t deny that.”

“I was happy because I was working on a project with a friend. I was happy because I would get a chance to see Nadia again. That’s what motivated me.”

She turned to me with a wicked smile. “Did Paul tell you we kissed—”

“You tried to kiss me, Ingrid,” Paul said in an even tone. “I told you if you did it again, it would end the collaboration and our friendship.”

She smirked at me. “You don’t believe that, do you?”

I nodded at her affirmatively. “Yes, I do.”

Paul squeezed my hand.

It wasn’t the first time a woman had tried to entice Paul. Linux kissed him in front of me at the Paris studio. Paul not only rejected her, but he fired her, too. Dani warned me this would happen, and I’d have to be prepared for exes

who would try to take him away. What I was sure of was that I could trust him.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand. “So that’s it? You’re just going to marry her? She’s a mistake, just like Aubrey. You even admit that now—”

“Aubrey was never a mistake. You’re making things up—”

“Am I? Like you telling me that you loved me? You did.”

Paul exhaled. “I do, Ingrid, but as a good friend. I love Nadia as my future wife, and that’s what she will become.”

I exhaled and squeezed his fingers.

She placed her hands on her hips. “Then I don’t think it would be fair for you to work on my project anymore. I’m hiring a new producer.”

“You’ve left out that you broke my confidence by breaking into my studio and stealing the footage—”

“It belongs to me—”

“No, it’s my intellectual property, as stated in our contract. I also have film of you removing my footage and equipment for the documentary. I could turn it over to the police, but I won’t.”

She glared at him. “I know you won’t because I’ll tell them your secrets. How you like to watch people have sex.”

“Go ahead,” he said. “It will only make things worse for you. No one in our circles will ever trust you again.”

Her brows knitted, and she chewed her lip.

“You will pay for the repairs and return my work. I’ll send you the bill. The contract stands.”

“You won’t release me from the contract? After what I did?” Her tone was incredulous.

Paul lifted his chin. “No. The Ludwig documentary is *my* work. I own the rights and the footage. Even if you use someone else, it can only be published under my production company. That’s business. Gunnar will be in touch soon.”

Laurence stepped up to Paul’s side, and Ingrid bristled. “You don’t need guards. I considered you a friend when I signed your contract. You took advantage of me, and now I’m stuck with your company. But it’ll be fine... I’ll be fine, even *better*, without you.”

“You will, Ingrid. We all believe that. I worked on your documentary personally because of our friendship, and you violated my trust and

confidence. I will never work with you again or consider you a friend.”

She bobbed her head. “Fine. I’ll never have anything to do with you, either.”

She turned, and I called to her back, “Goodbye, Ingrid.”

“Fuck you,” she hissed and stormed out.

Laurence slammed the door behind her. “So what’s for dinner?”

“Jacque and Lulu’s,” Paul and I said together, and we both laughed and kissed.

Paul rubbed my back. “I didn’t tell you about the kiss—”

“I didn’t tell you about Hayden’s kiss.” My voice was nonchalant.

“He kissed you?” he hissed.

“It didn’t mean enough to share with you.”

Paul sulked, but I pressed my lips to his a few times until he broke into a smile. “Okay. I’m letting it go, but that fucker.”

“I could also get angry and feel hurt, but I’m engaged and maybe pregnant soon.” That brought a smile back to Paul’s face, and he embraced me.

“Really?” Laurence’s face lit up like Christmas.

I smiled. “We’re trying,”

Paul leaned over my ear. “And your period should have started a couple of days ago.”

My cheeks warmed, but I grinned. “You remember that?”

“I don’t forget anything about you.”



CHAPTER 39

Paul sat to the side, and I sat down before the computer monitor and took a deep breath. This was the moment I waited so many years for. *She's a mother. I want to be a mother, too. This is for my future children.* "I'm ready."

Thump. Thump. Thump. My heart pounded against my ribcage. I clicked the FaceTime icon to connect, and after a few moments, she appeared. Celeste. Nora. Her brown hair had bleached sun streaks and covered the scar on her face I'd seen on the photo. Her delicate face, pretty, but fuller than what I remembered as a child. There were lines around her eyes and mouth. She had on no makeup, but her skin was tan and radiant. Her eyes appeared a deep blue. *Blue. I didn't remember them as a deep blue.* Her wide lips twitched as she stared back at me. She adjusted her blazer collar—a nice blue one over one of the smock dresses I'd seen in her video.

"You...you look just like him, like Justus," she rasped. For a second, I could see the stars in her eyes, and I imagined the adoration she might have had for him.

I nodded in agreement. "Yes, I look like him." *And you.*

Her eyes watered and tears fell down her face in a stream. "I...I thought you might have some questions. You can ask me." Her arched brows lifted.

"Did you ever think about me?" My voice wavered.

She nodded and wiped under her eyes. "Uh, yeah...yes I used to often."

Used to. I didn't think much of her when I moved on with my life. *Only*

because I ran into Justus.

“You sew?” she asked.

I smiled. “I do, and I knit. I’m in college at New York City School of Design, and right now, I’m in the middle of an internship at Givenchy in Paris.”

I cringed inside. A part of me still wanted to show her I turned out good, and she had missed out.

Celeste shrugged. “Oh, that sounds good. Good for you.”

Sweat broke across my body, and my stomach twisted in knots. I’d reached the ultimate question—the one I thought about asking a billion times.

...

“Did you miss me? Did you ever regret what you did...?” The answer wasn’t for me, but for that child inside me who was broken—the one who desperately wanted to be good enough to keep. She needed to hear the truth.

Celeste curled her chin under. “I...I was a heroin addict and a high school dropout. My boyfriend beat me and took all the money I had...I turned tricks to feed you, and I got thrown in jail. What did I ever have to give you? I never sold you, though. But no, I don’t regret leaving you or giving you up.”

I swallowed against the lump in my throat. “Good. I’m glad you did.”

She let out a sob, and my pulse sped up, fearing she’d end the call, but she blew her nose into a cloth and stayed.

“Agata, she was real nice, and Darek, too. They were good to you, then?” she asked.

“Yes, wonderful to me.” I nodded and smiled. “They took great care of me.”

“They raised you right, I see. You’re polite...that’s...that’s good,” she bobbed her head. “They wanted to take you; I could see it. They kept doing stuff for us, but I was a stupid kid. I didn’t appreciate it. I thought they’d turn me in to the cops and social services. That’s where I’d been raised; foster homes, group homes. Until I ran away. I wanted better for you.”

I wanted better for you. They were actually the words I needed to hear. I’ve always felt as though she abandoned me. *Ran from me.* But she actually did the opposite. She *gave* me a better future. She *gave* me to people who she knew would love me. *Even though it sounds as though she suffered a lot in her early years.*

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” I gentled my tone.

Her eyes widened, and she smiled at me. “You’re kind, too...yeah, I did

right. I did the right thing giving you to people who could care for you better than I could.” Her shoulders dropped.

I wanted to ask about her kids, but I didn’t know how she’d handle it since she didn’t want me to meet them. So instead, I asked about her family.

