

EXCERPT FROM SHADOWS WITHIN BY J.P. CANE

Reed and Lily Williams hurtle along the boulevards of Paris in what he mistook for a taxi, but is more likely a stunt car. Or soon, a hearse. Any moment now, Reed expects a steep ramp to appear to take them over a moat, or tanker trucks, or Belgium.

Lily loosely laces her fingers in his, casual about their pending fiery crash. For his part, Reed checks his seat belt a fourth time, plants his feet under the seat before him, and grips the door's handhold.

When the cab whips onto the cross street, the force of the turn pressing his body against the door, an emergency vehicle zooms past. Its bleating passive-aggressive siren catches the attention of the firefighter in Reed.

On another street, Lily argues in French with the driver.

"Lily, don't distract the man."

"He's deliberately taking a longer route," she says.

"We're not in a hurry. Tell him we're not in a hurry."

When the whole car seizes up, coming to a sudden halt, Reed realizes they've arrived at their destination. Lily pops the door, while he checks that his balls haven't been sucked into his body.

He thought the cabbie on their first outing was reckless, but it turns out the whole city is full of drivers who think they're in a *French Connection* car chase. How the traffic circles aren't heaps of smashed cars instead of the majestic spouting fountains is a miracle. He will never complain about Philly

cabbies again.

“God d—” he begins to say, but catches himself. To Lily he says, “Sorry. I meant to say, thank God we didn’t die.”

She kisses his cheek. “You worry too much.”

After he pays Evel Knievel the fare, Lily leads him into the *pâtisserie* she has been raving about.

“Wait till you try them,” Lily says while in line, her arm in his. He has never had crepes. They look like pancakes that slept in, too lazy to rise.

Lily expertly orders for them both in French. Just a guess, but Reed thinks they pass for natives as long as he doesn’t speak, which suits him fine as he’s not a conversationalist. Happy to have her do the talking, he loves the sound of those tempting French words dancing off Lily’s tongue as though they showed some leg before dashing behind a curtain.

Ooh-la-la.

“What?” Lily asks, appearing self-conscious.

“Don’t you mean, *que?*” Reed teases.

She pats around her mouth. “*Qu’est-ce que c’est, actually.*”

He says, “Like I said.”

“Are you going to tell me?” She counters his grinning with her fake annoyance. With the real thing, she’d fold her arms across her chest, tighten her mouth, and peer at him like he was one of her students caught eating paste again. Instead her eyes go wide and she holds up her hands as though ready to catch a throw.

He says, “You. You’ve got this sexy superpower.”

He has known that she can speak French—her father’s side, the Martins,

settled in Philadelphia after fleeing revolutionary France, bringing along and passing down their language and traditions—and she treated him to some choice phrases while they dated. Now seeing her in full command of the language, the culture, and the streets, fills him with admiration.

And yes, God, does it light his fire.

Comfortable and confident, Lily blends in with the citizenry like a chameleon. He loves experiencing Paris with her, his private tour guide, who knows all the ins-and-outs and best places for live music or scenic spots as though she has a key to the city.

“I promise to use my power only for good,” she says with a wink.

“I hope not. It’s damn sexy,” he waggles his eyebrows.

“*Vraiment, mon bonheur?*” she says drawing the words out.

He grunts. “*Lingerie* is French, right?”

She nods, listing other words that may be in her boudoir like negligee, camisole, brassiere, lace, and satin.

Reed says, “We’ll have to add those to our shopping list.”

“And what will you be wearing?” she says in a what’s-in-it-for-me tone.

“My bunker pants,” he says, meaning part of the firefighter gear he had worn when they met, although she was semi-conscious at the time. Later he would joke she passed out from his brawny good looks rather than the smoke.