

## Je Serai de Retour

He was the most beautiful man Ana had ever seen.

While the rest of the crowd swarmed the rope partition fighting for a view of the Mona Lisa, he remained on the fringe, a corduroy-clad knee propped on the circular bench. Michelangelo's David come to life.

And he was staring at her.

Awareness washed over her. Barely an adult, she might not be as experienced as the other girls on the trip, but even she recognized the strum of the instant attraction.

Finally, she thought. Something exciting.

Until now, her grand tour had been duller than dull. Her chaperone, Madame Debussy took the job of protecting her charges' virtues way too seriously, no doubt inspired by a hefty bonus from Ana's brother, Theodore. Thus, the past month had been long on cathedrals and museums and short on adventure, leaving Ana ready to pull her hair out just to alleviate the boredom. For crying out loud, here men were being shot into outer space, and she wasn't allowed to sit in a café by herself.

This trip was supposed to be her chance to experience life. *Freedom*. Lord knows, she wouldn't experience any when she returned to the States. Theodore would have her under lock and key until he found her a suitable husband to manage her fortune, and then, that man could keep her under lock and key.

She stole another look at her David. Theodore would never find him suitable, despite his beauty. Her brother would say that his dark hair was too shaggy, and his clothes were too mod. That no real gentleman would stare so openly at a woman while in a public place. Ana didn't care if he was the most dangerous man in the world. She only cared that his stare made her heart race.

After checking to make sure Madame Debussy wasn't watching, she baked away from the crowd, until she, too, stood at the fringe.

"Beautiful no?" a voice said in French from behind her. She didn't need to turn around. The shiver trickling down her spine, told her exactly who was talking. "They say it took da Vinci years to paint her smile just so."

"He was a perfectionist," she replied.

"Perfectionist. Artist. Same thing, are they not?"

"Not always. The world is full of bad art." Turning, she offered a smile. Up close, she saw that her mystery man wasn't much older than her. A year or two at most with features that were still boyish. His eyes, however, were as old as time. The color of chocolate, they burned with intensity that, up to now, Ana had only read about in the dime-store novels. This stranger had passion. Determination. Self-confidence.

*Theodore would definitely disapprove.*

And she, unworldly as she was, should feel out of her league, but she didn't. If anything, his passion ignited a fire inside of her.

"Is this where you tell me that your art is the exception?" she asked.

It was his turn to smile, and darn if it wasn't as beautiful as the rest of him. "What makes you think I'm an artist?"

Because, what else could he be? “Wild guess,” she replied. “Either that or the stuff about Mona Lisa’s smile is a very practiced pick up line.”

“Not so practiced, apparently, since you caught me,” he said with a laugh. “Believe it or not, you’re the first person I’ve tried it on. I don’t usually come to the museum to meet girls.”

Common sense would say not to believe him, that his response was simply another practiced line, but a blush warmed Ana’s cheeks anyway. “Do you come to the Louvre often?” she asked, only to internally cringe. Her question was almost as corny as his line about perfection.

“As often as I can afford. I like to study the various techniques.”

“So you *are* an artist.”

“I put paint on canvas,” he said. “I’m still working on the artist part. But some day though, you’ll see my work in a museum.”

“Right next to Mona Lisa?”

“Oh, no. Da Vinci is too old school. I’d much rather be with Braque and the other cubists.” His brow furrowed. “You don’t know who I’m talking about, do you?”

*Not a clue*, but she liked the way he answered with conviction, as though success was inevitable. Most of the boys back home couldn’t think beyond the weekend let alone picture their future. Quickly she ran through what little art history she knew from school only to come up blank. That would teach her to zone out during class. Then again, how was she to know she’d one day be talking art with a handsome stranger?

“Like Picasso.”

“Oh.” Him, she’d heard of. Vaguely. “*That* cubism.” She could tell from his chuckle, that he knew she was fudging.