“Do I have grandparents?”

“No. They’re dead. Overdosed many years ago. Mama couldn’t stop using even when she was pregnant with me. She went to jail, and I’d heard they were dead during a foster care report one time years ago. But no, you don’t have grandparents.”

“I’m sorry, that’s awful. You’re clean now,” I said. “That’s good.”

She nodded. “It is. I work every day to keep myself good for my family.”

My chest tightened. “Yeah,” I mumbled. “Did you ever look me up?” My voice was hoarse.

“Yeah. One time, I did. I hadn’t graduated from high school, and I hoped you would. I had a friend I knew back in Wisconsin to check at the school, and she said you did.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Yes, and you went to college.” There was a proudness in her tone, and despite her leaving me, it gave me comfort.

I next asked, “Are you from Wisconsin?”

“Illinois, but I ran away. I wanted to see the world. Justus showed me some of it.” Her eyes glazed over. “He told me I was his sunshine until I got pregnant with you.” She wiped her eyes and nose with a cloth.

I waited for her to make eye contact again. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

She wiped her face. “I...I can’t talk anymore. Sorry.”

“Okay...Celeste.”

She hesitated. And at that moment, I saw my life. That face that closed the door of the trailer, the woman I thought I’d see again. She didn’t close that door this time. Her hand touched something next to her on the table, and I recognized it at once. It was a clipped photo of me in New York standing next to Justus at his concert the night I met him. And I knew then that she saw her life as well. *The hard places in life always leave a hole.*

“I hope you’re happy, Celeste. You have a beautiful family.”

“Thank you, Nadia.” She cried into her hands, and I clicked the button to end the call and drew in a breath. Then I went into Paul’s arms.

“How was that for you?”

“It was...what it needed to be.”

I received the answers Nora had for me. Though she said she had no regrets, her cries told a different story. It was a hard life, but she had rebuilt one with a family. That was something I wanted for her. I didn't want her in jail or sick; I wanted her well. And in the end, I wouldn't change anything because it gave me my family.

“Let's call our parents,” Paul suggested.

“Yes, let's do it.”

I didn't need to be enough for Nora or anyone. I didn't need to go far or become something different. *I have a family that loves me.*

And that meant that I was lovable just as I was. Finally, after so many years of wondering, of feeling unlovable, I felt completely content.

My life not only became one of dreams, but even better.



CHAPTER 40

Tomas walked inside the design studio at Givenchy. “Let’s see the ring.”

It had become a teasing habit of his, and two weeks after the proposal. Still, I held out my hand and showed him.

“Lovely. You’re glowing. Is it with love, or do you have other news to share?” He cocked a brow.

“No. At least, not yet.”

We had an appointment with a doctor today for a physical that included a pregnancy test. I had late periods before and spotted when I was on the pill. Paul and I only had hope that we would have a child soon. That was yet another event to plan.

“Yes, I’ll do your wedding dress. You didn’t ask, but I know you want me to.” Tomas interrupted my musings.

I let out a happy yelp and gave him a bear hug. “Oh, my God, yes I do, but I was afraid to ask with all you have to do.”

Tomas never seemed to have a moment where he wasn’t working on something, and he still managed to check in with his team. He was the kind of boss I’d aspire to become one day.

“*Tu es mignon*,” Tomas said, and grinned, when I repeated the words in English, “You think I’m cute?”

“You are. And my offer comes with a condition. You finish the work on the knit collection.”

“Collection?” I squealed.

He nodded. "Come, see what I've done." He presented new sketches, and I was floored. My designs grew into jackets, dresses, and hats. "Some are your designs, and I've also been inspired to add in more of our brand to blend in. What do you think?"

I danced in place. "I think I love it."

Tomas was at the top of his game, a visionary in fashion, an expert tailor, and overall perfectionist. He left me in awe every day, and I was honored to work with him. His confidence in me had grown my skill. "Merci."

"Bien. Because I want you to do more knits. And well, I also want you to work on some couture. We will be moving to awards season, and our A-list clients will need more options."

I pressed my hands to my chest. "Moi?"

"Why not? I was serious when I offered to let you stay. Your dad's better. You work well with the team and take direction. You need to work on your French, but if you're here, you'll become fluent in no time. All approval still goes through me. Not all the designs will be used, and I will change them at will. It's a step into the deep, but you can do more here than in your school. Or are you returning?"

I hunched my shoulders. "I'm not returning this year."

I hated that I disappointed Professor Elan. However, there were still students who were from the boat party there. With the trials ahead, Paul and I decided it would be safer to wait until after the criminal cases were closed and things had calmed down with the press.

"Then there's nothing holding you back but you."

"Tomas, can you look at this?" Josephine came over and took him away to another project. I returned to my workstation, set my portfolio down, and turned my computer on. I was fairly sure I was working on muscle memory, though. "*There's nothing holding you back.*" Twelve months ago, I never would have thought this would be my life. *So incredible.*

Wyatt appeared with Hayden, who I hadn't seen since Monaco. He rushed over to me and gave me a big hug and kisses on each cheek. "*Mes sincères félicitations.*"

"Merci." I beamed at him.

"We talk later?" he raised his brows.

I nodded and he took his seat across from me and went about his own setup. They were both dressed in all black, the uniform around here. Hayden showed way too much chest, but that was him. He stopped at my workstation.

“*Meilleurs vœux à vous deux*, best wishes to the both of you.”

“Merci.”

Hayden leaned over my ear and whispered, “Paul’s a lucky man. You’re the kind of woman you don’t let go.”

A small smile formed on my lips. “*Merci beaucoup*,” I murmured.

Hayden may have had our relationship wrong, but he’d been right about how much I needed Paul. His interference, though unwanted, brought me and Paul closer together, and I know there wasn’t anything I needed to ever hold back from Paul. He truly cared.

Hayden strolled away, joining Tomas at a workstation. “Can I show you what I’m thinking for the Milan fashion show for next spring?” I gathered what he said from what French I now understood.

Tomas returned and handed Wyatt and me a long list of fabrics and materials to make the design sketches they assigned to us. We gave some of the errands over to the new interns. We both laughed together.

“I like not being the brand new interns.”

“Me, too,” Wyatt said. I was happy he’d be here with me until he moved on to Hayden or his own work, which also grew since one of his jackets showed up in a popular streaming movie.

We had made it to the fabric department before Wyatt stopped. “So can I ask you about Xander?”

“Please do.”

Xander had been hushed when I asked him about Wyatt.

“He’s *très gentil*. *Sensuel*. We talk every day, and FaceTime, but I miss him. Would he come here if I asked him to stay?”

“You mean to live together?” I asked.

We gave the order, and the assistant checked that it came in. He cut what we needed to start our work, then we return to the studio.

“Yes, I want us to live together. I know it’s fast, but he has business here. He loves it here.”

“I believe you should tell him what you want. I know Xander never holds back what he’s thinking. And most of all, he really likes you a lot.”

