

POISONED IN PROVENCE
(SAMPLE 3 CHAPTERS)



SASS GREEN

CHAPTER 1



“*H*olly! We’re finally in Provence.” I take a deep breath of the sunshine-infused air, tangy with salt from the nearby Mediterranean Sea. Then I gaze up at the palm trees swaying seductively in the warm breeze. With its vibrant display of pink bougainvillea and purple blooming lilacs, even the Marseille airport tarmac offers an exotic appeal.

“Gorgeous.” Clattering on high stiletto heels, Holly hurries to catch up with me. “I never dreamed we’d enjoy a free vacation in the South of France.”

“For the millionth time, this is not a vacation.” I turn toward my best friend. “At least not for me. On this trip, you’re looking at the face of *Travel! Food! Wine!* magazine. And I’m judging the most important culinary competition in France.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Just don’t let it get to your head, Miss Nina Brown. When this culinary weekend ends, you’ll still sit in front of Ruth Ross’ office like a proper little secretary.”

“Maybe so. But once she understands how well I

represent the magazine, I'm sure she'll put me forward for a promotion."

Glancing up at the bright sunshine as we enter the baggage claim area, I can't shake the feeling that this is the first day of my exciting new life.

Before we reach the luggage carousel, Holly pulls Jasper, our black and white French Bulldog, from her shoulder bag. "Will you watch him while I run to the ladies' room?"

I'm about to drape him over my shoulder when I glance down at our pup. Holly has dressed him in the costume of a Marseille fisherman, complete with a red striped t-shirt and black beret.

"Holly, this is my first business trip. How could anyone take me seriously if I dress my dog like a doll?"

"I'll explain everything, but now I'm about to burst." Holly runs off.

Jasper's chocolate-colored eyes warmly lock with mine, reflecting his excitement for our new adventure.

Spotting our luggage on the carousel, I place Jasper on a bench just a foot away. "Please stay. I'll be right back."

Jasper yips his okay.

But when I return ten seconds later, Jasper's gone.

My heart thumps with panic. *Where could he be? How could he wander off in the blink of an eye? Or did someone steal him?*

"Jasper! Jasper!" I dart through the crowd, calling his name. Spotting a patch of black and white fur, I spin around. But instead of finding Jasper, I bump straight into a tall man.

"Sorry. I'm trying to find my dog."

"Is that him?" He points at a small black and white poodle dragging a pink rhinestone leash behind him.

"No. Jasper's a French Bulldog. Bigger. And he's wearing a striped t-shirt."

“A dog wearing a striped t-shirt. Like a Marseille fisherman?”

“Exactly.” My eyes sweep the baggage claim area, but our pampered pooch is nowhere to be found.

“Is he wearing a black beret along with his t-shirt?”

“Yes. Black.”

“And is it placed at a jaunty angle on his head? Could that be your dog, mademoiselle?”

The man points toward the carousel, where Jasper sits proudly on top of a large navy suitcase. Like a toddler in an amusement park, he’s enjoying the ride.

“Jasper!” Rushing over, I snatch him into my arms. Holding him tight against my chest, I breathe in his fresh, just-had-my-shampoo scent.

Only now do I peer up at the man who helped find him. He’s as gorgeous as a fashion model, with dark brown curly hair and sun-kissed golden skin. Long black lashes frame his almond-colored eyes, studded with tiny glints of gold. Only his strong aquiline nose detracts from the perfect asymmetrical nature of his face and broad-shouldered form.

“I don’t know how to thank you.” My cheeks flush.

“You are American, yes?” His French accent is charming. “Do all dogs wear costumes in your country?”

“More than you’d think. Especially in Manhattan. But Jasper’s a unique case. My roommate designs doggie fashions. Jasper likes to model them.”

Jasper yips in agreement.

Just then, Holly rushes up and grabs Jasper from my arms. “Sorry I was so long. You wouldn’t believe the line.” Noticing the handsome stranger, she winks at me.

