

## **RUNWAY SCENE**

(Deleted scene from Cruel Truths)

It was funny how life could change in the blink of an eye. When I'd entered Cade's jet, I was on edge and questioning my sanity. Why would I willingly enter his unescapable box and give him the opportunity to hurt me beyond repair?

Coming out, it was like I was still floating on air, and the constant heaviness in my chest had eased. With my right hand in Cade's firm grip, I lifted my left hand to the stair railing to reach the red carpet. I kept rubbing and twisting my diamond ring to make sure what happened on the plane was real.

As he was opening the door of the waiting black town car, my left hand was in front of my wide eyes as I admired the refraction of the diamond in the sunlight. Cade grabbed my hand, kissed my knuckles, and tried to hide his amusement as he said, "It's real. You're not in a dream."

I stopped at the open back door of the car. "How did you know what I was thinking?"

Cade couldn't withhold his bark of laughter as he shook his head and stared down at me. "You've said it like three times since I put that ring on your finger."

My eyebrows snapped together, and I watched him carefully for any signs he was lying. "I did?"

His face broke out into another smile, and I found myself unable to look away for an entirely different reason. I'd never seen him so relaxed, and his eyes lit up as he stared down at me. I wanted to see him this carefree all the time.

I leaned in, braced my hands on his chest, and raised myself up to brush his lips. "I love you, Cade."

His eyes darkened, and he cupped my cheek. "Never forget it, Lindy. You're mine now and I won't allow anything to tear us apart."

A shiver tore through me, his possessive words lighting a fire in me. Just as I was ready to claim his lips, a discreet clearing of a throat burst the bubble that had surrounded Cade and me.

"Ma'am, what would you like me to do with the dress?"

I looked over at our fidgeting driver, the voluptuous garment bag hanging from his fingers. I pushed away from Cade with a small gasp.

"No more distractions from you, Cade Kingsley!" I scolded as I took the bag from our driver, who looked relieved to be rid of the burden.

"Can you open the trunk?"

The driver popped the trunk open, and my gaze stopped on the cooler taking up a majority of the space.

"Cade . . ."

I didn't need to say anything else. He was already lifting the cooler out and putting it in the front seat.

After carefully lying the garment bag in the trunk, I opened the front zipper and arranged the gown so that nothing would get wrinkled or bunched up.

The pure white silk glowing in the sunlight reminded me why I was in Los Angeles and butterflies swarmed my stomach. What if no one thought this wedding gown was as special as I did? What if I embarrassed myself? Worse, what if I tarnished Adelle's name and brand? She hadn't once asked to see what I was working on. She knew it was a wedding gown, but she'd never even seen my sketches.

I reached down to pull the bag's edges further apart and started meticulously examining the seams before the bag was zipped close by familiar hands.

I spun around. "Cade, what am I doing? I'm going to embarrass your mom!"

He grabbed my whirling hands in his and then transferred them to one of his before he gripped my chin.

"Lindy Garcia, you listen to me. I've never met anyone with as much belief in themselves as you. There's a reason you chose this design. What was it?"

I clung to his determined gaze and thought back. "I kept flipping back to it. It was calling to me."

He nodded. "It resonated with you. It will have the same impact on the audience. You do nothing half-assed. It will be the star of the show."

I searched his eyes and let the air that I'd been holding in escape. Cade believed every word he'd said. I closed my eyes and absorbed his confidence as I reflected on the moment when I'd officially declared the gown done.

A sense of peace had settled over me as I swept a critical eye over every inch of it displayed on the mannequin. It was a piece of art I had created and sewn.

I opened my eyes. "You're right. I put my heart and soul into that gown. It's original. Traditional with a surprisingly elegant pop."

The butterflies were still present, but my hands were no longer shaking as I closed the trunk. I turned to Cade and ran my hands up his powerful arms to the back of his neck and then settled them into his hair as I tugged him down.

Our lips met and opened, and I didn't resist the rush of desire that flooded my body. I lifted myself closer to him as I tilted my hips to relieve the ache that pulsed between my legs.

The start of the car's engine reminded us where we were, so we reluctantly slid our lips apart. Not willing to completely leave the moment, I put my forehead against his and whispered, "Are you going to stay with me today?"

It was the first time I'd asked for something from someone in years, but I needed Cade's calm, steady belief in me today.

"I'll be around, but I have a feeling you won't need me."

I clung to his hand on the way to the venue and let his strength infuse into me. When we arrived, it was chaos. I stood just inside the backstage door and absorbed the moment. It was my first runway preparation, and I was unsure what to do.

Adelle spotted us and strode our way. As she walked, her eyes darted between Cade and me before landing on our joined hands. She stopped a couple feet from us, searched his eyes, and then briskly nodded. “Good. You finally got your head screwed on straight.”

Cade laughed and pulled his very stunned mom into him. “Thanks for setting me straight.” As he released her, he picked up my left hand. “I got the girl, Mom.”

She enveloped me in a quick hug before asking, “Did you make him work for it?”

“I did.”

Adelle brought my hand closer and then looked at Cade. “You have good taste, son. We’ll celebrate later. Now it’s time to get ready for the show.”

The butterflies fluttering around started ramping up their activity and multiplied tenfold. Cade handed me my gown, and while I held it above my head, he cupped my neck.

“I’ll be sitting in the front row.”

I nodded and looked into his steady, encouraging gaze one last time. I felt like a kid leaving her mom on the first day of kindergarten.