Wyatt smiled, and his face pinked. “Oh, yes. I know...I like him a lot.” He looked away, and I understood that feeling. I had it for Paul. I’d not known I could have him, but I knew I could love him.

I beamed at him. “I believe it’s a great idea, Wyatt.” And how I would love having Xander here all the time. I missed him.

We returned to our station and started cutting fabric and pinning pieces with other assistants. The samples were coming together. We next went to fix issues on almost completed garments. When we finally went to work on our online catalogue.

Wyatt pieced together his strips of fabrics to make a jumpsuit.

I worked on bringing mixed fabric with knits in a more traditional design of solid dark colors. My designs had changed with the influence around me, but most of all, I saw my happiness reflected in my work. My phone chimed in my purse.

Paul: I'm on the way.

A tingle went through my chest at seeing his message. I glanced at my watch. Five hours had passed, and I hadn't even noticed. I packed up and kissed Wyatt's and Tomas's cheeks before walking outside to the waiting car. Outside, Paul signed autographs and took selfies. I was still in awe of how incredibly gorgeous and sexy he was and that he was mine. He saw me and came forward with his arms open, and I went in and squeezed him. "So, ready to find out?"

I climbed into the back. "Yes, but I'm nervous. What if I'm not pregnant?"

"Then we'll handle it." He kissed me.

I nodded and swallowed.

We drove to the clinic and went in through the back door. Dr. Fournier was waiting.

She came forward, and we went inside the room. "I have your records from Doctor Foster in New York. I'm going to examine you and take a blood sample, too, so we have an up-to-date record of your health."

My pulse quickened, and I went to the bathroom to give the urine sample, which was taken away by a nurse. I finished, took off my dress and put on a gown, then climbed on the table. Paul sat on the chair. When the doctor returned, I placed my legs up in the stirrups, and she examined me. Another nurse came in and took a blood sample.

I sat up, and Paul came to hold my hand. "I feel so nervous."

"It will be fine." Paul put on a brave face, but I could feel the tremor in his hand.

I knew I wanted a baby when I lost our first. We had the means and were getting married, but most of all, time was never a promise. My dad was here

now, but I didn't know for how long. I wanted him to hold our baby.

I changed back into my clothes and sat with Paul.

Dr. Fournier returned, and my pulse jumped as Paul stiffened next to me. "Please tell us."

She broke into a smile. "You are pregnant, Nadia."

I jumped into Paul's arms, and he picked me up and turned me around. His eyes shimmered, and I wiped his cheeks and kissed his lips. "You're going to be a father."

"I am," he whispered, his voice faltered. I hugged him tighter, thinking of the anguish he shared when he realized Aubrey wasn't ready for a child. He was so hurt, and I hope in time we'd heal that wound in his spirit.

"There's more." Doctor Fournier called our attention back to her.

I raised my brows, and Paul sat me down on the chair.

"You had spotting when you were pregnant before, yes?"

I cleared my throat. "Yes."

"Since you are possibly seven weeks along—"

"Um...wait. Seven weeks?" I croaked.

"It could be eight weeks, but I'll know more soon once we get your blood test back. You have a history of spotting, and you also had a miscarriage. Because of that, we're going to have to treat this pregnancy as moderate risk."

She said moderate, but I could see from Paul's face he interpreted moderate as high.

"Can I still work?" I asked.

"Yes, but keep the stress at a minimum. I'll have you return again in a week."

I chewed my lip. "Okay."

Paul tensed, but kept quiet, and I knew this wasn't the end of the conversation.

We left the clinic and climbed into the car. The ride back to the duplex was silent. Once we were inside, Paul took my hand and led me to the couch. "I know you want to talk to your mom, but we need to talk first."

"Okay." I folded my hands in my lap. "I'm healthy; the doctor told the both of us. Yes, we have crunch hours at work that are long, but I'm part-time."

"Yes, you are, and I don't want that to change." He tucked my hair behind my ears. "But we also have to put the baby first. Any sign of any

stress, you leave and rest. If you move to high risk, you take a leave of absence. I'm sure Tomas would agree with it. What do you think?"

"I agree with you."

He tilted my chin up. "Really?"

"Yes. We're putting in a studio here, but I will take it easier if necessary. When I said I wanted our child, and for us to have a family, I meant it."

Paul closed his eyes and rested his forehead against mine. "You've made me such a happy man. You will have your career, I promise you. Anything you want is yours."

"Anything we want together, Paul."

His eyes opened, and he gazed tenderly at me. My heart skipped a beat. "Thank you." He took a deep breath and smiled. "Now, let me talk to our child." He pulled my legs up and lifted my dress above my stomach. "Hello, new Crane."

I laughed, and we linked hands over my stomach. Everything was perfect. *Well...almost.* There was something I wanted to do.

"Can we move the wedding up?"

"Up? We haven't even set a date yet," he reminded me.

"I know, but I don't want to hold new Crane on our wedding day. Well, I can, but then if I'm breastfeeding, we would have to bring the baby to the honeymoon—"

"We'll make it sooner than later." His brows furrowed, and I laughed at him.

"Oh, so you want the honeymoon all to yourself, Mr. Crane?"

"New Crane will be there, just not born."

Paul took his phone out and gave orders, but he kept his hand on my stomach, warm and loving. And that was a memory I planned to share with our baby.

You were loved and wanted from the very start.



CHAPTER 41

Two Months Later

We could have had the wedding anywhere, but Paul and I chose New York City. While we fell in love in Paris and romanced in Rome, New York was our beginning. We first met, kissed, and made love here. We shared our darkest time that became a ray of hope. There was no better place to make our forever bond of love.

As I was told, it was tradition for Cranes to marry at The Frick Collection. One look at the museum was instant love. And for Paul Crane, the board of trustees closed it for a week to allow us to prepare for seventy guests in their garden court to celebrate our day. The list had been exclusive to our family and friends, though a few celebrities and dignitaries were included in our event.

Sitting in The Bouchon Room epitomized grandiosity, wealth, and privilege. It was a Rococo-fashioned boudoir, and nothing could be more excessive. But today, it was my dressing parlor. How I ended up here was still baffling. I still felt like a Cudahy girl who knit, trail walked, and laughed at corny jokes with my parents. But Paul Crane fell in love with me and couldn't let me go. He wanted me forever.

"Oh, Nadia, you look so beautiful." Mom's eyes misted. She never wore more than gloss, but today, her eyes were enhanced by a light shadow. Her hair was twisted with a small crystal and diamond ornament above the bun. Tomas also designed her dress—a beige embellished gown of satin, pearls,

and chiffon lace.

“How are you feeling?” The nurse in Mom scanned me for any signs of fatigue. The pregnancy was still at moderate risk, and I had to rest more than usual. I was showing, but the cut of the gown hid some of my baby bump. “I’m fine, Mom, really.”

We were cleared to travel for our honeymoon. Where? I didn’t know. Paul loved to surprise me.

Mags had covered the mirror while styling my hair and makeup. It had taken time for the curls and jewels she added to my long wavy hair. “May I present the future Nadia Crane.” She removed the cover from the mirror with a flourish.

