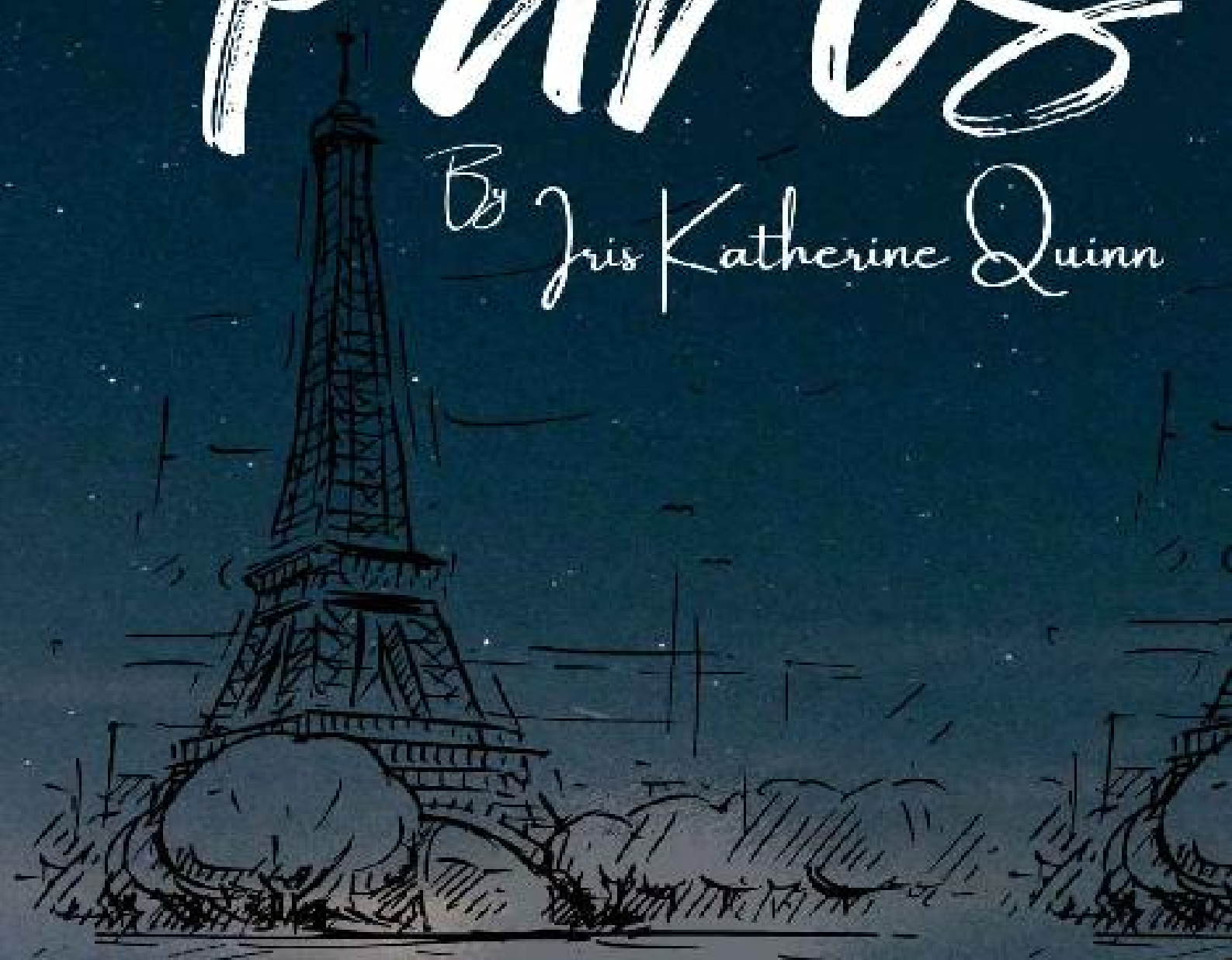


The
Stars
Over
Paris

By Iris Katherine Quinn



The Stars Over Paris

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The Best Things Happen in the Dark

Being a thief is hard. The adrenaline rush is fun. The money is great. But sometimes I wish I'd become a secretary.

I'm originally from a small town in Ohio. I'd mention the name of the place, but I'd really rather forget it. I was an only child born into a family with two loving parents; I had plenty of friends and a devoted dog named Chester. Life was good.

That all changed when my dad died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage when I was ten. My mother was never very good at being alone, so she quickly remarried.

The man she married—my stepfather—started touching me. An innocent pat on the butt at first, but by the time I was fourteen, I could see the look in his eye when he stared at me. I started locking my door at night, making sure to never be with him alone. When I was sixteen, I left to live with my high school boyfriend, and I never looked back. I escaped. All was good.

Then I turned eighteen.

My boyfriend was great. Gorgeous, sweet, and always there for me in my times of need. I, as many teenage girls do, desperately wanted to get married to the boy of my dreams. He had played varsity football in high school, was elected school president, and voted prom king all in our senior year. There was absolutely nothing not to love about the guy.

When he suggested that we go backpacking in Europe before we went to college, I thought it was a great idea. And it *was* a great idea. The freedom of world travel, the adult pleasures of being together, the feel of hedonism that only Europe can provide—it was an absolute blast.

We did it all. The two of us hit the British Isles, the Mediterranean, all the Nordic countries, and then, in a flash, we were off to Paris. The city of dreams. The city of romance and intrigue. I was drunk on our adventure and absolutely couldn't *wait* to get there.

We were in the glorious city of Paris for three days when it all came to a screeching halt. Because one day, out of nowhere, he was gone.

He had met a waitress at the La Boisson, an exclusive bar that we had absolutely no business being in. She was a fellow American who studied computer science at the Paris-Sorbonne University. After letting me know about the instant love affair in a five-lined text, he went home with her instead of me. Talk about an unexpected turn of events.

Young, devastated, and completely lost. I had no education, no money, no citizenship, and no future back home. That left

me with three options—prostitution, begging, or thievery. Since the idea of having sex with strangers was out of the question, and I certainly am not one to beg, I chose the latter, and it's been working for me ever since.

That's the short story of how I find myself in my current situation. Alone, in the dark, in an upstairs bedroom about to steal a hundred grand worth of jewels from one of the richest investment bankers in France.