“Ladies, I’m afraid I must leave you. I’m here to drive a guest to a hotel.” He glances down at the name written on his sign in big block letters. “A Ms. Ruth Ross.”

“That’s me! I mean, that’s my boss. She broke her leg and asked me to take her place judging the culinary competition.”

“What a fortunate coincidence! Then let me introduce myself properly. I am your driver, Jacques Corton. May I be the first to welcome you to Provence.”

Without warning, he kisses me on each cheek. Then a third time. The soft touch of his lips sends tingles through my body.

“Apologies!” Jacques reacts to the surprised expression on my face. “Kissing is the customary way to greet people in this part of France.”

“Then kiss me too!” Holly presents her rosy cheek. “And The Jasp!” Holly inches up Jasper’s t-shirt to expose his plump pink tummy.

“I love to kiss the ladies. But the little dogs, now is not the time. Especially one dressed as a Marseille fisherman. Please allow me to take your luggage and we’ll be on our way.”

“Wait!” Holly hands Jacques her phone. “I’m a scrapbooker, so I’d be super grateful if you could take a picture of the three of us here at the baggage carousel.”

“Holly! You promised to behave.”

“A pleasure, ladies.” Jacques takes a few pictures, then escorts us to a black shiny car with the logo of the Hotel Deluxe stenciled on its side. After gently placing our bags into the trunk, we’re off.

“What a cutie.” Holly flashes me the picture she snapped of Jacques on her device.

“Shhh. He’ll hear us.”

“No worries.” Holly taps lightly on the hard glass dividing the driver’s seat from us in the back. “It’s Soundproof.”

“Woo-hoo. This will be a weekend we’ll never forget.”



JACQUES WHISKS us past vivid lilac fields, each so mesmerizing I join Jasper in pressing my nose against the glass. Though it's difficult to tear my eyes away from the purple flowers and bright yellow sun, I check my phone for work-related email.

My eyes linger over a video message from Julep, my mom's caretaker. On my phone's screen, Julep and my mom make brownies together, rocking out to a Tina Turner song. Mom radiates joy. I like her that way.

Holly pulls the phone from my hands. I watch the curve of a smile appear on her face. "Cool. They're having fun! Have you heard from the estate lawyer yet?"

"Nope." I take my phone back and click out of my email. "Let's not talk about it this weekend. I'm anxious enough as it is. Okay?"

"Sure. Okay."

A grove of plane trees planted on both sides of the road welcome us to a charming village filled with tiny shops and enchanting cafes. Jacques pulls in front of a small, attractive hotel with polished brass bordering the door and front windows.

"And here we are," says Jacques. "The Hotel Deluxe."

"What's so 'luxe' about it?" Holly whispers loudly in my ear.

A sly smile plays about Jacques' sensual lips as he helps us out of the car. He must have overheard Holly.

"We French appreciate the traditional style. Classic and understated. I am sure you will be most comfortable here."

As he removes the luggage from the trunk, a distinguished man in a well-fitting black suit walks toward us. Handsome with an energetic vibe, he appears to be in his late forties.

“Welcome, Ms. Ross. I am Maurice Talbot, the hotel’s general manager.”

“Great to meet you, Mr. Talbot. But I’m not Ruth Ross. She appointed me to take her place for the weekend judging activities. I’m her assistant, Nina Brown. And this is my best friend, Holly Broad.”

“Welcome, ladies. And please, call me Maurice.”

Jasper yips sharply, demanding an introduction.

Maurice bends slightly to shake Jasper’s paw. “Welcome to you, my friend! From your lovely Marseille outfit, I see you admire our French culture.”

“He’s a *French Bulldog*.” Holly strokes Jasper’s soft, shiny fur. “He was born with a natural flair for style.”

While Maurice pets Jasper, Jacques brings our luggage inside the hotel. A strikingly beautiful woman about my age, tall with flowing blonde hair and a stunning figure, greets Jacques with a kiss on each cheek. Just as Jacques had greeted me.