Crane. I’m going to be Paul’s wife. Excitement and joy filled my chest, and my reflection left me speechless.

My hair was a work of art, with pearls and jewels interwoven into my dark waves that were twisted and braided into an elegant chignon. The dress was an off-the-shoulder silk gown with lace organza, caviar beading, pearls, and crystals. She kept the makeup light, with only a muted shadow on my eyes and blush pink gloss on my lips. “Thank you so much, Mags. It’s perfect.”

“I’m happy to be here for you, Nadia. Thank you.”

Tomas and the photographers came in for the shoot. He was impeccable in his tailored suit.

We had considered a remake of my mom’s wedding dress. I laughed, remembering Tomas’s expression when he saw the eighties dress Mom wore on her big day—complete with oversized lace puff sleeves. He compromised by listening to eighties music while his team worked on his design.

“Eighties mom,” he teased her, and she laughed as he kissed her cheeks.

“You look stunning, Nadia.” He kissed my cheek, and Mags fixed it. “Where are the jewels?” he asked.

Harry Winston’s team walked in as if on cue and placed the princess-cut diamond necklace around my neck and cluster diamond earrings in my ears. They were something borrowed.

Our marriage had additions that couldn’t be ignored. Marrying a Crane made me a part of a famous family. That meant a worldwide photo shoot with press. Every stage today had been filmed or photographed, but today’s shoot was for the official release.

I smiled and tried hard not to blink as flashes of light surrounded me. I

was positioned before a decorative mirror, the chaise, and the ornate fireplace, holding my wedding bouquet of white roses and lilies. Our wedding photos would be released globally, and it was daunting to think of so many seeing one of our most private moments.

Dad walked in and did a slow spin in his tuxedo. My heart contracted. He was still thin, but the cancer hadn't returned. He did every treatment and therapy these last few months so he'd be able to walk me down the aisle today.

The photographer positioned my parents next to me, and we held hands. Our happiness shone in our gazes, and I was sure it would be a picture I would treasure always.

"Perfect," Tomas finally said. He kissed my cheeks and Mom's, then shook Dad's hands. "Cecil and I will see you after the ceremony." Mags and the photographers also left to give me a few moments with my parents.

"How about a quick check of wedding traditions?" Mom asked. "You need something new and blue to complete the wedding tradition of love, purity, and devotion."

"Two out of three," Dad half-joked, and Mom scolded him, "It's *all* three. Purity also means transparent. You're going before the world to devote your life together."

We are devoted to each other.

"Paul sent over something blue, Mom."

He gave me a pale blue sheer thong and garter to wear, which I agreed to only if he would remove it. His gift and request, but he wasn't the only one with provisions. He agreed to abstain from sex for two weeks. Sex was something only work could keep him away from, and even that didn't stop him most of the time. I adored him for it.

"I have something for you that I hope will be our family tradition." Mom cleared her throat. "When I was a girl, I dreamed of getting married and having a daughter. It was something I wrote about in my diary, and I kept it all these years. I had hoped that one day, I could give it to my daughter, and she would also dream and get married and give the same to a child of her own." Her hands trembled as she placed an intricate, cast-iron heart-shaped key pin in my palm. "My gift is my book of dreams. This is a key to the diary. I had it made into a pin for you. I hope one day you will make a diary for your children with your hopes and dreams for them. Because with dreams and grace, I have been truly blessed."

The air whooshed out of my lungs. My eyes watered. “Oh, Mom, it’s perfect.”

“We love you so much,” she choked, and dabbed my eyes.

I looked at Dad, who had tears in his eyes. “My best girls.”

She bent down and lifted the skirt and pinned the key at the hem.

For my child, I vowed.

The sound of Elgar’s *Salut D’Amour* filled the air. It was a favorite of Paul’s and a song about love’s grace, and now one of mine. Our passion for each other hadn’t wavered, but deepened to true love. *Love’s Greeting, Salut D’Amour*.

“Outstanding, darling,” Xander trilled, and clapped his hands. He was in an impeccable tuxedo, and even went back to his original dark hair. “I’m here to escort Mom to her seat.” He was also my best person, and he winked at me and pointed to his pocket. He had Paul’s ring.

Mom kissed me and Dad, then left with Xander to take her seat.

Dad held his arm out for me to take. “Shall we?”

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Your life is about to change. In some ways, for the better, but marriage is a long road, and it’s sometimes hard. While he’s financially stable, that doesn’t mean your life will be easy. You’re marrying a man who will come with his own complexities and complications.”

“I know, Dad.”

I’d found that out in the beginning. Paul’s life came with hard times, too. We lived with restrictions and limits, but we were both determined to work on our happiness.

“You can still make a choice, even now. What I need to know is, do you love and want to spend the rest of your life with him?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

I knew Paul Crane. He was bold, passionate, and loving. He was also demanding, stubborn, and a workaholic. There would be times when I would miss him. There would be times when being with him would feel all-consuming. But in the end, there was this amazing, dynamic man who would fill up my life. There was a quote I once read that said, “You don’t marry the one you can live with, you marry the one you can’t live without.”

My life was with Paul.

Dad paused to place the veil over my head as the wedding march sounded.

I took his arm and, together, we left the room for Paul Crane to marry me.



CHAPTER 42

The ionic pillars and crystal chandeliers of vines and lights shone on the silk and rose petal pathway to the grand garden court fountain, where our ceremony would take place. It was as colorful and boundless as a Monet painting through my watery eyes. I floated like mist past the stream of faces in formal gowns and suits. Cranes, business partners, close colleagues, friends, and the photographers for our press release—an extension of Paul’s life I’d only begun to know.

An instrumental of “Here, There, and Everywhere” by The Beatles started to play, and my gaze fixed on the man who captivated me like no other. I could never resist him when he was near. His magnetism radiated, and like a moth to flame, I went to him and let his fire consume me. Even behind my veil, my first glance at him at the front of the aisle took my breath away.

Paul stood on a raised platform like a king holding court. His tuxedo was tailor made to fit him to perfection. His dark waves were brushed back, leaving his gorgeous sculpted facial features on full display. But what enthralled me were his sea-blue eyes. They stared with such sensual penetration; it stripped me bare, tightening things low within me. A wave of desire and emotion rose, taking up every corner of my conscience. My heart raced in my chest, and my stomach quivered.

“Nadia, you’ve stopped walking,” Dad said in a loud whisper, calling me back from my daze. I hadn’t been aware that I stood in the middle of the aisle!

My face burned behind the veil as I took a few quick steps to recover.

Paul left his spot and walked down the aisle, his confident stride as smooth as silk. He shook my dad's hand and Dad left for his seat. Paul lifted the veil over my head and gave me one of his devastating smiles, and my knees went weak.

"Cold feet?" he mused.

"No, not at all. I don't know why I stopped. You look so handsome."