The lady of the house has taken the kids to Madrid to visit her parents for the week, and her multi-millionaire husband is having sex in the room below me with his mistress. He is so wrapped up in their lovemaking that I can hear the headboard banging against the wall from up here. That's one of the benefits of being a thief. You get to peek inside the underbelly of people's lives and take what they don't even know is missing.

I've already pinched two pearl bracelets, a Tiffany diamond necklace, and a stack of 24-carat gold hoops. That will have to be all for tonight. I'm sure they won't even miss them. I've left the emerald earrings and the jewelry that the wife typically wears when they go out. She'll probably think that she misplaced the other pieces somewhere in the house, or left them at one of their five properties around France.

That's one of my secrets. Never clean them out. When you steal, take just what you need and get the hell out. They won't even know they've been robbed. I never leave a place in shambles, with closets ransacked and drawers thrown

haphazardly on the ground. That's amateur hour. There will be nothing out of place by the time I exit the third-story window that I came in through.

The show on the way down is quite something. Mr. Investment Banker has both of his mistress's legs wrapped around his neck and she's digging her cherry-red nails into his chest.

But I can't be concerned with that right now, I've got to get these pieces fenced...*fast*.

The Perfect Mark

Lauren

I used to watch old movies when I was a kid. My mom thought it would develop character better than Saturday morning cartoons would. To Catch a Thief was my absolute favorite. But I never wanted to be Grace Kelly. Nope, I wanted to be Cary Grant. The mysterious thief called “The Cat”, who would disappear into the night with a bag of priceless jewels. If my mom could see me now, I’m sure she’d disapprove.

My first jobs were pickpocketing unsuspecting tourists. Next came hotel rooms. But only the high-end ones. I’d never stayed in one place for too long and I never let myself get recognized. I tried my best not to develop close relationships because I knew they would be my downfall. I got in, took what I wanted, then disappeared. My work was clean that way, and it became very lucrative for me.

After a while, I found myself on the French Riviera. I decided that if I had to be all alone in this world, I’d at least be where the sun shines almost 365 days out of the year. I took a fake name, a fake identity, and learned to speak fluent French

all within the first year of being here. It's truly amazing what desperation will make you do; who it will make you become.

I go by the name Marceline Levesque, a poor girl who died when she was less than a year old. But my real name is Lauren. Lauren Ellis.

Just like The Cat, I sneak into darkened rooms, take small pieces of gold and jewels, and sell it for cold hard cash.



“My darling, I will give you eighty-five thousand euro for what you have brought me this morning.”

“What?” I glare at the old man standing in front of me. He takes another puff of his cigarette and looks back at me. “This haul is worth at least one hundred and fifty thousand euro on the black market. The diamond necklace alone is worth one hundred grand. You know that damn well, Le Bault.”

It's so hard to find a good fence these days. If I didn't worship the ground he walks on, I'd get rid of the old man and find someone who could promise me thirty cents on the euro. I cased that villa for two whole months. Following the wife around, learning her routine, the kids' names, even the nanny's work schedule. I deserve every cent that's coming to me. Not to mention that I had to take the midnight train back home from Cannes.

“Yes, that's true, but the stones will have to be cut into smaller ones and the settings smelted. That costs money, Marceline.”

I look at him and cross my arms in disgust. All he does is smile and take another puff of his cigarette. We remain silent for over a minute before he finally concedes.

“My dear. I’ll give you ninety thousand, but that is final. The extra five will come out of my cut if I can’t find a buyer at that price.”

“Thank you, Le Bault.”

“Mon plaisir ma chérie.”

He reaches for my head with his calloused old hands and kisses me on the forehead. What can I say? I love the old man with all my heart. The stodgy old man standing in front of me is Henri Le Bault, and he’s my one true friend. The only person who ever gave a damn about me in this whole entire world.

“Please tell me you still have a buyer for the watch.”

His face lights up. “Yes my dear, an eager one.”

“Perfect.”

The watch I’m referring to is a Patek Philippe Grand Complications. It holds that odd name because of the tiny pieces that work together in its base to tell time, the date, and even phases of the moon—they are known as *complications*. Who knew, right?

I knew nothing about luxury watches until I was introduced to the Patek Philippe by Le Bault. He has more than one enthusiastic buyer for the timepiece, and they’re willing to pay top dollar for one of the most expensive watches ever

produced. A mint condition original is worth six million retail, but only 3.4 million on the black market. It's not a lot, but it's enough to save me from my current life, enough to get out for good.

As luck would have it, I happen to know of a guy who owns one—a multi millionaire named Roger Toussaint. He's a tall man. Grey hair. Muscular. Handsome as hell. He's the kind of man who has a different woman on his arm every night of the week. Every time he's caught by the paparazzi leaving a dinner or a business function, he's wearing the Patek Philippe casually on his wrist.

He has it. I want it.

Getting my hands on it will allow me to finally retire. To stop putting my safety on the line. I want to go back to school and live a legit life. But I don't want to do that being broke—I want to do it in style.

I've had my eye on the guy's villa for over six weeks now, and the intricate watch with the brown leather strap is prime for the taking.

His neighbors have been kind enough to go on an extended vacation and their red-tiled roof is the perfect location to scope out his place. With military-grade binoculars, I can see right into every room of his home. I practically feel like one of his staff.

Speaking of staff, he only has three: a private secretary, a driver, and a chef. I don't see anyone else. He's thrown two bashes during the time that I've been watching him—a

modern-day Louis XV costume ball, and a fundraiser for children's cancer research. Both times, he removed the watch for the party. Both times, he changed into his tux and kept the watch in his study.

You might think that he puts a timepiece of such value in a safe, or at least some sort of lockbox. But he doesn't. He keeps it in his study drawer like an idiot.

As I walk out of Le Bault's tiny curio shop on the waterfront, I put my long blond hair up in a casual bun. I always wear a rubber band on my wrist just in case I need one. As I head to my home on the marina, I go over each move I'm going to make so that when tomorrow comes, my mind will be attuned to each step of the plan without fear or hesitation. This will be my very last job, so it has to run perfectly.

My place is nice. Small, but nice. It's an old forty-five-foot sailing yacht with a raised wooden deck. I moor it here in Toulon, a small port town about an hour and a half outside of Cannes. It's my only material possession in this world, and I love it to death. Tonight, I'm going to let myself fall asleep to the rocking waves and dream about a better future for myself.