Thank goodness for the tour guide. The neatly uniformed woman chose that moment to speak up, saving Ana from making a bigger fool out of herself. “If everyone has taken a picture, we’ll move on to the next room.” Like a giant, murmuring cloud, the group began moving toward the doorway. In the center of the throng, Ana spied her friend, Elizabeth, looking around for her.

“Your tour is leaving,” her stranger said.

“I...” *Not yet*, a voice in her head protested. There was a charge in the air – an overwhelming sense of serendipity – that told her walking away now would be the biggest mistake of her life. “I can see a bunch of old paintings any time,” she said.

From the relief that flooded his features, she knew she made the right choice. “Yes,” he said. “You can.”

Having settled the issue, the two of them fell silent, content to lose themselves in each other’s smile.

“I don’t know how long I will have,” she said after a moment. “Madame Debussy has eyes like a hawk. She’ll notice I’m gone.”

“We could always run the other way.”

Don’t tempt her. All he had to do was ask. “I don’t even know your name,” she realized. And yet, here she was ready to run off with him.

“Nigel,” he replied. “Nigel Rougeau.”

*Nigel*. So much nicer than David. More handsome too. “I’m Ana Duchenko.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Ana Duchenko.”

She waited for the light of recognition in his eye. In America, the name Duchenko was as famous as Rockefeller and Kennedy - as her brother never failed to remind her. None came. Either he was a very practiced grafter or he truly did not recognize the name. Oh, how she hoped it was the latter.

She gasped as he pressed the back of her hand to his lips. Warmth ran up her arm and spread through her body. Was it possible for a person to fall in love after thirty seconds, she wondered.

Meanwhile, Nigel was grinning over her fingers. “There. We know each others’ names; that means we can run away.”

“Where should we go?” At this point, she’d settle for a quiet corner of the museum where Madame couldn’t find her easily.

“Anywhere you want. The Champ Elysees? The Tower? The Moon?”

“Oh the moon for sure,” she replied with a giggle. “We can win the space race. The first artist and tourist in outer space. We’ll need space suits though.”

“No worries. I happen to have a set at my studio.”

“You do?”

“But of course. I keep them hanging on a hook on the door. One never knows when they might run into a fellow astronaut.”

“And your rocket ship?”

“Parked on the roof, of course. Where else would one keep their rocket ship? That way you don’t have to walk very far in the suit.”

“How practical, and since it is parked above your studio, perhaps you can paint my official portrait before we blast off as well. “

“I would love to paint you.”

“Nothing too elaborate though. I wouldn’t want to delay take off. We never know what kind of traffic we’ll run into up there.”

To her surprise, Nigel didn’t smile at her joke. “I’m serious,” he said. “Your face was born to be on canvas.”

As compliments went, a man couldn’t give much better. Telling a girl she deserved to be immortalized? “I don’t think Madame would let me out of her sight for that long,” she told him. “We’d have better luck going to the moon.”

“She can’t watch you twenty four hours a day, can she?”

“Certainly feels like it.” In fact, Ana was pretty sure the only time she wasn’t watching, was when they were locked in their rooms to sleep.

“Anastasia! There you are. Madame is looking for you.”

Speak of the devil. Elizabeth’s sensible heels sounded like taps as she hurried across the exhibit floor. “I told her you were in the ladies room,” she said, her attention moving from Ana to Nigel and back.

So much for serendipity. “I better go,” Ana said. Her heart sank as she said the words. She would leave and their paths would never cross again.

Nigel must have come to the same thought, because he suddenly reached for her hand to hold her in place. “Can I see you again?”

It was crazy. There were to strangers who’d known each other but a few minutes. And yet as soon as he asked, Ana knew the answer had to be yes. She

didn't just want to see him again, she *needed* to, and from the silent pleading in his eyes, he felt the same urgency.

"I'll have to come to you," she said. "Where is your studio?"

As he whispered the address, Ana listened with an intentness she never applied to my school lessons. She was determined to forget her own name before she forgot how to find Nigel Rougeau again.