Something about her seems familiar, as if I’ve known her in another place and time.

They stand in the doorway talking quietly. *No, flirting.* My stomach twists into a knot. *How can I be jealous? I barely know Jacques.*

The blonde must sense my interest, for she meets my eyes for a long moment, as if to size me up. I try to avert my gaze, but she keeps it fixed with an almost physical grip. Then she turns back to Jacques again.

I force Jacques out of my mind as Maurice leads us inside the hotel. The sparkling chandelier in the entranceway, the red velvet sofas, and the gold accents everywhere whisper the hotel’s grandeur.

“I will escort you to our presidential suite.”

“That’s generous, but I’m sure any normal room will do.”

“It is my pleasure to show you the best of what Aix-en-Provence can offer. The Tourism Council is subsidizing your visit. Everything, as you say in English, is on the house.”

“Even a massage?” Holly asks.

I elbow her a warning.

“Yes, of course. Just let me know and I will arrange it.”

“Jasper only eats filet mignon.” Holly winks at me.

“Ah, but of course. He is a French dog with discriminating taste. Here in France, we have special room service menus for le chien ... the dog.”

Holly’s clearly loving this. And from the way Jasper’s head thrusts up from Holly’s carrying bag, he’s enjoying this luxurious adventure, too.

The last thing I need is for Ruth Ross to think I’m taking advantage of the situation. If she hears about the presidential suite, massages, and special filet mignon room service menus for our dog, heads will roll.

Especially mine.

CHAPTER 2



Maurice leads us up the winding staircase to the hotel's upper floor. Lovely and dramatic, it evokes an earlier, more genteel era. Each step reveals a small, yet charming feature, such as a small vase of fresh red roses tucked inside the recessed curve of a wall. Or a sophisticated woman captured in an oil painting smiling down at me from her ornate gilt frame. Even the polished wooden banister feels luxurious to my touch.

Once upstairs, Maurice taps at the door of the presidential suite with a magnetic key card and opens it with a flourish.

"The finest suite in the hotel, for your pleasure. You will share a living space in the center. Your individual bedrooms lie on either side, complete with your own bath."

"Man-oh-man. Swanky! I've never stayed in a hotel like this." Holly puts Jasper down on the gorgeously colored Persian rug on top of the gleaming hardwood floor. Then she steps back to survey the living room with its attractive furnishings in elegant tones of beige and white. Romantic seascapes line the walls, like you'd find in a museum.

“I must take a picture of this for our album.” Holly darts around the room, taking photos with her phone. When the porter wheels our luggage into the suite, she takes a picture of that too. And even more snaps of the room service trolley containing a bottle of Champagne and some buttery, delicious smelling hors d’oeuvres.

“Your album?” Maurice asks.

“A scrapbook to mark our first trip abroad. Here it is.” Holly opens it. “It’s empty now, but by the end of the weekend it will be filled with photos and other memories of our adventure.”

“Ladies, if you please, take a seat on the sofa. I would like to introduce the structure of the Provence Epicurean Delight weekend. But first, Champagne.”

Holly grabs Jasper by the scruff of his neck and settles into a corner of the sofa. Maurice picks up a dangerously sharp sword from the room service cart, then examines its blade.

“You didn’t tell me this was a murder mystery weekend,” whispers Holly. “Is he going to slash our throats?”

I put my finger in front of my lips.

“Ladies, this is the way we open Champagne in France for ceremonial occasions.”

Maurice removes the Champagne from the cart, takes aim, then slices the neck with the precision of a sushi master.

“Salut!” Maurice pours the Champagne into flutes. Once we clink glasses, he presents me with a thick cream-colored folder with the hotel’s elegant gold insignia.

“Inside you will find biographies of the contestants and the itinerary for the weekend. I’ll walk you through the schedule of events. Mademoiselle Nina, you will judge the

competition for three nights: tonight, tomorrow, and Sunday evening.”