Another Day Another Gala

Toussaint

Another day. Another Gala. I have four women on the list to accompany me tonight, but I can only bring one. They don't exactly enjoy each other's company. Madeleine is wonderful, but she always wants to stay over. Camille is an option, but her husband's in town. That leaves Margeaux and Pauline.

"Ms. Fournier, will you please send Margeaux Barbier an invitation to the party by messenger? Oh, and send her some flowers as well." She might not forgive me for the late invite, but I have a feeling I can soften her up. She knows from experience that I always make things up to her.

"Oui monsieur." She flashes a warm efficient smile in my direction.

Ms. Fournier quietly gets up from the opposite side of my desk and starts swiping her smartphone with all the speed and grace of a true professional. Evelyn Fournier is my savior. She does everything for me. She organizes my parties like a machine—the caterer, the security, even the coat checkers. The woman always has everything covered. I don't have to lift a

finger. By the time people start coming in, which will be in a few short hours, all I will have to do is show up. Ms. Fournier has made the last five years bearable for me. She's been a constant source of order and stability in the whirlwind of business meetings, parties, and social events that keep my businesses running.

I'd better start getting ready. Ms. Fournier will take care of the food and the security detail, but I like to be the first person to welcome guests when they come through the front door. The elite of the elite. The guests in attendance are the type of people who put the *filthy* in filthy rich. I need them. For my business. For my reputation. They're absolutely necessary for my survival. They come to my home to mingle, dance, and get drunk enough to forget how much effort it takes to stay on top.

"Mr. Fournier, do you have everything handled, or do you need me for anything else?"

"Non, M. Toussaint, everything is handled. The messenger is on his way to the home of Ms. Barbier. I'll let you know when she responds."

"Perfect."

I have a nagging feeling this afternoon. A tension up around my neck. I had it when I woke up and it hasn't left me. It's like a soft buzz of pent-up energy. I'm not quite sure if it's good energy or bad, but I know I don't like it. Maybe Margeaux will be able to help me get it out of my system. Maybe I just need a good screw. A quick one. The woman is good at that. *Very* good.

A Party in Full Swing

Lauren

The party Roger Toussaint is throwing this evening is a lavish one. The kind that requires additional staff—added security, a coat checker, extra kitchen staff, and a caterer.

That's where I come in.

People think that thieves climb through air vents. Like there's a whole labyrinth of them in the interior of a home. They're wrong. You'd have to be a twelve-year-old to make that happen. The older homes on the French Riviera sometimes have dumb waiters but they've usually been permanently locked or pulled out altogether.

No, my *modus operandi* is far simpler. It consists of an ordinary server's outfit and a lock pick. A servant's outfit of any kind is invaluable. I've gotten out of a jam more than once by simply telling a hotel guard that I've gotten myself lost on my first day of employment. I have a special bewildered look that I use, and it works *every* time. And I'll use it tonight if I have to. But it won't come to that. I've planned this for too long, and taken every diversion into account.

I've been watching Toussaint's daily routine for over a month straight. No dogs to start barking, and no camera except at the front door. He has an exceptionally small private staff. Just a personal chef who is off tonight, a driver who is on call, and a private secretary named Evelyn Fournier. Everyone else who will be here tonight is a stranger, contracted only for the event. Even the security is hired out. They don't know him and he doesn't know them. And the alarm system will be turned off for the occasion.

Here's the brilliant part of my plan—I've gotten a legit job with the caterer who he's hired to serve the guests tonight. I've come to learn that the wealthy people of Cannes always use the same three elite caterers. I have stolen a waitress outfit from all three just in case, but tonight I don't need to wear one of my pilfered polyester button-down dresses, because tonight I'm actually getting paid to steal, and it feels great. Once I take the watch, I'll go back to serving the elite residents of the French Riviera brie-stuffed mushrooms and champagne. Then I can say goodbye to thief life forever.

I've been on the floor for only about twenty minutes, holding trays of champagne, cocktails, and various hors d'oeuvres, when I look across the vast expanse of the living area to see him—Toussaint—the man himself.

He is simply magic. Operating like a well-oiled clock, he works the crowd. First, he laughs and says a few witty words to one of the lucky guests, then he switches gears to greet the next person. He's a real professional. The absolute perfect host.

I've watched the man from a distant rooftop, but nothing quite prepares you for seeing him in the flesh. He is gorgeous. His white tux wraps around the muscles on his six foot three frame, and his silver hair makes him truly stand out from the other guests.

As expected, there's a beautiful redhead on his arm by the name of Margeaux Barbier. She's locally famous for being locally famous. She can be seen at all the hot spots on the Riviera seven days a week. Standing at five foot nine, the woman is radiant in a black dress that cascades down her body to gently brush the red oak floors. As I stare in amazement, Toussaint, just for a split second, locks eyes with me. I almost drop my tray, but I steady it just in time to disappear back into the crowd.

An hour into the party, it's finally time to make my move. This is the magic time when, at height of the celebration, it has the most people in attendance. They are getting drunk, laughing, and swirling on the rented dance floor. I need a large crowd to take his attention away from what I'm going to do next. He's probably had a few drinks by now too, chatting the night away with Ms. Barbier. Who knows, maybe they're making out in the corner somewhere. What I *do* know, is that it's go time.

Today is Friday. I'll have the watch fenced by Monday morning.

I walk up the stairs to his private study and lean against the door, making quick work of the lock. It opens quietly on

command without making even the slightest creak. I shut the large wooden door behind me and make my way to Toussaint's desk as my eyes adjust to the pitch-blackness of the room. I stand, just for a minute blinking the blindness away, then with my eyes finally in focus, I begin to see the contents of the room. I can make out shapes, outlines of the desk, and the drawers within it. I run my fingers over to the right-hand drawer next to his leather chair and pull on the handle to open it. There it is just as I had planned—the Patek Philippe.

I grab the watch, put it in my pocket, and silently congratulate myself on a job well done.

I make it halfway across the room when the fucking door opens.

A Light in the Darkness

Lauren

“Hello, young lady.”

I can only see a gigantic silhouette standing against the light of the doorway. Two equally gigantic men are on each side of him. I know right away by his husky voice, full of command, that Roger Toussaint is the man who is speaking. He reaches for the light and flicks on the switch.

Keep it together, Lauren. Do what you do best.