"And you look stunning. We can talk later, after you're mine." His tone was light, but he meant what he said about me belonging to him. Paul was possessive, and it started well before the wedding. While most would feel his sentiments were old-fashioned or destructive, it wasn't him. What he meant by being his was that he'd care for me and treat me like I was special, precious.

"I'm already yours, Paul." My voice graveled and tears stung my eyes.

He lifted my hand and brushed his soft lips against my wrist, then led us to the front of the dais, where our officiator was waiting beneath a canopy of white roses, gardenias, and lilies. Gunnar smiled and winked at me. He stood there next to Paul as his best man. Xander's eyes shone as he waited on my side.

Paul kept my hands in his as our officiator started the ceremony.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to witness this man and this woman joining in the bonds of holy matrimony. Marriage is a sacred and joyous covenant, which they enter today with reverence."

My heart pounded so hard it filled my ears. Paul squeezed my hands.

"Paul Crane and Nadia Sokol chose to share this special day with those close to them. You were invited here to witness one of the most important days in their lives. If you had the pleasure of spending any time with them, you are left without doubt of their loving bond as a couple. It was indeed clear to me that they were committed to spending the rest of their lives together. Paul and Nadia, this ceremony is your promise to each other that no matter what challenges you face, you are not alone. You will have each other. Today, you become one. We will seal the bond by reciting the vows you will hold true in your marital commitment. Do you, Nadia Sokol, take Paul Crane to be your husband."

"I do. I vow to love, honor, obey, and cherish him, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, till death and after."

Xander smiled at me and handed me the band of gold I'd chosen as Paul's

ring.

Paul squeezed my hands to calm me as my trembling fingers slid the band on his finger.

“Do you, Paul Crane, take Nadia Sokol to be your wife.”

“I do. I vow to love, honor, and cherish her, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, till death and after.”

Paul slid a band on my finger, a marquis diamond ring with a blue center like his eyes.

“Now, we will have a reading of the E. E. Cummings poem, ‘I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart)’, by the bride and groom.”

We serenaded each other with a small passage from the poem as we gazed into each other’s eyes. Our love was a sonnet, a poem, a melody of beauty. It was a loving bond aligned with all that gave us life. And in this poetic vow we were devoted, fearless of love’s consuming nature. And even apart, we were never alone because we would carry each other.

We ended by reciting the last lines in unison, “I carry your heart. (I carry it in my heart).”

He mouthed, “I love you.”

My heart swelled.

“If anyone objects to their union, speak now or forever hold your peace,” our officiator said.

Of course, no one dared.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. May I present, Paul and Nadia Crane.”

Paul pulled me into his arms and crashed his lips down on mine. My gasp was lost as his tongue slipped inside and against mine, stroking, tantalizing, arousing. My desire for him took over my senses, and I kissed him back with just as much unrestraint.

The courtyard erupted in cheers, and he broke our kiss with a chuckle and cupped my face, tracing his thumb over my swollen lips.

“You’ve got a long night ahead of you,” he whispered.

“You can do whatever you want with me.”

“I know I can, and I will.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Apparently, you can.” His tone had a hint of frustration. “Two weeks was much too long.”

I grinned. “I’ll make up for it.”

We twisted and turned to each hug and handshake. I strained my ears over the hum of the music and crowd as people flooded forward, introducing themselves as relatives, friends, and business associates. I tried to give each person an enthusiastic “Thank you for coming.”

Paul touched my arm. “Pace yourself, Mrs. Crane.”

My chest fluttered, and I grinned. “I love being called Mrs. Crane.”

“I know you do.” He hugged my waist, and I closed my eyes. *This is perfect.*

“Nadia.” Darling came forward and kissed my cheek. She looked beautiful in her rose sheath dress. “When you stopped in the aisle, we all thought you were about to make a break for it. Paul had to drag you the rest of the way.”

My brows rose. “I wasn’t going to run away. I love Paul very much.”

Darling laughed. “I’m messing with you. You have to stop making it so easy for me.”

“And you have to stop teasing her,” Paul scolded her.

“Oh, doesn’t it feel good to have you on the receiving end?” Jonas said, walking up with a laugh. He hugged Paul and kissed my cheek. “You make a stunning bride, Nadia. I told Paul he’d be a fool to let you go. We’re so happy to have you in our family.”

“Thank you, Jonas.”

Lily kissed my cheeks. “You look so beautiful.” She dabbed her eyes. “It was such a lovely ceremony. Please come back to Neverland soon. We miss you.”

“I miss you all, too.”

Paul kissed Lily. “We will soon, I promise.”

Gunnar came, and he hesitated in front of me, but I hugged him tight. “Thank you so much for everything.”

He hugged me back. “You and your children will make our family sweeter and kinder. We’re happy to have you.”

Paul hugged him. “Thank you.” As I looked beyond Gunnar, my eyes landed on Dani.

Once Gunnar stepped aside, Dani grabbed me and held me in a long hug. “I stood up for my son all those months ago, Nadia, because that’s what mothers do. But I am so, so thankful that he found you. That you didn’t give up on him and the crazy that comes with the last name of Crane. I love you and am thrilled to welcome you as my new daughter.”

At her words, my throat clogged. “Thank you, Dani. I love you, too. You taught me how to protect my future children, and I will do so to the best of my ability.”

“I know you will. My son and your children are going to be in very safe hands.” She kissed my cheek and continued on to Paul, wrapping her arms around his waist.

Cecil, Chef Renault, and Ben, the long list of family and friends, congratulated us. There were also Cranes I hadn’t met before, who gave us more well wishes, until the wedding planner appeared to move us along.

We left the group to return to the formal hall for photos. Paul holding me in his arms, kissing me. And every moment, it hit me. This would be my forever.

We headed into the music room next to the courtyard. It was an elegant hall of gold tapestry walls, velvet curtains, and sconce lighting. A grand piano had been set up on the small stage with a string quartet, with the pit area of polished wood that was sectioned off for us to perform the first dance. Our wedding planner, Will, with hosts and hostesses, was already arranging for guests to find their seats.

A pianist started to play, and Bianca appeared in a shimmering gold gown, smiling as she came on the stage with a microphone. “Congratulations to Paul and Nadia. Lorenzo and I knew the moment Paul walked up the hill with Nadia in Rome to meet us that he was hopelessly in love, but so, so stubborn.”

Everyone laughed.

“But there’s so much love between you two, and it’s the kind that can last. On your special day, we all wish to remember you today this way.”

The pianist started to play, and she sang Lady Gaga’s *Always Remember Us This Way* as we slow danced. I was transported to the many times I was in his arms—and how I never will have to be away from them again.

I was the first to cheer and break into loud applause when the song ended. The band came on, and Paul spun us around the grand parlor as others joined us. The candelabras around the stage glowed like stars in the dim light, giving the room a warm ambiance. There was nothing more perfect.

“Our new rule is you stay naked the whole honeymoon.” Paul’s voice lowered to his deep, intimate tone, enough to cause a shiver to course through my veins and an ache to throb between my legs. His lips turned up in a knowing smile as he stared back at me. “You like that idea.”