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It took some finagling not to mention buying Eliabeth's silence, but Ana managed to sneak away after Madame declared lights out. Her body trembled with excitement as the taxi sped along the crooked roads toward Montmartre. She couldn't believe she was actually breaking the rules to meet a man she barely knew.

Disobedience had never felt more right.

Nigel's address, which she'd memorized so acutely, was in the old artist's neighborhood. These days, however, Van Gogh and his kind had been replaced by a different kind of bohemian. They filled the stoops despite the late hour, their heavy-lidded faces turned toward the night sky, clove cigarettes trapped between their fingers. In the rearview mirror, Ana saw the taxi driver arch his brow, silently asking if she had the right address. This wasn't the type of neighborhood well-bred women visited, he seemed to be saying.

*Oh, but it was*, Ana wanted to reply. She smiled and handed him the fare plus a sizeable tip. Something she'd learned from watching her brother. Money bought cooperation.

A pretty blond in a paisley dress and bare feet smiled at her when she reached the steps.

"So you're the one," she said in an English accent. "We've been wonderin'."

The comment stopped Ana short. "Excuse me?"

"Nigel's been cleanin' his flat like a madman since this afternoon. Figured it had to be somethin' for him to pick a broom over his brushes. He's on the top floor." She pointed to the door, her cigarette ember lighting the way. "Go ahead in. Doors unlocked."

Inside wasn't much more than a dingy corridor and a stairway better suited to a Hitchcock movie than a romantic rendezvous. The fleur de lis paper lining the stairwell was yellowed from smoke and time. There was no elevator. At least none Ana could see.

As she stepped on the bottom step, the wood groaned loudly. This was a bad idea. Coming here alone. What if she'd read Nigel all wrong? No one knew where she was. Like an idiot, she didn't tell anyone the correct street address, not even Elizabeth. The idea was to protect her privacy in case Theodore or Madame started asking questions. She should have thought about protecting her safety.

Suddenly, somewhere upstairs, a door opened, filling the stairwell with music. "Ana?" a familiar voice called. "Is that you?"

Nigel's head peeked over the railing above her, his smile illuminating the stairwell. "You made it!" he said. "I'd hoped but wasn't sure.... Come up! Come up!"

The sound of his voice erased Ana's misgiving disappeared and, once again, she was filled with excitement. "I told you I'd try," she called up to him.

I know, but that was before you left the museum. I was afraid that once you got back to your hotel you would..."

They met on the third floor landing. "I would what?" Ana asked. She was surprised at how breathless she sounded after only two flights. Or maybe it was the man in front of her. If she thought him beautiful at the museum.... Barefoot and wearing a rumbled shirt smeared with paint, he took her breath away.

Nigel's gaze dropped to the floor, his face expression suddenly vulnerable and shy. For the first time, he looked like someone her own age instead of a man capable of conquering the world. "That you would change your mind and decide I wasn't worth the risk," he said.

"Are you kidding? And miss out on having my portrait painted? Not on your life." If she didn't think it would make her sound too desperate, she'd have told him the whole truth. That the thrill of seeing him again outweighed any risk.

No matter. Her answer must have satisfied him because he looked up beaming, the confidence once again securely in place. "I'll do my best to do you justice," he said, holding out a hand.

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"We could go to a café if you'd rather," Nigel said as he led Ana upstairs. His palms were sweaty. Hopefully, she'd think he was just hot because of the weather. The air in his studio was certainly stagnant enough. He'd opened the window, but the air outside was just as warm and sticky. What was he thinking inviting her here? Look at her, sweet and bright in her Dior dress – had to be Dior, right? Wasn't that what girls of her kind wore? She belonged in a fancy restaurant, not his dingy hallway.

Except she was smiling as though he was showing her Versailles. "No way. You promised you'd paint my official portrait, and I'm going to hold you to it."

Nigel smiled to himself. It'd been a silly conversation, talking about the moon. A way to flirt with a girl who was so above his status it made him dizzy.

He was desperate to paint her though. For months he'd been searching for the perfect subject, and then like magic, she appeared. The personification of every dream he'd ever had.