“I’m so sorry. I think I’ve gotten myself lost.” My voice is so artificially smooth that I’m sure I have him convinced that I’m just some silly server who zipped when she should have zagged. No harm, no foul. “Can you gentleman please tell me where I might find the bathroom?”

He looks at me and smiles.

“Please hand me my watch.”

I was wrong. He didn’t buy it. What can I do but give the man what he wants? I casually walk over to him, put out my hand, and drop the watch into his. Damn, he has big hands. I

look up at his equally big chest, square shoulders, and exquisite face.

“May I go?” A foolish thing for me to ask, but I’d thought I’d take a shot at it.

“No, you may not.”

I’m studying his face. He’s trying to hold in a smile. I can see by the way he bites the side of his lip. If I didn’t know better, I’d say this womanizing, Patek Philippe wearing, French multi-millionaire was *amused*. Like he just caught some little girl rifling through his sock drawer. My emotions lie halfway between petrified and insulted.

I cock my head to the side like an insolent teenager. “Are you going to send me to jail?”

I’ve been doing what I do for ten years now, and I’ve never been caught. This was my grand finale. My last job. This was my ticket out. Now I’m standing in front of a man who has the money and power to put me away for a *long* time. *Damn it, I was almost free.*

“No, I have a party to attend.”

My emotions have just crossed the line into *completely* insulted.

He whispers something to the rent-o-guard.

“Yes, sir.”

One of the gargantuan apes on his security detail comes into the room and escorts me to a small chair in the corner. He has

a set of zip ties. In short order, he ties me to the chair with them. My sense of humiliation is only dimmed by the acute pain of my wrists being shoved against the wooden arms of what I can only imagine is a priceless antique.

Toussaint is still standing in the doorway. I see his lips move. “Lock her in the study,” he whispers. “I’ll be back after the party.”

Wonderful. I still have my lock pick kit in my bra. I think I can manage to get the file out. All I need is an open window to get the hell out of here, and the room has two facing the side of the house.

“Oh,” the bastard continues, “and a man inside as well.”

Thing Number Two walks in.

Shit.

“What if I have to use the bathroom?” The chair that I’m sitting in must be worth a small fortune. If I’m going to be hauled off to jail, I might as well pee all over the thing for a mild sense of revenge.

“I apologize. You’ll just have to hold it.” Before he leaves, he turns to me. “What’s your name?”

“Marceline.”

“Marceline who?” He speaks slowly, with a calm, even timber.

“Levesque.”

“Don’t go anywhere, Ms. Levesque. I’m not through with you quite yet.”

Where the hell am I going to go? I’m tied to a fucking chair.

He closes the door and leaves me alone with the biggest gorilla I’ve ever seen in real life.

The Girl in the Crowd

Toussaint

I noticed her when I came into the dining hall. A blond server with light eyes and freckles, carrying a tray of Shrimp Remoulade. She was the only one looking up. Engaged. Not staring at her feet like the others. For a split second, I caught her eye, then she disappeared into the growing crowd.

I should have known then to keep my eye on her.

Now I've caught her trying to take my Patek Philippe. It's funny, I sometimes question why I order security for my parties at all. As if anyone would be stupid enough to steal from me. My guests are wealthy, influential, and they care deeply about their reputations. They come to these parties to get drunk in secret, perhaps to take a young socialite into the closet for a quick blow job while the wife and kids are safe at home, but they don't come to steal.

I had a bad feeling when I woke up this morning, and now I know why.

I thought the buzzing feeling was bad, but in fact, maybe it was good. I thought I'd go to bed tonight after having a quick roll in the sack with Margeaux. Instead, I've decided to send her home when the party's over so that I can deal with the young woman tied up in my study. Who knew the night would end this way?

Margeaux wraps her arms around me under my jacket and pulls me out onto the dance floor. We spin in unison to the music. Her black dress glides along the floor. The party's in full swing now, with people starting to pack the dance floor alongside us; laughing, drinking, and forgetting about the real world just for a few hours. She wants to fuck me. I can feel it. She grabs my dick in the middle of the dance floor. People are too caught up in their own revelry to notice.

I bend lower to catch her lips in my mouth. She slips her tongue inside it. Fuck, I knew I made the right decision inviting her tonight. She knows just what I want.

We stay out on the dance floor for two more hours.

As the party winds down, and the limos drive away, she asks, "Would you like to take me upstairs?"

"Darling I can't. Not tonight."

She pouts. "Roger, why not?"

Because I have a woman tied up in my study.

"Because I have a plane to catch tomorrow." I speak with a casual tone, hoping she'll believe the lie, and she does.

“It won’t take long.” She reaches down to the inside of my thigh, slowly gliding her hand up my leg. But I catch her wrist before it meets its destination. Pulling her arm up to my mouth, I bite the inside of her wrist as she sucks a breath through her teeth. I need to get her to leave before I change my mind.

“I know sweetheart, but I really must get to bed. Listen, I’ll call you next week and we’ll have lunch. We can do whatever you’d like afterward.”

“*Whatever* I’d like?” Her eyes glisten.

“Yes, whatever you’d like.”

I text my driver to come to get her. He pulls up within five minutes.

After escorting Margeaux to the car, I gently shut the door and walk the steps back up to the front door. I open it to survey the damage.

The party was clearly a success. I look across the living area to the rented dance floor to witness the devastation. Empty liquor glasses on the bar, appetizer plates on the coffee tables, plastic spoons and forks litter the carpet, and a small heap of cigar ash sits on the windowsill. To complete the scene, a pair of black lace panties hang on one of the silk lampshades.

Classy.

I’ve had the couches and chairs moved to the guest house for the night, far away from the well-healed barbarians that attend my celebrations. The pieces will all be put straight

tomorrow, and with the help of Ms. Fournier, it will look as though the party never even happened.

Taking a long stretch, I look at the time. *Wonderful, three in the morning.*

I try to get a quick nap on the couch, but I can't relax. Maybe it's because of the girl tied up in my study who tried to steal the only thing I truly value in this world.

The Morning After

Lauren

Every muscle in my body aches, and my hair has fallen in ringlets over my face. I fell asleep in the chair they tied me to for what must have been at least three hours. My neck is killing me, and I can't feel my fingers. I open my eyes as the sharp morning sunlight comes into view.

When my eyes fully open, who do I see sitting in front of me in his desk chair but the man, the legend, Roger Toussaint. He's still wearing his white tux from the night before, and I have to admit—the son of a bitch looks good in it.