“I do, but you haven’t even told me where we’re going yet.”

“To the end of the world.”

I playfully scolded Paul, but then danced with Dad and next, Jonas. I couldn’t catch my breath. Paul was also busy as he danced with Mom, Lily, and Dani. But he came to check on me. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” I admitted. He took my hand and led me to the dinner. Chef Renault had taken over to give us his four Michelin star award-winning dinner with French favorites: *coq au vin*, *foie gras*, scallops and lobster, with some vegetable and vegan options. Paul placed chocolate mousse on my plate—chocolate had been my latest craving. He lifted a spoonful and fed me, then pressed his lips to mine.

“Delicious,” I whispered against his lips.

Paul studied me. “You need rest.” He rose and called over the wedding planner. “Nadia’s ready to throw the bouquet.”

He quickly hustled a group together.

I stood and went into the hall, and waited for the photographers, then looked at all my friends and family. Xander, Dad, Mom, Lily, Jonas, Darling, Dani, Alan, Gunnar, Lorenzo, Bianca, Tomas, Cecil, Wyatt, Laurence, Ben, and Opal. There were also new friends. My world was expanding, and life was getting so much richer. I was truly grateful.

I closed my eyes and threw the bouquet but reopened them in time to watch Darling catch it and dance. Jonas immediately took it away and threw it at someone else.

“Dad, it’s just flowers.”

We all laughed at him.

“Darling’s fifteen. Slow down, everybody.”

Lily wrapped her arm around Jonas and his face softened, and he kissed her.

Paul’s arms closed on my shoulders, and he gently tucked me into his side and moved us forward. “Thank you all for coming. We are sincerely grateful. Please enjoy the rest of the night.”

Laurence came up to us with four security guards, who surrounded us as we moved out to the front of the building. The press was still in position behind the barriers outside. We walked together as a unit to an awaiting Bentley.

Paul helped lift my dress inside the car door and placed me on his lap before Laurence closed the door. I shivered as his hand slid up my leg and

under my dress, closing around the garter.

“You forgot to throw it,” I said and sucked in air. I could feel his erection beneath me, and my inner muscles clenched in want. I moaned and closed my eyes, writhing on his lap.

“You teasing me, Nadia? I’ll fuck you right here.” He kissed my neck roughly and worked a hand under the top of the tight bodice. His fingers lightly traced one of my hard nipples, and my breath came fast.

“I’ll take my thong first.” He reached under my dress, grabbed the front of the thong, and yanked, tearing it off. He inhaled sharply as he brought the strip of fabric out from under the dress. I stared down at the ruined underwear in his right fist. “Mmm, you smell so good. I should fuck you right here.”

“Mmm, do it. Who cares who sees us?” I urged him.

Paul laughed. “I love you, Nadia.”

My heart skipped a few beats. I’d never get enough of hearing Paul telling me he loved me. *Dress be damned*. There wasn’t a thing in this world I wouldn’t do for him.

“I love you, too, Paul.”

I took a seat and belted in. We held hands as we rode away in the car to the airport, where we would take off for the honeymoon. “Now, tell me where we’re going.”

“Seychelles,” he finally shared, and I beamed at him.

“Wow, really?”

“Yes. We’ll have the beach to ourselves. I also have doctors on call and an emergency plan for you and the baby. Doctor Foster said it was okay.”

I kissed him. He always planned everything.

Opening gifts would come later, but there was an envelope that we received from Doctor Foster’s office after she performed the ultrasound. He took out the envelope from his suit. It had the sex of our baby.

“How about we wait until we arrive at the honeymoon?” Paul teased me.

I grimaced. “No. I want to know now.”

He was just as impatient, but we decided to tear the envelope open together.

Congratulations on a boy!

I screamed, and Paul’s eyes filled with tears.

“We’re having a boy,” his voice graveled. He reached over and placed his hand on my small bump.

“Yes, we are.” My hand closed over the top of his.

Welcome, baby Crane, to our family.



EPILOGUE

A year later

“Go time,” Gunnar said when security came for us in the back room at the courthouse. We were led up the aisle, past the rows of mahogany benches that were already filled with public spectators, media influencers, and press. Phones were not allowed in the room, but a court photographer was capturing the case. We sat behind Dale, who was the lead prosecutor. Whispers rose around us. I adjusted my dark glasses, and for the most part, ignored them. I hadn’t attended every sentencing, but I wouldn’t miss today’s.

Sophie was seated with two defense lawyers. Her hair was cut into a pixie cut, and she squared her shoulders and glanced behind her. For a second, she paused on me. Her face was blank. I hadn’t expected more from her.

An elderly woman wearing a black robe walked up, and we all rose. A clerk came to stand in front of the podium, facing us. “The District Court of the State of New York is now in session. The Honorable Judge Anna Mann presiding.”

“You all may be seated,” Judge Mann announced.

“Today is the sentencing hearing for New York State vs. Sophie Wilks. Ms. Wilks, you have already pled guilty to the crime of prostitution and the procurement and distribution of drugs. The court has agreed to consider your help in the cases against Mr. Styles and Mr. Livingston in their sex trafficking and racketeering cases. However, your assistance does not completely absolve you of your crimes. You violated the trust of young girls;

some were found to be as young as fourteen. You led them down a path they couldn't escape easily. While you are not charged with being involved in child prostitution, your acts contributed to irrevocable harm to many young women. Do you have anything left to say before sentencing?"

Sophie stood and straightened her spine. "I'm sorry for the harm I caused to everyone."

"You have been sentenced to five years. You will begin your time today and be transported to FPC Alderson in Florida for no less than twenty-seven months. You are eligible for parole in eighteen."

Sophie sobbed into her hands. It was the first emotion I'd ever seen from her. She stood and was handcuffed, then led out the side door.

The court adjourned, and I squeezed Gunnar's hand. "Thank you."

"She deserved more time, but Dale assured she helped bring down many patrons. Her information was essential."

It was how Landon and Trevor ended up in jail. Landon got twenty-five years, Trevor twelve years; however, the longest sentence came for Louis Ralls, with thirty years to life for the abuse of minors. His wife Christina had disappeared from the public eye soon after that, but in her statement, she realized he was guilty as charged. The chapter was closed now, and a weight lifted off my spirit.

We walked out the side door in the back with Ben, and Gunnar gave me a hug. "You take care of yourself, Mrs. Crane."

He'd turned out to be one of my greatest confidants and a good friend.

I kissed his cheeks. "See you soon."

Ben pointed at an ice cream place down the road. "Strawberry or chocolate?"

"You know I have no control."

"Nadia Crane?"

Crane. I still got a rush of excitement at hearing my new name. An elegant, middle-aged woman in a pantsuit came close. Her eyes were brimmed red.

"I hoped I'd get to see you. I suppose you don't remember me, do you?"

I blinked. "No, I don't. Sorry."

"I'm Sophie Wilks's mom. We met on orientation day."

Ben stepped close to me and put his hand out. "Don't step any closer."