I glance at my printed schedule. “So tonight, following the cocktail party, Chef Adonis Hellman will give his culinary demonstration.”

“Yes, exactly.” Maurice shows us a picture of Adonis Hellman on his phone.

“We know him from Manhattan,” says Holly. “Well, we don’t know him personally. But he’s always on the front page of gossipy publications like the *New York Post*. Usually for doing something naughty.”

I clear my throat. “Can you tell me more about the judging?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Maurice says. “But you seem very young. Have you judged a culinary competition before?”

“Of course.” I surprise myself with my confident tone. “I attended the Culinary Institute of America. Part of the curriculum included judging the cuisine prepared by other students. And even judging for local restaurant events. Then I worked for a three-star Michelin chef when I went to UCLA. La Toque. Beyond that, I meet many chefs working with Ruth Ross at *Travel! Food! Wine!* magazine. I like to think I’ve captured their secrets.”

“You have excellent credentials, mademoiselle. One of your fellow judges will be Mr. Bates Bateman of New York. He’s the founder of the Epicurean Delight competition. It took some arm twisting from the Tourism Council to convince him to hold it in Provence this year.”

Maurice taps his screen to bring up Judge Bateman’s photograph. I nod in recognition. Almost every American foodie could recognize him by his trademark silk ascot alone. Like Julia Child before him, he also hosted a cooking

show called *The Culinary Curmudgeon* on the TV Food Network.

Until that moment, I hadn't realized that Bates Bateman had been flying with us on the first leg of our flight from New York to Paris. He had been seated in first class, and we were in coach. But Holly and I could hear the imperious way he ordered the flight attendants around.

Then Maurice taps at his screen again, showing us the picture of a stern woman, her gray-white hair arranged around the front of her head in an odd style.

"This is Gertrude Mannheim, the leading chef in Germany. Some say she's responsible for Germany's culinary renaissance."

"Will it be just the three of us judging the competition?"

"Yes. The three of you will sit together in the judging box. We've constructed a portable stage in our ballroom. Each chef will demonstrate the dish, then you'll be served the food to judge. Guests will receive small portions, made in the kitchen from the judge's recipe."

"Who are the guests?"

"A combination of local foodies, with some international connoisseurs thrown in for good measure. Most stay here at our hotel. We're hoping the publicity will put our little Provençal village on the map as far as tourism is concerned. In our correspondence, your boss Ruth Ross mentioned a feature on our town for your magazine."

I nod, making sure to flash a bright smile. What Maurice probably doesn't know is that Ruth likely wants a pay or play deal. Meaning that she'd feature Maurice's hotel and showcase the town, but as a paid advertisement.

"I'm sure she'll be happy to tell you more about it after the competition. We know about Adonis Hellman. Who are the other contestants?"

“Feng Lung, from the Guangdong Province. He’s scheduled to showcase his culinary mastery tomorrow night.”

“I’m excited to meet him again. He’s quite popular in the international scene right now,” I say, peering down Maurice’s phone screen. His face is painted his signature kabuki white, contrasting to the expression in his fierce black eyes.

The chef’s blue-tinted spiked hair makes him appear like a cross between an ’80s rock star and a stadium-ready painted sports fanatic. In his photo, Chef Lung sports a black kimono and wields an enormous silver sword.

“You’ve met him before?”

“Just a quick introduction in a Manhattan test kitchen,” I say. “He has a reputation for using unusual ingredients.”

Holly laughs. “Like what? Toads? Eye of newt?”

“Something like that.”

“Then Sunday night, our local hero, Jacques Corton, takes the stage.”

As soon as Maurice shows us the picture of Jacques, Holly points her finger at it. “That’s Jacques! The cute guy who picked us up at the airport.”

Maurice smiles. “Yes. We’re quite proud of our local chef.”

“But why would a contestant come to pick us up? Wasn’t there another driver to call?” Holly asks.