“I love you,” I whispered.

Cade brushed my head with his lips. “I love you, Lindy.”

I savored the rush of emotion his words and touch invoked before Adelle took charge.

“Okay, go! I got her.” He turned away, and it was time to wade into the unknown and conquer it.

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Two hours later, I looked at my model and declared her ready.

“Celeste, thank you for your patience with my ignorance and nerves. Most of all, thank you for working for such a small fee.”

I looked at Celeste’s flawless ebony skin and how the white silk popped against her skin. Her 5’10” frame was slender, but she had the curves to showcase the cut of the dress. Once again, Adelle had stepped in when I’d called her in a panic. I couldn’t finish the alterations until I had a model and knew her measurements. She had sent over several photos of models, and as soon as I saw Celeste, I knew she was the perfect person.

Runway models made considerably more than what I could afford to pay her. She’d agreed to my reduced pay when she saw the sketches. It was a win-win since she was trying to get her name out in the industry as well.

“We women have to stick together and boost each other up.”

“You’re right. We do.”

I took a deep breath when my name was yelled backstage to line up at stage left.

“I guess that’s us. One more thing.”

I reached into my hobo bag that I'd brought to stuff anything I could think of into. When I opened the case with the ruby-and-diamond choker, Celeste gasped, "Holy shit, Lindy! That's gorgeous. Where did you get it?"

I grabbed a stool and stood on it behind her so I could put the necklace on. "My former grumpy boss and now fiancé."

"I should've known it was the same man who gave you that gorgeous ring!"

"We're not done yet." I reached down and rummaged through the bag, finally finding the small case containing the diamond hoop earrings.

We made our way to stage left, both of us falling silent. So much was riding on this thirty-second trip down the runway for both of us. My heart was pounding against my rib cage, my legs felt like rubber, and I had to consciously think about breathing. Otherwise I was sure I would've passed out.

All the announcements and frantic running around were like the ocean in my ears as I stood backstage with Celeste and peeked out at the sea of people lining the runway. There were several celebrities I recognized before I slammed my eyes shut. It couldn't be good if you were seeing little dots in your vision.

I reminded myself of everyone who had already gushed over the gown backstage. All the fashion was incredible, and if my creation stopped people in their tracks, it would be a hit.

The lights dimmed, the opening announcements were made, and then the music I'd picked to have Celeste walk down to was piped in and suddenly she and my baby were gone from my side and walking down the runway.

She strode like she'd done this a million times before and I held my breath as I dared to see the audience's reactions. Some were nodding, some were typing into their phones, but the low-level gasps freed the butterflies from my gut.

I was giddy and looked around to hug someone. I instinctively wanted it to be Cade and realized I hadn't seen him since he'd left me backstage.

The appearance of Celeste by my side dropped the thought from my head. I'd only just met her, but I couldn't contain my excitement as I pulled us away from the side stage and threw my arms around her.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! You were amazing!"

She laughed and gave me a quick squeeze before stepping back. "Don't wrinkle me. We have to go back out at the end. And it wasn't me. It was this jaw-dropping gown. I don't even have a boyfriend, but I still want to have it."

The energy running through me couldn't be contained, and I needed to find Cade.

"I'll be back!" I told Celeste and sprinted off.

I weaved through the bodies and looked for his broad shoulders, but as I wound my way around backstage, my heart sank. I glanced down at my ring, remembering his heartfelt speech, and convinced myself, with a side inkling of doubt, that there was a good reason he wasn't here.

When I reached my corner of the prep area, I found my phone and scanned the notifications. My heart lifted with the good luck texts from Tessa and each of the moms. The tension building in the back of my brain eased a little at Cade's text.

**C: I have a surprise for you. I won't wish you luck because you won't need it.**

I put my phone into my bag and changed into my white Jackie O dress, stood back, and admired it in the mirror before I touched up my makeup and hair. In about a half hour, I would walk onto the runway as an official designer.

I found a nook where I could see the rest of Adelle's show and admired her collection. When the last model came down the runway, my nerves were once again tightening up. I made my way back to Celeste, who was already at stage left, waiting for me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to Lindy Garcia. The designer of the original, amazing, eye-popping wedding gown that opened our show."

Hand in hand, Celeste and I walked out to thunderous applause. It was hard to see with the lights shining on the runway, but I soaked up the adoration of the appreciative audience.

"That's my Aunt Indy! I love you!"

The tears came immediately, and I didn't even try to stop them as I squinted through the light barrier and finally saw it.

In the front row at the end of the runway, Jordis was on Jordan's shoulders yelling, but my moms were yelling just as loud, and then I finally found Cade. He was clapping and whistling for me, and my feet took me to them. I squatted at the end of the runway, sliding off and into the arms of my entire world.

As I was engulfed, the applause reached a new level. It was so loud that I barely made out the words said against my ear, but what I heard was enough.

"I love you."

"I'm so proud of you."

The group hug broke apart, and I threw myself in Cade's arms. This was his surprise. The man knew how much my family meant to me and he went out of his way to make sure they were here for my big moment. This gift meant more to me than all the gowns and jewelry he'd gotten me. This was my man, and I was never letting him go.

He lifted me as I clung to his neck. I pulled back and connected with his twinkling eyes. "Thank you. I love you."

I knew he couldn't hear me, but he mouthed the words back to me. I sank into his arms and absorbed every detail and sensation of this life-changing moment.