She stiffened. "I'm not here to cause trouble. I'm sorry about what happened to you. Sophie wants you to know she's sorry." She wiped her eyes

with the handkerchief in her hand. “She was taken advantage of too. She’s not from here, either...like you.”

Everyone knew my story because of the criminal and civil trials, not to mention being the new wife of Paul Crane. We also did our own interview to make sure everyone got our story right. However, there was nothing left to say.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Wilks.” I walked on with Ben, leaving her staring after me.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“That went better than I expected.” Mrs. Wilks knew I was part of why her daughter went to jail for her crimes. I didn’t know much about what Sophie would go through, only that my birth mom Celeste had found a new path after she left incarceration. I hoped the same for Sophie.

I glanced over my shoulder and caught Isabelle placing her arm around Mrs. Wilks. Isabelle’s testimony was the most damaging for Landon and Sophie, but in the end, she was there for Sophie’s mom. They had a relationship I didn’t understand or care about anymore. She had changed her name to Belle, and from what I heard, moved to Florida and opened a swim shop there. It was over, and I would finally put it all behind me.

We got in the car and drove to New York School of Design. I hadn’t expected my life would change so much when I arrived here almost two years ago. I quickly walked to Professor Elan’s lecture and sat at the back of the new student orientation. A few students turned and eyed me curiously, but as usual, Professor Elan strolled in with a commanding presence. All focus went to her at the podium.

“You were chosen for your potential. Half of you will quit before the end of your first year, and the odds of any of you having a career after graduation are even less. Still, at least a few of you will exceed all expectations and rise to the level you need to become a fashion designer. And like I tell everyone every year, you only design because you love it.”

Even though her speech was quite bleak, I still remember feeling inspired. I was going to have my own store one day. That was as far as I dreamed then—limited to my experiences. Now I knew I could do anything, not because I was Mrs. Crane, but because I loved design.

“We have Yin Xao, design lead at Magnum Studios in Hollywood. Did you see the Oscars for the movie *Bohemian Nights*? That was him. We have Dionne Brown, who is the director of design at Dior. Xander, who no longer

uses his last name, has accessories everywhere.” She showed a slide of Xander, with empty shops in Paris, Milan, and West Village.

“He sold out before even having an official shop. And we have a first year working at Givenchy Paris, Nadia Crane. I used to make fun of her knitting, but look at what she has done.”

The screen changed to the knit collection online at Givenchy. Under Tomas’s mentoring, my design grew.

“But that’s not all she’s doing. Nadia’s copper dress won her first year, and if you look at Givenchy, you will see her collaborative work there.”

The screen changed to one of the recent couture collections on a runway in Milan. It had been one of my favorites. Givenchy had the best; every day, I was in awe to be a part of their team.

“She must continue with couture because she has what it takes to be one of the greats.”

I knew that the last line was specifically for me. I was both shocked and extremely grateful. Her belief in me...had transformed me, and I was truly in her debt.

The orientation ended, and students rushed up to meet Professor Elan. She was a big name for the college. She waved away the students trying to get her attention. “Sign up to speak with me during my office hours. I have no time now.”

I walked down the aisle and waited as she packed up, then she turned to me with a warm smile. “Now, here is a woman who loves design,” she said to the students who were still there, and I basked in her top praise. “So, you’re staying in Paris?”

“Yes, I am.”

“But you’re here with me?”

“Because I want to talk to you about a sponsorship exchange program—a new foundation I want to set up with the school.”

She scoffed. “You think I have time to do more work?”

“I won’t ask more of you than you ask of us students.” We laughed.

“Okay, Nadia, but don’t we have a program?”

“Yes, but not with someone on the ground willing to help the students. I will be in Paris; I can help your program do whatever it’s missing. We can make it even better.”

The program had been cut in funding and resources because of recent cuts to the arts and education. It was unlikely anyone could afford to stay in Paris.

I couldn't if it hadn't been for Paul. Thankfully, after the civil lawsuit settlement with Landon's business and the liquidation of his assets, I personally had millions for the project, and he wouldn't be needing it.

Professor Elan smiled at me. "Now I want a hug from you."

I hugged her tightly, then waved my eyes. "I'm feeling emotional." Her belief in me lifted my confidence to take more risks in my designs. She saw something I hadn't seen or known I could do back then.

I left some information with her and left the room with Ben at my side. I always went with security—it had become a part of my life. The good thing was Ben had become a good friend and a great uncle to our boy, Miles. We walked down the corridor, and I glanced toward Xander's old dorm building, and my heart panged. I missed him, even though I saw him often in Paris. My phone vibrated in my purse.

Xander: So what did Professor Elan say?

Nadia: She was reluctant, but I think she will do it.

Xander: She will. Wife, mom, designer, and now philanthropist. Who are you?

Nadia: A happy woman. She showed your work too.

Xander: I know. I sent her the pictures.

I laughed. Of course, Xander did. He never stopped promoting.

Xander: Wyatt says bonjour.

Nadia: Bonjour to you both. See you soon.

Xander: We miss you.

Nadia: Miss you and love you both. SYS.

Wyatt worked full-time with Hayden now, so I didn't get to see him as often. But Xander and Wyatt bought a home together in Paris, so I still saw him regularly. A wedding was definitely in the works, and knowing Xander, his biggest problem was limiting guests when he made friends every day.

"Paul and Laurence are on their way," Ben told me when we reached the sidewalk.

The Bentley pulled up a few minutes later, and Paul stepped out with our baby Miles in a baby carrier strapped to his chest. Paul was a hands-on dad and even took him to his office.

“Miles wanted to be here to see you on your big day as a new Crane Foundation leader.”

Philanthropy was a big part of life as a Crane, and we all tried to work to give more back to the world.

“Miles Darek Jonas Crane.” I went over and kissed Paul and kissed my sweet baby. It was shocking how much he looked like Paul with his head full of dark wavy hair and those sea-blue eyes. However what really surprised me was how great the love I carried for our baby was. It was immense. And so was my love for his dad.

Paul grinned at me. “What are you thinking about?”

“How happy I am with us,” I told him.

Paul took my kiss and kissed Miles, who giggled.

I tickled under his cute little chin. “Ready to spend time with your grandparents?”

Miles was making the rounds. Our parents all wanted time with their grandson. This time, Wisconsin. My home.



On the plane’s descent, nerves tumbled in my stomach. After everywhere I’d been, Milwaukee was the place that left me humble. I arrived on a bus with my teenage mom, cold and hungry. And at the downtown bus depot, my life changed. And though I don’t remember it all, one thing rang true. My dad took one look at us and cared. He reached out without reserve and gave us a place to stay and food to fill our bellies. He took me to my mom, who opened her arms and gave me my first real hug. It was so full of warmth, I wished I could stay, that she’d keep me. That was why I now thought the moon cookie story wasn’t all made up. My parents’ instant love for me made Celeste believe she wasn’t doing right by me. She gave me up that fateful day in the parking lot and changed the trajectory of my life.

