

FIND YOU IN PARIS

By Alix Nichols

PART I: PROPOSITION

CHAPTER ONE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young man in possession of a vast fortune must be an entitled SOB born into money. Either that or a rags-to-riches a-hole who bulldozed his way to said fortune, leaving maimed bodies in his wake.

The ferocious-looking PA returns to her desk. “Monsieur Darcy is still in a meeting.”

“That’s OK.” I smile benignly. “I can wait.”

I place my hands demurely on my knees and stare at the portrait adorning—or should I say disfiguring—the wall across the hallway from where I’m seated.

Pictured is Count Sebastian d’Arcy du Grand-Thouars de Saint-Maurice, the oldest son of the late Count Thibaud d’Arcy du Grand-Thouars de Saint-Maurice and the inheritor of an estate estimated at around one billion euros. Said estate isn’t your run-of-the-mill stock holdings or start-up fortune. Oh no. It’s made up of possessions that were handed down—uninterrupted and snowballing—all the way from the Middle Ages.

Even Robespierre and his fellow revolutionaries didn’t get their greedy little hands on the d’Arcy fortune.

What are the odds?

Upon his father’s premature demise ten years ago, young Sebastian moved back into the town house in the heart of Le Marais and took the reins of the family’s main business. A twenty-three-year-old greenhorn at the time, you’d expect him to make tons of bad decisions and sink the company or, at least, diminish its value.

But no such luck.

Instead, Sebastian Darcy took Parfums d’Arcy from number three to the number one European flavor and fragrance producer—a feat that neither his illustrious grandfather nor his star-crossed father had managed to accomplish.

According to my research, also about ten years ago, the new count chose to go by “Darcy,” abandoning the apostrophe and the rest of his status-laden name. I’m sure he only did it to fool those *beneath* him—which includes most everyone in a country that guillotined its royals—into believing that he sees himself as their equal.

The hell he does.

Sebastian Darcy is a stinking-rich aristocrat with instincts of an unscrupulous business shark. This means he qualifies in both the SOB and the a-hole categories.

No, scratch that. He *slays* both categories.

And I hate him more than words can say.

The straitlaced man on the wall seems to smirk. I shudder, my nerves taut to the point of snapping. Will they kick me out if I spit at the photo? Of course they will. I steal a

glance at the PA stationed between me and Darcy's office. She looks like a cross between a human and a pit bull. I'm sure she'd love to stick something other than paper between the jaws of her sturdy hole punch.

My hand, for example.

But I didn't come here to fight with Darcy's PA. I'll keep my saliva in my mouth, my eyes cast down, my butt perched on the edge of the designer chair, and my knees drawn together and folded to the side.

Like the meek little mouse I'm trying to pass for.

After waiting three weeks, I'm careful not to arouse any suspicion in Pitbull's mind so she won't cancel my appointment with Darcy.

Eyes on the prize, Diane! Don't forget you're here to declare war by spitting in Count Sebastian Darcy's face, rather than at his photographic representation.

I look at the photo again, arranged in perfect symmetry between the portraits of his grandfather, Bernard, who founded the company, and his father, Thibaud, who almost put the lid on it. I know this because I've done my homework.

During my week-long research, I dug up every piece of information the Internet had to offer about Sebastian Darcy and his family. I was hoping to find dirt, and I did. The only problem was it was already out in the open—common knowledge, yesterday's news.

And completely useless as leverage.

Pitbull looks up from her smartphone. "Monsieur Darcy is delayed. Do you mind waiting a little longer?"

"No problem." I smile politely. "I'm free this afternoon."

She arches an eyebrow as if having a free afternoon is something reprehensible.

How I wish I could stick out my tongue! But instead I widen my already unnaturally wide smile.

She frowns, clearly not buying it.

I turn away and stare at Darcy's likeness again. In addition to the now-stale scandal, my research has revealed that Darcy is close to his middle brother, Raphael, and also to a longtime friend—Laurent something or other. Our vulture-man even managed to have a serious girlfriend for most of last year. A food-chain heiress, she looked smashing at the various soirées, galas, and fundraisers where she was photographed on his arm. Darcy was rumored to be so into his rich beauty he was about to propose. But then she suddenly dumped him about six months ago.

Clever girl.

He has no right to be happy when Dad's life is in shambles.

I won't stop until I crush him, even if it means I go to jail—or to hell—for using black-hat tactics. It's not as if they'd let me into heaven, anyway. I've already broken the arms and legs on Darcy's voodoo doll.

There's no turning back after you do that sort of thing.

The next step is to let the world know who he really is and hurt him in a variety of ways, big and small. And then, just before delivering the deathblow, let him know he's paying for his sins.

That's why my first move is to show him my face and make sure he remembers it and associates it with *unpleasantness*. That way, when the shit hits the fan, he'll know which creditor is collecting her debt.

Pitbull breaks me out of my dream world. "Monsieur Darcy's meeting is running late."

“That’s OK, I can—”

“No,” she cuts me off. “There’s no point in waiting anymore. As soon as the meeting is over, he’ll head to the 9th arrondissement, where he’s expected at a private reception.”

I stand up.

She glances at my bare ring finger. “Mademoiselle, I can reschedule you for Friday, December twelfth. It’s two months away, but that’s the only—”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary,” I say.

I know exactly which reception Sebastian Darcy is going to tonight.