“Jacques did it as a favor to me. There was a mix-up with the limo service, and he knew I was in a bind. Our area of Aix-en-Provence is quite small. No taxi service to call at the last minute. Not like your New York.”

After inspecting Jacques’ photo, Holly glances up at Maurice. “What’s his kink?”

“Kink? I don’t understand.”

“I think Holly’s asking what kind of food he makes. His culinary specialty.”

“Ah. Well, Jacques is a classically trained French chef, of course. Back in 1925, our great-great-grandfathers were friends. In the days before ‘celebrity chefs’ Jacques’ ancestor created the menu for our own restaurant in the hotel.”

“So, does that mean you are cousins?” I ask.

“In Provence, our families have intermarried for years. We’re all cousins in one way or another.”

I take one last eyeful of Jacques’ photo. Like Holly said, he’s certainly a cutie. And he’s so nice, maybe the nicest man I ever met. Especially by Manhattan standards. Beyond that, he seemed so familiar. Comfortable to be with. Like someone I’ve known all my life.

Riding in the car with him, I had hoped there might be time to meet him again over the weekend. But who was that blonde woman flirting with him? *And why did she glare at me?*

“I’d love to hear more about him.” I say.

“Jacques’ family owns the restaurant across the street, Chez Corton. After his father passed, Jacques helped his mother run it. But she recently passed too, alas. Maurice rises. “I’ll leave you ladies to get ready for the cocktail party.”

I walk Maurice to the door, then close it behind him. As I do, my thoughts turn to Jacques. *How can I arrange to see him again?*

CHAPTER 3



I'm in the process of concealing the scar above my left eye when Holly bangs against the door.

"You have your own bathroom, you know."

"Yes." Holly pushes open my door, then takes a seat on the bathtub rim. "But I insist on doing your makeup. You need to make an excellent impression tonight."

"What business is it of yours?"

"I've developed a taste for Champagne. And free travel! You told me yourself that this trip is your magazine's test for you. And I want to ensure your next assignment to be on the Italian Riviera."

"Your wish is my command, my fine lady." Long accustomed to Holly's outrageous demands, I tease my lashes with mascara.

"I'm serious! Luxury travel is fun."

"For you as my guest, you mean. I'm on assignment."

"Maybe so. But I saw the way you made goo goo eyes at Jacques. And that blonde girl made you jealous."

"I don't even know him. Why would I be jealous?"

"Because he's a cute, super nice guy. And I like him

too. Oh, no worries on that part. He's all yours. I'm just saying a girl's got to stake her claim on a man. Like swinging a lasso on cattle."

"I'll keep that in mind." I gather my cosmetics and put them back into my kit.

"Not so fast! The maestro hasn't finished with you yet."

"Maestro?"

"Oui. *Moi*. You know I'm the best makeup artist Saks Fifth Avenue ever had. Back home, you don't know how many times I've resisted the temptation to knock that freckled red-headed schoolgirl look right out of you. You've said yourself that this weekend will make or break your career at *Travel! Food! Wine!* magazine. I'm here to ensure you'll succeed."

"Like cosmetics really have anything to do with that."

"Cosmetics matter more than you know. Think of that tiger Joan Crawford up against meek Norma Shearer in *The Women*."

"What? Who?" Holly and her obsession with 1930's classic films elude me.

"Everyone at the cocktail party will soon know you're representing *Travel! Food! Wine!* magazine. They're expecting someone like that assistant Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada*. After she's had her makeover. *Not before*. Now fasten your seatbelt. This is going to be a bumpy ride."

For the next thirteen minutes, Holly pokes at my face with fingers and brushes, applying potions and powders. When she turns me around to face the mirror, I don't recognize myself. At least, the face reflected in the mirror every day. It belongs to some future Nina Brown, someone bolder, more demanding.

More like the bold, assertive person I want to be.

"Now shake your hair out of that ponytail." Holly

squints an appraising eye at me like an artist studying her creation.

I do as she says.

