

# **Diamonds are Forever**

**(Book 3, Diamonds are Forever Trilogy)**

**by Charmaine Pauls**

## **Excerpt**

The walk and fresh air do me good. I feel invigorated when I get to an open-air textile market I remember from driving past here once. The smell of grilled chestnuts from the vendor stand mixes with the odor of chemical dye from the fabric. Weaving through the aisles, I drag the familiar perfume into my lungs. Despite my situation, my spirits lift. It's like the smell of roasted beans when entering a coffee shop on a cold morning or the welcoming scent of ink and paper in a bookstore on a lazy afternoon. Only, it's the cocktail of threads and colors that makes my heart beat faster. With it comes the rush of memories from the fashion academy and, like an answering echo, a wave of nostalgia. I miss this. I miss the slide of fabric through my fingers and the soothing hum of a sewing machine.

A piece of organza hanging from a wooden rail lifts in the breeze. The floral print catches my eye. It's pink and lilac, soft and lovely. I said I was done with sewing, but maybe it's because I've been stuck on my old designs. Romantic designs. Walking to a stand with a much statelier roll of navy linen, I rub the coarse fabric between my fingers. Maybe I was looking at the wrong dreams.

"Would you like this fabric, ma'am?" the vendor asks.

I look up. The woman has a friendly smile. A red scarf tied around her hair brings out the warm tone of her skin and eyes.

I don't have any money on me. I didn't even know this was my destination when I started walking. "Oh, I'm just browsing."

"Please cut the lady however much she wants," a deep voice says.

I spin on my heel. The sight of him takes my breath away even after all this time. With his hands shoved into his pockets, Maxime's stance is relaxed, but I recognize the power running underneath. As always, he's dressed immaculately. Even his casual street clothes scream of sophistication and a keen sense of fashion. A roll-neck black T-shirt and fitted pants are rounded off with a brown coat, matching scarf, and short boots, but it's not the clothes that define the man. It's his presence. It's how he dominates the space and demands attention. It's what that look on his face promises.

Women stop talking to stare. I stare, too. I take in the familiar sharp chin and deep lines, the crooked nose and bump on the bridge, the gray eyes that cut through defenses and intentions, and the strong mouth that makes knees weak. His hair is ruffled, curlier from the humid air, and the longer sideburns give him an artistic look. He could be an eccentric painter or a brilliant rocket scientist, a mafia boss or a man bathing a woman on his knees. He could be a jet fighter pilot or a diamond tycoon. A woman's imagination could run wild. What every female here knows with instinctive knowledge is that those hands, those hidden hands, can stroke a cheek as gently as they can squeeze around a throat. This is a man who can make a woman's fantasies come true, and his gaze is trained on me with possessiveness. Adoration. Lust.

Our gazes remained locked as he takes his wallet out of his pocket and pulls out a few bills.

The vendor clears her throat. Her voice is husky when she asks, "How many meters would you like, ma'am?"

"Three, please," I say, ripping a number from the sky.

Maxime's lips lift in one corner. The smile makes his unconventionally beautiful-unattractive face seem more predatory than friendly.

Leaning closer, he presses his lips against my ear and says in English, "Let me buy this for you."

The foreign accent hits me between the knees. We've been speaking French since my return. I've forgotten what his deep timbre sounds like when he whispers in my mother tongue. He smells like the king of winter, of cold weather and citrusy days. The perfume of chemical dye retreats as that winter heat rushes over me. The man and everything he stand for overwhelm my senses.

That my mind can focus on his words is a miracle. I think back to his story, to the man who had two choices, the kidnapper who could take his target kindly or with force. I don't want force. I don't want kindness. I want honesty.

"Why?" I ask with a dry throat.

His breath strokes over my ear. His words are self-assured and seductive. "Because I can."

Pulling away, he creates an avalanche of cold when he takes his heat with him. I look down to where he's rubbing the fabric between his fingers in a gesture that seems oddly like a caress. I shiver as if feeling that caress on my skin.

*Because he can.*