His overly romantic nature his mother would say. Poor woman was still trying to figure out why he chose to live the life of a starving artist instead of taking a nice steady job. She never understood the complexities of the creative soul. She certainly wouldn't understand love at first sight.

Then again, perhaps she might, if she saw Ana. Surely, even his unromantic mother could recognize the extraordinary.

The door from his studio was still open from when he rushed out. "There's not much space," he said pushing it wider, "but it's big enough. I only need a place to sleep and paint."

Good thing, since doing much else would be impossible. Most of the perimeter was taken up by canvases. A collection of completed and discarded work too inferior for display while his easel and worktable took up the center space. The only pieces of furniture were a stool his threadbare bed and an antique table he found at the flea market to hold his radio.

He watched as Ana looked around, waiting for disappointment to fill her face, but she looked too intrigued to be disappointed. Releasing his hand, she walked toward a painting he did while visiting Sacre Couer. A derivative rendition of children on the carousel.

"Wow," she said, crouching to get a better look. "This is amazing. You're amazing."

He was capable of better, but the reverence in her voice kept him from saying it aloud. Instead, he crouched beside her. "I've wanted to be an artist for as long as I can remember," he said. "I can't remember when I wasn't drawing or painting."

"You're lucky," she replied. "To be so certain of what you want."

Au contraire. What made him lucky was to have someone like Ana in his studio. The way she looked at him – at his paintings – made him feel far more important than he was. "And what about you?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid what I want doesn't matter. My brother, Theodore, has my life mapped out for me."

"Of course it matters," Nigel replied. He hated this faceless brother of hers who was intent of clipping her wings. "You don't belong to your brother."

"No, but my money does. At least until my birthday."

"Money isn't everything."

"You're right, it isn't. But with money comes power, which makes breaking away from those who have money very difficult." She stared at the canvas in her hands. "If only you really had a space ship stashed on the roof," she said in a soft voice.

Her words squeezed his heart. Surely she wasn't that much of a prisoner? "If I did, I'd give you the keys in a heartbeat. You could go anywhere you wanted."

She raised her luminous brown eyes to meet his. "Even if where I wanted to go was right here?" she asked in a shy whisper.

"Especially then," he whispered back. "I would keep you safe for as long as you needed."

Mon Dieu, but her skin was like dew-kissed satin. He could paint her for a century and not get the texture correct. His personal Mona Lisa smile, he thought to himself.

He couldn't help himself; he needed to touch her, experience the softness beneath his fingers first hand. Trembling, he reached out and brushed her cheek, only to be rewarded with Ana's soft sigh. Her eyelids fluttered shut. "You are so beautiful," he murmured.

"You're the beautiful one," she replied. As his touch grew bolder, she turned her face into his hand. "I feel like I've been waiting for you to appear my whole life."

"That long?" he teased, although he knew exactly what she meant. He'd been waiting for her too. Didn't matter their ages. Romeo and Juliet were young too weren't they? Were Juliet's lips as tempting as the ones before him? Doubtful. Ana's lips were berries, waiting to be tasted. Thumbing the lower one, he almost expected to see juice on his skin. When none appeared, he leaned forward. Ana's breath was fresh and cooling on his lips as they drew close. Insides quaking, he kissed her. Better than berries. This was the taste of every color on his pallet. The reddest red, the bluest blue. Heaven couldn't have tasted as perfect.

They kissed until they were breathless, and even then, it hurt to stop. Eyes closed, he pressed his forehead to hers, and listened as their sound of their mingled gasps floated around them.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" he heard her ask.

"I do now."

"Me too. Crazy, isn't it?"

"Insane."

Her fingers were combing his curls, each stroke wrapping him in a feeling of warmth and affection. He could hear others now. Calling the two of them children, and saying they knew nothing of real emotion. They would be wrong. He knew the deepest, most private parts of his soul that he and Ana were meant to be together. And not just in a sexual way. Oh sure, he was aching to have her in his bed, but even if they never touched beyond this one kiss, he would still only be complete in her presence.