“My apologies for the uncomfortable night's sleep, Ms. Levesque.” It's obvious the guy hasn't had much sleep either, but he still looks like a million bucks. He's the very definition of a silver fox with blue-gray eyes and dark circles around them as if he just stepped out of a coal mine. I'm staring like a schoolgirl. *Stop it. You're a thief, remember? He's just a mark that got the better of you.*

Thick gray hair is cut perfectly around his ears. No wonder women flock to Toussaint. His fortune is nice, but his looks

are magnetic. And the way he holds himself? Like a king.

“How was the party?” I ask, still groggy from sleeping upright in a chair all night.

“The party?” he asks with an annoying sense of grace and calm. “It went well. It just ended an hour ago. I’m sorry to have left you in such an uncomfortable position.” He looks at the chair. My dress. My hair. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he feels a little guilty. Serves him right. He *should* feel guilty. My ass is in pain.

“What time is it?”

“It’s five thirty in the morning.”

“Wonderful.” The sunlight is killing my eyes. I fight to keep them open. “Before you send me off to prison, I have one question.”

“Sure.” He smiles. “Ask away.”

“How’d you catch me? I mean, how’d you know I was in the study?”

“There is a night vision camera that alerts my smartphone to intruders. I could see you as clearly as if the lights were on.”

I shake my head. “No, that’s impossible. I cased this place for almost seven weeks.” I look around the room. “There are no cameras except the one at the front door.”

“There’s only one interior camera in the entire house—and it’s in *this* room.”

“Where is it?” I see no sign of a camera. No light. No wires. Nothing.

“None of your business,” he says with a hint of a grin.

My annoyance comes back in full force. If he’s going to have me arrested, there’s no need to be smug about it. He should just get it over with rather than laugh at me.

He doesn’t say a word. He just looks at me with his steely blue eyes.

Toussaint gets up and walks over to me, putting his hand down the front collar of my dress.

Oh, God.

I’m overcome by an overwhelming sense of fear as he puts his hand down my bra. My body stiffens. I can’t move. “Don’t.”

He pulls out my lock pick kit. “You won’t be needing this.”

I can see the joy in his eyes. The joy of catching a thief. The joy of rubbing it in my face. He’s sitting in front of me free, and I’m tied up like a wild animal. What’s worse is that I don’t know what today will bring, but whatever comes, I’m sure it will end inside a jail cell—and he thinks it’s funny.

“Have you called the police yet or what?” I roll my eyes.

“No Marceline, I haven’t.”

“Well, go and do it then,” I shout. My voice gets louder when I’m upset, but the man isn’t fazed. He’s as cool as a

multi-million dollar cucumber. He sits there calmly and smiles. The bastard.

“How about a bite to eat before you are carted off to jail? I hear prison food is atrocious.” He gets up and takes a small knife out of his pocket, then he walks behind my chair. Gently, he slips it under the zip ties. I’m finally free. It’s nice to feel my hands again. As I rub my wrists, the blood begins to flow to my fingers.

“Come down to the kitchen. We can eat.”

He walks out of the room like Adonis, expecting me to follow. The arrogance of the man is astounding. I have half a mind to jump out the window and hope I land in a tree, but the security guy that spent the night with me is still standing dutifully in the corner.

The kitchen is on the ground floor and it’s about the size of a small Parisian café complete with floor-to-ceiling bay windows and beautiful Moroccan tile that you’d expect from old money. There is a small breakfast nook set up for two people—two sets of silverware, two glasses, orange juice, and a cream and sugar set. Clearly, he already had this planned.

Perfect. Breakfast for a prisoner. I bet he’s getting a real kick out of this.

“Have a seat.” He gestures to a padded chair near the window. Looking out into his backyard, I’m awestruck by the sheer wealth of it all. Sculpted topiaries. A pool. There’s even a large tiled fountain with koi swimming in it. It must be nice to live like this. Not having a financial care in the world.

His personal chef comes out with a full display of food.

“Thank you, Maxime.”

“Oui, Monsieur.”

Toussaint returns his gaze to mine. “I hope you like eggs.”

Maxime pulls food off a large food cart and places plate after plate delicately on the table—scrambled eggs, fruit of every description, and platters of bacon and sausage—it’s all there, anything I want. I feel like Cinderella after the ball.

“I do. Thank you.”

I scoop a small helping of scrambled eggs onto my plate with sausage and a few slivers of cantaloupe.

“Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes, please.”

He takes off the black bow that’s been hanging from around his neck and places it on the table. Then he picks up the silver pot of coffee and watches the stream fall perfectly into the cup.

“So.” He pauses and threads his hands together.

Awesome. He wants to start a conversation. “What do you want me to say, Toussaint?”

“For starters, I want to hear all about how you thought you could steal from me and get away with it?”

I’m getting irritated all over again. I was caught doing what I do best. I don’t need the third degree from the man I intended to steal from. “Blind faith. Just like all of my other jobs.”

“No one steals on blind faith.”

“No. I planned this job for over a month and a half, day in and day out. Watching your every move. There. Are you satisfied?” I push my plate away.

“Go on. I’m all ears.”

He has no idea how defeated I feel or how embarrassed I am for letting myself down like this. I’m just a joke to this man. I keep talking so that I won’t break down and cry. “It was supposed to be my last job.”

He leans back in his chair, casually taking a sip of orange juice. “Wow. So you were caught red-handed doing your last job? Isn’t that a little...what’s the word I’m looking for— cliché?”

“Yes. Yes it is, thank you. I’m glad you’re enjoying this. Are you going to call the police? Because I have half a mind to call them myself at this point. I don’t enjoy being made fun of.”

“I’m not making fun of you, and I’m not going to call the police, Ms. Levesque. Not until you’ve calmed down and gotten some food in your system.”

The bastard is being condescending now.

“Why? So you can send me to jail on a full stomach? How kind of you.” I put down my fork and drop it onto my discarded plate. “Why are you keeping me here? Because I refuse to become your sex slave Toussaint. It’s not going to happen.”

He lets out a giant roar of laughter. “That’s disappointing.”

“I don’t see the humor in that whatsoever.”

I look at the food spread out before me, but I’ve lost my appetite. Toussaint is just playing with me, like a cat who catches a mouse, and after batting it around for a while, loses interest and leaves the poor rodent in the dirt to die.