“Holy cow, Nina! She’s a wild one tonight!” From the first day we met as toddlers, Holly has always referred to my unruly red hair with a feminine pronoun, like a separate person. “What products have you packed to tame her?”

“You’ll find my stash in my suitcase.”

Holly walks over to open it. “Jeez Louise, did you raid the haircare section of our local Walmart?”

“I wasn’t sure about the weather, so I brought different anti-frizz and smoothing products.”

Holly returns with a hard bristled brush in one hand and a blow dryer in the other. She wields her tools like a lion tamer. “Remember, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Several screams later, I stand in front of the mirror with glossy hair and elegant makeup that gives me a ‘finished’ rather than artificial appearance.

“Now, here’s the little black dress I made for you.”

“Won’t Jasper be jealous you made an outfit for me instead of adding to his own wardrobe?”

“Jasper, jealous? *Not at all*. He likes his humans to be well dressed.”

I ignore her condescending remark about my laid-back style and slip her deceptively plain cocktail dress over my slender form. Holly’s dressmaking talent is an appearance of simplicity, but with the nips and tucks that form the well-tailored lines of elegance.

Our pampered pup yips his approval.

“Jasper likes it. And now I’ll let you wear my grandmother’s pearl necklace. You’ll outdo Audrey Hepburn in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* three times over.”

As Holly hands the pearls to me, the scar above my left eye throbs. I'm instantly overcome with a sensation of warmth and comfort. In my mind's eye, I visualize the serene figure of Holly's grandmother enveloping me like a warm bath on a frigid night. I'd only been eight the last time I saw her.

"What's wrong, Nina? Are you okay?"

"Yes. It's just ... that I saw your grandmother. She looked exactly as she did the day before she passed."

Holly guides me to my bed and sits me down.

"Is it coming back?"

"Is what coming back?"

Holly leans toward me, whispering, as if someone around us could overhear. "You know. *The gift*."

I shake my head. "No. Just a freak thing."

Holly takes both my hands in hers, concern in her onyx-colored eyes. "You can't repress it forever, you know. Should I call Dr. Lockwood?"

"Holly, please. The pearls made me think of her. A natural reaction. Nothing clairvoyant about that!" I stand, forcing the vision out of my mind. "Now you must get ready. I'll give Jasper dinner while you dress."

Feeding Jasper is one of my secret pleasures. I love the ritual of showing him the container of his favorite food, then slowly opening the top so he can smell its aroma. That always produces a hungry, *give-it-to-me-now* sort of yip.

I fill his bowl with food and stroke his silky fur as he nourishes himself. With my other hand, I touch the pearls and think about Holly's grandmother, Mrs. Broad.

She was always extra kind to me, even before my father passed and my mother began her slow descent into madness. As the school librarian, she also enjoyed reading my short stories and gushing praise. Her encouragement is what made me seek a career in journalism.

“Well, I’m ready.” Holly steps in front of me and gives herself a little twirl. “How do I look?”

“Like your usual fashionista self.” I nod approvingly at the retro outfit she wears of her own creation. Holly’s red and white polka-dot bustier and matching skirt are separated by a thick patent leather belt emphasizing her narrow waist. “But we better hurry.”

“I just need a moment to get The Jasp ready.”

“Ready? What do you mean?”

Holly points to a corner of the suite’s living room, where she’s set up a portable canine wardrobe, only slightly smaller than the one we have at home. Adorable handmade doggie duds hang from miniature hangers.

“And you accused me of bringing too many hair products?”

“This is for my Etsy shop. I’m taking advantage of the South of France ambiance to photograph Jasper’s portfolio. Everyone in his Facebook group’s been asking when I’ll publish it. I thought I’d take some candid shots of Jasper enjoying the party tonight.”

“This is a culinary event, not a photo shoot.”

“No one will notice me. Indulge me, Nina.”

Jasper rubs his face against my calf. He gazes up at me with his soft brown eyes, whimpering hopefully.