"Stay with me," he said pulling back so she could see the sincerity in his face. "Stay and let me paint you."

"But my brother..." Fear filled her eyes. "He won't..."

"To hell with him," Nigel said. He didn't care about her brother or his power. "I'll protect you."

Her fingers slid from his hair to cup his cheek. "You mean that don't you?"

"With all my heart."

Nigel held his breath while he waited for her answer. She would say no. After all he was asking her to give up everything, family, home, security, after one day. Not even a day. A few hours. What sensible woman would agree?

Her arms wrapped around his neck, drawing him close. "Paint me," she said with a husky whisper. "*Paint* me."

He didn't need to be asked third time.

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*Six weeks later*

"You're squirming."

"I can't help it," Ana replied. This material makes my skin itch." To prove her point, she wriggled against the velvet. The rough material scrubbed her bare thighs. "I'm going to be all pink and burned."

Nigel peered around his canvas. His frown might have looked sterner if his eyes weren't sparkling. "Not if you stop squirming, mon cheri"

"I'd like to see you lie naked and not move."

"Ahh, but that is why I am the artist. I couldn't." He gave in and smiled to match his eyes. "Besides, my body is not nearly as beautiful as yours."

"And here I thought you loved me for my mind."

"I love you for everything." Setting down his brush and palette, he joined her on the chaise. They'd found the chair at a flea market a month ago. The hideous peony materials was practically threadbare, but Nigel fixed that by draping a velvet curtain over the surface.

It was on this chair, that Ana modeled for him. They were creating a series of portraits, studies of light on her skin. Ana didn't mind. If anything, she found being exposed incredibly liberating. Her way of casting aside all years of good girl-dom. She was a woman now. A woman cherished, loved and free.

For now, at least. Nigel wanted to believe that the night she ran away from her tour was the start of a long, perfect life together, but Ana knew better. The tick-tick-tock of inevitability grew stronger every day. Theodore was far too rich and powerful to elude forever. Sooner or later he would track her down.

"Mon cheri? Is something wrong?" Nigel brushed the curls from her cheek. "You disappeared on me."

Ana shook away her dark thoughts. Theodore wasn't here yet. Until then, she would enjoy every moment.

"I was wondering if you'd ever get tired of painting the same subject over and over."

"You mean would I tire of you?" His hand slid lower, tracing the curve of her neck to her shoulder. "I told you, I could paint you forever."

"What about when I'm old and wrinkled?"

"Then I will paint you old and wrinkled," he said, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "You will still be beautiful to me."

God, but she loved him. With every inch of her soul.

*"Anastasia!"*

The sound of her name reverberated through the paper thin walls, rattling the canvases, and stilling her heart. *No*. She closed her eyes. *I'm not ready*.

"Anastasia, where are you? Come out this instant!"

She jumped to her feet. "It's my brother. He's found me."

"So? Let him find us. We've done nothing to be ashamed of."

Sweet, noble Nigel. As if that mattered. "You don't know my brother. He is not going to approve of us. Ever."

"But you're his sister. Surely your happiness..."

"My brother only cares about two things. Profits and himself." What difference did Ana's happiness make? Her rebellion – and mark her words, he would consider her staying with Nigel a rebellion - made him look foolish. Such insubordination wouldn't be tolerated. "He's a selfish bastard."

Was she any better, she wondered as she retrieved her robe. Stealing nights in Nigel's bed even though she knew the fantasy wouldn't last? "I should never have stayed," she murmured.

"What are you talking about?" In a flash, Nigel had her wrapped in his arms. "We belong together." He cradled her face in his hands. His gentle, talented hands. "Do you love me?"

"Of course," she replied. How could he even ask such a question? "But ..."

"Anastasia!" The garret door burst open to reveal Theodore's barrel-chested frame.

Theodore Duchenko was considered by much of the world to be a handsome man. Large and burly, he had the same sharply Slavic features as Ana. But where Ana liked to think her face was soft and welcoming, her brother's features were hard and unyielding.