“Then why *are* you keeping me here?”

“Because I’ve never met a real-life thief before. One who has the audacity to saunter into my private study and steal from me.” He takes another sip of orange juice. “One who is stupid enough to use her real name with the catering company she’s using as a front. I would assume that they know you by sight at the police department, Ms. Levesque. Am I correct?”

“No. This might surprise you, but I’ve never been caught.”

“You’re right. I’m surprised.”

Ouch, that one stung.

“If you hadn’t been standing in the doorway, two seconds later I would have been back at the party serving drinks. Nine times out of ten, people don’t pay attention. It’s the one out of ten that you have to look out for. They’ll get you every time.”

“Am I that one person out of ten?”

I take a sip of coffee. “Yes.”

“So, how much does a thief like you make in a year?” He raises a single eyebrow. Damn, those eyes are blue.

“In a good year? One million euro.”

He practically spits out his orange juice. “You must be joking.”

“No, I’m not joking.” I take a deep breath before explaining the downsides of my profession. “The problem is, you have to steal three million worth of goods to make that much. The items have to be fenced, sometimes they have to be reset or repaired, and other times, precious metals have to be smelted. A person has to risk capture to do what I do. After last night, I was going to get out of the game for good.”

“So, I ruined your last score, huh?” He slowly removes his cuff links, which must be worth a fortune by themselves. By the way they catch the light of the window. It’s clear that they’re constructed of real diamonds set in a titanium bezel. Then he takes off his jacket. The smell of some sort of delicious aftershave comes off his body in waves. “I almost feel bad.”

“Oh really? How bad? Would you like to give me the watch and call it a day?”

“No.” He smiles.

“I’m glad I can entertain you with my incompetence, Toussaint.” I shove a final mouthful of egg and swallow it down. “Do you have cameras in the bathroom?”

“No, of course not. I told you, the only camera is the one that caught you.” He puts his cuff links in his pocket.

“May I use it, please?”

“Absolutely. It’s right around the corner.” His eyes follow the hallway past the refrigerator. “We can finish our discussion when you return. And I *expect* you to return.”

When All Else Fails—Jump

Lauren

I've never seen such opulence in a bathroom before. The walls are covered in silk wallpaper with gold flecks and images of tropical jungles. Running my finger along the wall to feel the smooth texture, I can only imagine what a square foot of this stuff would cost. The floors are tiled to match. Of course, the sink isn't ceramic, but copper. It accents the rest of the space perfectly. The soap? Coconut naturally. And this is just the guest bathroom.

“Unbelievable.”

I wasn't lying when I told Toussaint that I needed to use the toilet, because I do. Desperately. But I did neglect to tell him that I planned to leave through the window.

But what did he expect? Security left after the party, and if he can't keep an eye on me, then he gets what he deserves. I didn't enjoy his charming pretense of playing my endearing host before dropping me on the doorstep of the authorities.

The water isn't even finished flushing before I open the window. The air outside is fresh. The smell of freedom enters my nostrils right behind it.

There is a mass of thick bushes under the window, but I've been through worse. The few cuts and scrapes that I'm about to endure will heal in a matter of days, then I'll be on to the next score.

Here it goes...

Sure it hurts falling legs first into the thick brambles, I can feel my skin getting gouged by sharp laurel leaves, but I'll be fine. I fall out of the bush onto the mud-soaked ground. The sprinklers must have just been on. I quickly slip onto all fours.

“Damn it.”

I rise to my feet and look down at myself. My legs are a bloody mess and my dress is covered in mud, just like my hands and feet.

Freedom is rarely free, Lauren. Time to get out of here.

There's a small gate between two large masses of foliage. It's just a few yards away. It looks like the best way out—so I run.

I open the door. I close it. Freedom.

But then, before I know what the hell is happening, I'm grabbed by the arm. The man doing the grabbing can only be described as Hercules with a body covered in the lamest tattoos you've ever seen. The guy's hand is the size of my entire forearm.

“Are you looking for the bathroom again?” he asks. “It’s the window you just crawled out of.” He smiles wide, his gold tooth showing. It’s one of the Goliaths from the security team that Toussaint hired for the party last night. The one guarding the study door.

I guess Toussaint didn’t send security away after all. The jackass.

The monster who grabbed me has the nerve to pull me up and swing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. All the screaming and kicking I’m doing has little effect.

“Put me down...*tu imbécile!*”

“Non.”

“I said put me down.”

“Non,” he repeats. “I should give you a spanking, but M. Toussaint told me not to lay a hand on you.”

His hulking body trembles as he laughs. He walks through a small side door of the house, ducking down and twisting because of his massive size. My body still flails over his shoulder. I’d like to get in one good kick before he puts me down, but he’s holding me too tight.

I quickly find myself right back where I started—at the breakfast table.

Toussaint is silent as he takes another sip of juice.

The Little Bird Returns

Toussaint

“Thank you, Jean-Marc.”

“Yes, sir.”

He’s still grabbing her arm. *Hard*. Did she really think I’d let her slip out of the bathroom window? How stupid does she think I am?

I know her name is not Marceline Levesque. It’s Lauren Ellis. I had the security team that I hired for the party look into her background. There was a missing persons report in Ohio that wasn’t too hard to find. Someone out there, in America, loved her enough to file it. I don’t blame her for lying about her name. She’s a caged animal. She has probably been one since the day she was born. Not trusting. I understand completely. It can be a cruel world sometimes.

The sheer bravery of the young woman standing in front of me with mud on her dress and blood dripping down her legs is astonishing. With all my business dealings, million-dollar acquisitions, even with all the high-stakes poker games I’ve

ever played, I would never have the audacity to walk into a stranger's study and steal his property, in the middle of a party attended by hundreds of people no less. What could have led her life so astray? She's clearly smart, beautiful, and resourceful. Would I have made the same decisions if I were in her shoes? Maybe. Who knows? The truth is, looking at this girl with bloody scabs clotting on her knees and laurel leaves caught in her hair, there's a part of me that really wants to find out what the hell happened to her.

"Will you please ask this gorilla to take his hand off of me?"

Wow. She's indignant. After coming into *my* home trying to steal *my* watch. *She's* the one who's upset. Remarkable.

"Thank you, Jean-Marc." It only takes a glance from me to encourage him to release his grip. He lets her go and walks away from the table and out of the room.