Celeste gave me to parents who would love me unconditionally. In many respects, she made an extremely selfless and wise decision, and even though I had always seen it as abandonment, now I could only be grateful. She gave me the chance of an incredible life.

“Nadia,” Paul said, calling me back from my thoughts. We had to prepare for the press leaving the plane. It was the public part of our lives, something I had slowly but surely adapted to.

I strapped on the carrier and kissed the top of Miles’s head while Paul warmed my back. Laurence and Ben walked out first, and we grouped out to the tarmac and the car. I covered Miles with a light blanket as camera flashes went off. Paul had a firm grip on my hand. He was our warrior, ready to protect us. Still, we smiled and waved because we were happy. No matter what life had thrown at us, we were together.

Inside the car, we strapped Miles into his seat. We both kissed his cheeks and looked at each other, electricity sparked, and the current between us grew stronger. “What are you staring at, Mommy?”

“You, Daddy,” I teased him back. His gaze darkened, and his mischievous smile appeared, which made my pulse quicken. And I knew he was thinking about sex. “Yes, please.”

“Mmm, beg for me,” Paul murmured.

I leaned across the seat. “Please, my love.”

Miles cooed, grabbed my hair, and pulled. Hard.

“Ouch,” I gently clasped his little hand and untangled my hair, then kissed the back of it. “He’s grabbing everything.”

“Good boy, Miles,” Paul joked, and we laughed. I gave him a rattle, and he shook it wildly.

Paul picked up another rattle from a pocket in his carrier and added a rhythm. “Miles, will you be a musician like your daddy?”

Miles cooed. Paul kissed and smiled at him lovingly, “He’s beautiful.”

I nodded. “Miles looks just like you.” It was uncanny.

“Yeah, beautiful, like me,” he teased. “Well, Miles, tell Mommy you want a little sister that looks just like her.”

“Tell Daddy I’m hoping that will happen soon,” I pretended to tell Miles. Paul and I had only grown closer, more confident in us as a couple, and thoroughly loved being parents. I was keen to have another child and hoped there would be confirmation of that soon.

Paul picked up my hand and kissed my wrist. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Glancing out the window, we were on the highway, and I could see the exit that led to my parents’ former house ahead.

I pressed the call button for Ben. “I’d like to stop at the Cudahy house,”

catching him just before he turned off to head toward downtown Milwaukee. Just that simple action was a change for us. Paul trusted my decisions, and I knew he'd always be there to support me.

My neighborhood had stayed the same. It was still beautiful rows of craftsman's houses. The tree-lined street had leaves of all colors showcasing the fall. Ben stopped out front, and I gazed lovingly at our two-story home. Even now, I could see myself rushing down the road heading home, where Dad and I would enjoy a cup of tea and a chat. It was where I learned to knit and sew, where I dreamed. Where I ran to when I was afraid of my love for Paul, but now there was no uncertainty as I stepped outside the car with Miles in my arms. He was mine.

I kissed Miles's forehead. "This is where I started."

"It's a lovely house," Paul said, joining me on the sidewalk and rubbing my back.

I leaned my head on his shoulder. At one time, I couldn't imagine him here, but now, there wasn't a part of my life without him.

A couple of my old neighbors came out and over to us, where Paul took selfies, and they congratulated us.

"Tell your parents we miss them over here."

"They miss you all too," I told them, and we returned to the car.

We rode through the streets and back on the highway. And in a short time, we were on Lake Drive, pulling up to the gate of my parent's new house. It was a neighborhood we drove through for many years to see the beautiful houses on our way to the beach, trailing, a show, or just a long walk.

Ben pressed in the code, and we drove up the circular driveway. It was a stone-pillared mansion with rows of windows and shrubbery. I'd thought it was too much, but then I saw the flowers my mom had planted. She had made it her home and was obviously relishing retirement and the ability to spend hours in her garden. It brought her so much joy, so I was thankful.

Mom was stacking flyers for the Birthday Wishes charity she and Dad had started to help kids in need. On seeing us, though, she threw up her arms and rushed towards the car. "You're here."

"We are," Paul said as he climbed out.

She kissed and hugged him. "I'm so happy you're here."

My heart warmed at the sight of Mom with Paul. They had come a long way. I got out, Miles reached for Mom, and she immediately took him from

me. “You’re growing up so fast, Miles.” She kissed his forehead. “Laurence, good to see you again.”

“How are you, Agata? He asked her.

“Great. We made plenty of food just for you.”

Laurence chuckled and rubbed his hands together. “I’m ready.”

Mom grinned, then went over to Ben. “I know you said you’re not dating, but—”

“Mom, come on,” I told her, and we all laughed.

“If she’s just like you, I’m interested,” Ben said, winking at her.

Mom blushed. “You go on in and relax. No one’s sending you out anywhere. You’re on vacation, too.”

“Where’s Dad?” I asked her.

“He’s helping your Uncle Jan babyproof everything.”

“Good plan. Miles is crawling everywhere.” Peering inside the foyer, there were many toys. “You’re going to spoil him.”

“He doesn’t have to play with them all, and most are for the charity.”

Dad appeared, and I hugged him. “How are you, Daddy?”

“Great now.” He walked over and kissed Miles. “Hello, little guy. I have so many jokes to teach you.”

Dad was doing okay, but he still had doctors and nurses around. He wasn’t completely well, yet, but he certainly had a new lease on life. He started baking again, something he’d missed, and it was a welcome scent that made this place feel like home. And had given Dad much joy.

“Come, Paul. Show me how to play ‘Heart and Soul’ on the piano.”

“You have a piano here?” Paul asked, surprised.

“Yes,” Dad said. “I want to hear you play your new songs. You sent a few, and I enjoyed them.”

Paul’s smile broadened, and he squeezed Dad’s shoulder. We both knew Dad preferred folk rock music. “Thank you, Darek.”

Dad kissed and pinched Miles’s cheeks while he cooed, then went back inside the house.

Before we could follow him, Mom stopped us. “I have a surprise. Follow me.”

Mom cuddled Miles, and we followed her around the side of the house to a gazebo. There was our porch swing! It was the very one that Mom held me in when I came to stay forever with them. “I couldn’t let it go.”

I rubbed Mom’s back, “I’m glad you didn’t.”

She went up the short stairs, sat down with Miles, and began to hum, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Just like they'd done for me a hundred times when they gave me a home.

I placed my arm around Paul and whispered. "Let's wait."

He stood with me and watched as Mom rocked Miles in her arms. It didn't take long for him to fall fast asleep. And my life came full circle again. I understood what Miles felt in my mom's arms.

Home.

He already learned he didn't need to go far to find it.

Home was inside the hearts of all who loved us, and like Dorothy said in The Wizard of Oz, there was no place like it.

"Thank you, Nadia," Paul said, cuddling me close.

"What for?" I asked, curious about his quiet words.

"For this. For giving me so much joy. For giving me a home, something that cannot be bought, something you've simply created in your love for me and our son. You are so precious to me, and I will always be thankful that you came back to me."

"There was never any choice, Paul. You too, are my home. My love. My forever."