He stood on the threshold, and glared at them with icy eyes. "Get your hands off her," he said.

Ana went to step back only to be held in place by Nigel's embrace. "No," the artist said, with a quiet firmness. "This is our home. You cannot tell us what to do here."

"I will tell you whatever I damn well please. That girl is my sister." He took in Ana's silk robe and obvious state of undress. "Look at you. Holed up some garret like a *bylat*."

He spit the insult at her, making her stiffen. Instantly, Nigel's grip tightened.

"You will apologize right now," he told Theodore.

Her brother's face darkened. No one told Theodore Duchenko what to do and Nigel had dared to twice thus far.

"Apologize? I will do no such thing. You, however..." He yanked Ana's arm. "You will come with me."

"Theodore, please! You don't understand." Useless as it was, she begged him anyway. Her words only made him pull her arm harder. Jerked free of Nigel's grasp, she stumbled forward, landing on her knees with a small yelp.

"Leave her alone!" Nigel snarled. Despite the fact her brother outsized him by several inches, the painter rushed forward and thrust the heels of his hands into Theodore's chest. "She is free to do what she wants."

"Oh, and you think she wants you?"

His mocking tone shook Ana from her fear. How dare he. Nigel was ten times the man he was. *Ten times*. Years of swallowed anger bubbled to the surge. No more. If Nigel could find the strength to stand up to him, so could she.

Pushing herself to her feet, she glared at her brother with all the anger she'd kept "Yes, I do," she said. "You can't tell me what to do anymore, Theodore. I won't let you. I love Nigel and he loves me."

Her stand failed to impress him. "I can't, can I? Tell me, Anastasia, what exactly will you live on without my money? You and your wannabe Picasso. What will you do when it's cold and you have nothing to heat this..." He swung his arm wide. "This space. Burn his masterpieces for he...."

Ana stopped breathing. Theodore had finally noticed the painting.

Not the one on the easel, for that was only half finished, but the others. Nigel's many studies of her naked form.

"I will speak to you in the hallway," he said in a low voice.

She knew that voice. It was the voice of danger and destruction. The calm before the storm.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Nigel open his mouth to protest. Quickly, she shook her head. She loved him for trying, but speaking out now would only end up with him getting hurt.

Her love was already in danger as it was.

Nodding in acquiescence, she pulled her robe tight and headed toward the door. As she passed Nigel, his fingers found hers.

Nigel "It's all right, mon amour," she said. "I'll be back."

But would she? Theodore's eyes were hard as steel when he turned to face her. In his mind, Nigel's paintings were a slap to his reputation. "Your painter has

a lot of talent," he said as soon as the door clicked shut. "I wouldn't be surprised if the young man has quite a career ahead of him."

The compliment made her blood run cold. Theodore didn't give compliments, not in that quiet voice.

"Of course, people would have to see his work, for that to happen."

And there it was. Her brother didn't have to say the threat out loud; Ana knew. He would use his money and influence to destroy Nigel's career before it ever began. His work – his gift – would languish unrecognized.

God, but she wanted to slap the smirk off his face. Theodore knew damn well that as long as he controlled her trust fund, there was nothing she could do to stop him from carrying out his threat. Whatever love she felt for her brother died in that moment.

Poor sweet Nigel. He didn't deserve this. She was the one who'd been selfish. Who knowingly courted Theodore's anger just to have a few weeks of happiness.

It was time to stop being selfish. Try to fight him, and Theodore would only hurt Nigel more. Ana had no choice but to acquiesce. She nodded.

Theodore's smirk grew wider. "Good," he said. "I'm glad you see it my way."

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Nigel knew the moment she opened the door. She could tell by the way the hope drained from his face. "No," he whispered. "Don't..."

"I have to," she told him.

"No you don't. We'll bolt the door and refuse to come out. He has to leave sometime. When he does, we'll leave to. We'll..."

He would run away to save her. Ana nearly choked on her heart. "Where would we go?"

"Anywhere. We'll go to another country. To Venice. To..."