"Yeah, *thanks* Jean-Marc." She pulls her arm back and rubs where he grabbed her.

"My apologies Ms. Levesque. I forgot to mention, I've asked security to stay on for the next few days." Her death stare is less than flattering. I hope she doesn't have a knife stuck somewhere under her dress. I could really be in trouble with a stare like that. I can't quite judge the color of her eyes because tendrils of stringy blond waves are getting in the way, but the closest color I've ever seen to them would be hazel.

"The next few *days*? How long do you intend to keep me here?"

“As long as I please.” I twirl my glass of orange juice as if it’s the glass of whiskey that I’d prefer it was.

“Why don’t you just call the police and have me arrested? I might be safer with them than with you.”

That’s it, I’ve had enough. Playtime is over.

“If you try to do something like that again,” I look toward the bathroom, “you *will* be leaving in a police car. I have you on camera with my six million dollar watch in your hand, remember?”

She stands a little straighter. “I’m pretty sure keeping someone captive against their will is equally illegal.”

“I’m sure it is,” I agree.

She crosses her arms. “Cocky bastard.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Sit down.”

“No.”

“Please sit down. I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to have a conversation. That’s all. I promise.”

Her stance softens. She limps over to the chair that she ate breakfast in. Her legs are in worse shape than I realized. I think even *she* is surprised by the pain.

“Would you like another cup of coffee?”

“Yes, please.” She’s becoming defeated, and it’s showing. Poor thing.

I pour her another cup of black coffee. She puts cream and sugar in it with muddy hands. This is the moment, seeing her stir her coffee, that I decide what to do with her—this beautiful little monster.

“I’m not going to call the police. You can relax.”

“I’m sorry Toussaint, but I don’t believe you,” she says, taking a sip. “I’ve never met a Frenchman who could be true to his word.”

“That’s funny, I’ve never met an American that I could stand for longer than two minutes.”

“Awesome. I can get out of your hair. Just let me walk out the front door.”

The little girl is quick-witted. That’s for certain.

“Listen, I want to make a deal with you, Ms. Levesque. Spend the next week with me, and at the end of it, you can have your freedom. I want company for a few days. Just until I go to Paris for Fashion Week and take care of a few business obligations. I tire of eating alone.”

She looks at me like I just laid a trap, lowering her coffee cup from her lips. “You must have a little black book filled with names. What’s your game, Toussaint?”

She doesn’t trust me.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why don’t you call one of them?”

“Because I don’t want my dick sucked. I just want company. The kind of company that only a professional thief can offer.” I can see the fear in her eyes. She wants to know my angle. She doesn’t believe that there isn’t one. “I want conversation. Who to better converse with than a thief who was caught committing her last job?”

She doesn’t answer, so I try to keep talking just to ease her mind. “How old are you, twenty-two, twenty-three?”

“I’m flattered,” she replies. “I’ll be twenty-eight in two weeks. Working in my profession is a game for the young, and the house always wins. If you stay in it long enough, you’ll get caught. My twenty-seventh year was supposed to be my last one playing.”

She studies me.

“What are you, fifty-one...fifty-*two*, maybe?”

The guess makes me laugh. It’s a common one. “I’m only forty-one.”

She sits there with a look of complete awe, as they all do when they hear my actual age.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be insulting.”

“I know you weren’t, Ms. Levesque. I have a genetic predisposition to going gray early. My father had a full head of gray hair when he was thirty-five, and so did I. So what do you say to our deal?”

“You’ll let me walk away after a week?”

“Yes.”

“No sex slavery.”

I hope to God she’s trying to be funny, but I can’t tell. “No, no sex slavery. You have my word.”

She softens ever so slightly. “You *promise* to let me go without calling the police?”

“I promise.”

My tone is flat but sincere. I’m not playing with the girl. When we return, she can steal to her heart’s content as long as she stays the hell away from my villa.

“Okay, deal.” She offers me her muddy hand, and I shake it.

This is perfect. I have a lot to take care of in Paris, and it’s easier having a woman by my side while doing it. A woman I won’t have a problem saying goodbye to when it’s all over. Besides, I’d like for her to know what it’s like to feel safe. Even if it’s only for a few days. She’ll know what it’s like to be fed, clothed, and treated like a woman without having to steal for it.

“Am I supposed to stay in this server’s uniform? I’d bet you’d like that.”

She glares at me. It’s an obstinate glare. The kind that says ‘screw you’ without actually saying it. I find it amusing. So many women want to bend down at my feet and suck my cock, that it’s refreshing to see a woman dislike me this much.

I look her up and down. She's a sight to be seen. "No, I have plenty of clothes in the guest bedroom. I'm sure there are quite a few pieces that will fit you."

I need Ms. Fournier.

She comes into the room with the touch of a button on my phone. It's a handy little app made just for households with staff. My driver, my chef Maxime, and Ms. Fournier, are all just a swipe away.

"Ms. Fournier, will you please show Ms. Levesque to the guest bedroom?"

Checkmate

Lauren

Toussaint touches the screen of his smartphone. A woman walks in. It's Evelyn Fournier, his devoted private secretary. She's plain, but there is a brightness in her cold brown eyes. As expected, the woman turns her attention to him, not me. I'm sure she has a lot to clean up after a party like the one he threw last night. A stranger at his breakfast table is just another addition to her list of things to do. He asks her to take me upstairs to find some clothing, and of course, she agrees because she has no choice. But she looks at me like I'm a bug on the wall.

"Do you mind if I take a shower first?" I ask. I'm caked in dried mud, and the bloody scrapes on my legs are beginning to clot.

"Absolutely." He looks at his devoted servant. "Ms. Fournier, will you please escort Ms. Levesque to the upstairs lavatory? Provide her with clean undergarments as well."

She looks me up and down, trying her best to hide her disgust.

“Yes, monsieur.”

As we leave the kitchen, I turn to him. “Toussaint, I—”

I don’t know exactly what to say.

“Yes, Ms. Levesque?”

“Thank you.”

He responds with a silent smile that would melt butter.

Evelyn Fournier looks to be about thirty-two years old, and she’s precisely what a private secretary should look like—sharp eyes, glasses, short bobbed brown hair. She has a slim body that she covers with a variety of turtleneck cardigans. She has no idea that I’ve been watching her for the last six weeks from the neighbor’s rooftop. About three weeks into my surveillance, I surmised that she must buy her clothing in bulk or something. I swear her sweaters are all *exactly* the same, just made in different colors.