“Okay. Fine.” I hate myself for giving in, but I know how much Jasper enjoys everyone’s attention when he dresses up. “Holly, please be discreet.”

Beaming, Holly whispers in Jasper’s ear. “Go for it!”

Jasper pads over to his wardrobe, touching each outfit with his moist, pushed-in snout. Then he raises his paw to swipe at a white shirt and black jacket combo, marking his selection.

“We’ve got a winner!”

Holly slips the lightweight outfit over his back, fastening

it loosely under his belly. Then she makes sure his attached red tie hangs straight. “This outfit is going to be a best seller. I just know it.”

Holly and I exit our suite. As we approach the curving staircase, a woman with white hair and hunched shoulders walks toward us. I recognize her as that frumpy woman traveling with Bates Bateman from New York. On the plane, I figured her for his employee because she sat in coach class near us, while Mr. Bateman sat in first class.

I might not have even noticed her if it wasn’t for the curious way she looked at me, then ducked down to scribble something into her notebook. At first, I thought it was my imagination. But when I got up to walk to the restroom, she did it again. *It wasn’t a coincidence.*

“Hello.” I smile politely. Now’s the time to figure out who she is and why she was writing notes about me. “I’m Nina Brown and this is Holly Broad.”

Jasper yips, demanding an introduction.

“This is our dog, Jasper. We saw you on the plane over from New York.”

“Sally Adams.” She fingers the small gold earring on her right ear, shaped like a knife and fork. “I’m Mr. Bateman’s executive assistant. Mr. Bateman mentioned you’re filling in for your editor, Ruth Ross.”

“It happened so fast. How could he have known?”

“Mr. Bateman makes a point of knowing everything about everybody. He has his ways, you know.”

Remembering Mr. Bateman’s snippy, supercilious attitude on the reruns of his show, *The Culinary Curmudgeon*, I can imagine him shaking people down for gossip and information.

“Shall we go to the cocktail party together?” Sally says. “Mr. Bateman’s already there. He needs his business cards.”

“Sure.”

A few minutes later, we enter the expansive ballroom. My eyes feast on the décor of the room. Crystal chandeliers dangle from the ceiling, while the textural richness of the walls evokes a fancy wedding cake.

The pleasant sound of popping Champagne corks and the indistinct murmur of polite conversation in French and English swirl all around me.

“What a fancy party.” Holly jiggles Jasper in the over-the-shoulder doggie carrier she designed, affording him an excellent view of the room. Then she turns to me, lowering her voice so Sally can’t hear. “Nina, there’s that German woman with hair wrapped around her head like a donut. She’s standing with Mr. Bateman and this incredibly tasty guy.”

The man Holly calls ‘tasty’ is tall and well-built, with jet-black hair, a neatly trimmed mustache, and a well-groomed beard.

“Come, Sally. Mr. Bateman’s this way.” Taking her arm, I lead her toward Mr. Bateman’s circle.

“Mr. Bateman. Your executive assistant has something for you—” Before I can introduce myself, he cuts me off.

“Ah, yes. Excuse me, all.” Mr. Bateman’s voice fills with charm before he drags Sally to a corner of the room. As soon as he’s out of earshot, he lashes out at her. *Why does he tyrannize her that way? Why does she stand for it?*

I cast a friendly nod to everyone in the circle, including the German judge Gertrude Mannheim, a blonde woman in pink, and the handsome man in black.

“Hello. I’m Nina Brown, the judge from *Food! Travel! Wine!* magazine.” My eyes linger on the dark, attractive man a moment longer, inhaling his aroma of tobacco, leather, and spice.

The aroma of danger.

And temptation.

**What will Nina do? Will it be Jacques or Detective Marc Roy?

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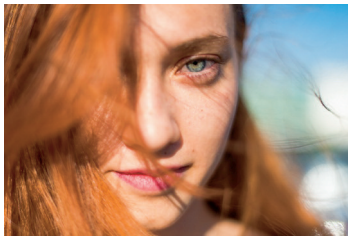
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