"To the moon?" What a beautiful dream that had been. With tears burning her eyes, she shook her head. "It won't work. Even if we disappear, we won't get away."

"What are you talking about?"

Rather than answer, Ana walked toward the window. Nigel's last painting sat propped against the wall next to it. *Ana Reclining*. He'd arranged her on her side, with her robe untied and open. Face turned upward, she looked to the horizon with eyes that were glazed and heavy-lidded with desire. *The way you look when you welcome me to your bed*, Nigel had teased.

*You and only you*, she'd teased back.

The painting was beautiful. All of Nigel's paintings were beautiful. They deserved to be seen.

"If I don't go with him, he'll ruin your career," she told him. "He'll make sure no one ever sees your paintings. Ever."

"So what? Let him." Nigel was behind her, his hands once again gripping her shoulders. "I don't care."

She knew that's what he would say, and while he meant the words now, he didn't truly *mean* them. "Of course you care," she said. "You were meant to paint. To be a great painter."

"I was meant to love you," he said, lips pressing hard against her temple. "Without you I have no art. No soul."

So dramatic, the French. Her time in Paris must be influencing her, because she felt the same way. Without Nigel, she would be but half a person..

Theodore pounded on the door. "Don't dawdle, Anastasia. You have two minutes before I come in."

"Don't go," Nigel whispered. His fingers dug into her shoulders. "Stay. We'll fight."

"And we would lose," she whispered back. "We're but two people against a man with all the power money could buy." Money neither of them had.

*Yet.*

Why didn't she think of it before. There was a way.

"Did you hear me, Anastasia?" Theodore called..

"It's going to be all right," she said, twisting to face Nigel. "We'll be together again. I promise."

"How? If you leave...."

"I'll be back," she replied. They didn't have much time. She need to explain before Theodore lost patience.

"My trust fund," she told him. "I inherit in six months. When that happens, Theodore will no longer be my guardian. I can go and be with whomever I want." And if he tried to ruin Nigel's career, she would have the resources to fight back. The two of them would no longer be powerless. "All we have to do is hold out until then."

"Six months," Nigel repeated.

"Yes, my love. Will you wait for me"

The doorknob start to turn. Their time together was almost up. "Nigel, will you?"

"Forever," he whispered. He needn't have bothered. His hard, needy kiss was answer enough. Pressing tight against him, Ana kissed him back with everything she had in her heart. If this was to be their last kiss for six months, she would make the most of every second.

"Time is up." Theodore said coldly. "I don't care if you're packed or not. We're leaving now."

Clamping down on her shoulder, he tore Ana from Nigel's embrace and pushed her toward the door. In a last futile effort to stop them, Nigel rushed toward her, only to be blocked by Theodore. "Don't even think about it," the older man told him.

Nigel looked past him, toward her. "Six months," she mouthed. Hopefully, the promise would be enough to keep him from doing something foolish.

To her relief, he nodded imperceptibly. "Comment te dire adieu," he said instead. *It hurts to say goodbye.*

"I know. Je t'aime."

"Je vous aimerai jusqu'à ce jour où je mourrai."

*Till death do us part*, she mouthed back, the silent words as sacred as any vow she might say in church. *I will be back*. Giving him one last, tremulous smile, Ana turned away. With luck, she'd keep the tears at bay. She refused to give Theodore the satisfaction of crying.

Nor would she acknowledge his satisfied smirk. Her head high, she descended the stairs, the cadence of *I will be back* repeating with every step.

"You'll thank me for this," her brother said when they reached the sidewalk. "I've saved you from making a stupid mistake."

"You're wrong," she said as she slipped into the back seat. "I won't thank you, nor will I ever forgive you." She lifted her gaze to the top floor. To the floppy haired man leaning out the window. "Je serai de retour, Nigel," she called to him just as the door closed.

*I will be back.*

The End

You can read about what happened to Nigel and Ana – and Nigel's paintings - in [A Millionaire for Cinderella](#) and it's sequel, [Beauty and Her Billionaire Boss](#). You can purchase your copy through my [website](#).