She leads me up the stairs to one of the many bathrooms in the place. It’s just as exquisite as the one downstairs, but twice the size. The shower is all glass with inlaid tiles that are bluer than the ocean itself. The jacuzzi tub is deep. Standing in the doorway, Ms. Fournier glares at me.

“Un moment... *stay*,” she says as if she’s yelling commands at a domesticated dog.

She comes back a minute later with a lacy bra and underwear. The bra is practically see-through, and the underwear is the kind that shows off a woman’s butt cheeks almost completely. It’s a message. She’s trying to tell me that

I'm lesser. That I'm a lowlife who would wear that kind of thing. I've met many servants in my life in France. Each and every one of them has a quiet way of voicing their frustrations; almost invisible ways to insult those whom they despise. The masters of the house never know what's really going on. But *I* can see it. Ms. Fournier is no different from any of them. She doesn't like me, and this is her silent way of voicing her disapproval. I'll be waiting for her to spill something on my shirt, or "forget" something important that I might need. Those are two classic domestic offenses. They look like innocent accidents, unprovable, but they're committed by design.

"Merci."

I close the door behind me. I have never wanted a shower this bad in my entire life.

I turn on the water and watch it stream perfectly out of the copper heads. There is one from the top of the shower and two from the sides. As the steam starts to billow, I remove my clothes and step inside. It's heaven.

The dried mud falls off my body in clumps. My stinging legs start to get clean as the dried blood swirls down the drain.

I stand there in warmth, complete comfort, and safety. It's pure bliss. I can't imagine feeling this kind of pleasure every day. Toussaint probably stopped appreciating his lifestyle years ago. This is just another day for him. But I appreciate it—the beautiful tile, the hot water, and the sunlight coming through the bathroom window—all of it. Right now, in this very second, I am happy.

After about twenty minutes in the shower, I finally turn off the water.

The towels are soft and fluffy like cream-colored clouds. There's only one cotton robe folded next to the sink. Of course, it's Toussaint's size, but I don't care. I put it on and let it drag over the floor. Ms. Fournier is waiting outside the door. She has a yellow sun dress for me to wear. Along with a pair of leather sandals.

She escorts me and my dragging robe to the upstairs guest bedroom. It's a small, elegant little room. Perfect for someone like me. It reminds me of my boat back in Toulon. Small. Intimate. Solitary.

Without a word, Ms. Fournier leaves me in the room alone. I look around my new living quarters, exploring it in all of its parts. There are two small windows that look out onto the backyard and a single full-sized bed covered in a quilted silk bedspread. I open the walk-in closet to see that it's filled with women's clothes. A can only assume that they are all my size. Ms. Fournier might be irritated with my presence, but that doesn't stop her from doing her job efficiently.

I walk across the room and look over to the window that faces the backyard. There is a small guest house way in the back. I can barely see the security detail sitting there smoking through the lit window. *Ah, so that's where they're hiding.*

After about half an hour of getting acquainted with my new surroundings, I walk down the hall to find Toussaint in his study.

I expect him to be diving into his work, but to my surprise, he's playing chess at his desk. It looks like he has an electronic chessboard that plays against him. He's so engrossed in the game that he doesn't even hear me walk in.

"Toussaint?" I whisper so as not to startle him, but he still jumps a little.

"Hello, Ms. Levesque."

He looks me up and down. "That's a nice dress."

"It is. Did you buy it for some lucky lady?"

"Ms. Fournier does that sort of thing for me."

I bet she really enjoys that part of her job.

"Do you play chess?" he asks, looking down at the board.

"I haven't played in years." I squint my eyes. "I don't quite remember the moves. But if you wouldn't mind refreshing my memory, I'd love to play a game."

"Ah." He perks up. "That sounds wonderful. I hate playing against a machine all the time."

He sets up a game for us. I'm white and he's black.

"Alright, let's start with the pawn..."

He explains the moves of each piece in standard chess and we play our first game. It all slowly comes back to me as we play, but in the end, I still get trounced.

"Checkmate." He bites his lip and smiles.

He wins the first game, but I play much better in the second. It takes more effort to finally beat me.

“You win for now Toussaint, but I’d like a rematch if you’re up to it.” I let out an enormous yawn. My eyes are heavy. “Sorry, I haven’t got much sleep lately.”

He scratches his gray afternoon stubble. “We can have a rematch later if you’d like. You look tired.”

It’s only early afternoon, but I have to admit I’m beat. But I’ve already been caught by the guy’s security team twice. I can’t let him beat me at chess, too.

“Are you trying to get out of it?” I ask, blinking my eyes.

He starts to remove the pieces from the board. “Not at all. I can play chess into the night.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“I have a rule that I don’t work on weekends—ever.”

“Not even for an hour or so?”

“No. Not even for an hour or so.” He smiles. “Would you like some warm milk? Cocoa perhaps?”

“Cocoa sounds wonderful.” My mom used to make hot cocoa for me when I was sick. It always put me in a good mood.

Toussaint goes to the kitchen while I study the board for the next round.

Sleeping Beauty

Toussaint

I have no idea how to make hot chocolate, but I figure it can't be that difficult. I pour some milk into a saucepan and heat it up. I throw a cinnamon stick in it and stir at medium heat. There is a small tin of cocoa in the pantry that I see Maxime use every once in a while. I don't see any sugar, but there is a small jar of honey on the shelf. I suppose that will do. I put in a few spoonfuls of chocolate and stir, then I take a sip.

Disgusting. It's not sweet enough.

I squeeze the honey into the pan. It melts gently into the chocolaty warm milk. Then I take another sip. "Ah, perfect."

After putting soft white marshmallows on the top, I take a small sip of the concoction. It's not too bad. My drink is simpler, and I know it from memory. Scotch. Neat.

When I get back to my desk, the girl has her head down on it. She's sleeping. It's been a long couple of days for her, I'm sure.

I put my hand on her back. “Ms. Levesque?” She stirs, but she doesn’t wake up. She’s breathing heavily in a deep sleep. The girl is—as the Americans say—*out like a light*.

“Come here,” I whisper, more to myself than to her.

Carrying her down the hall in my arms, I wonder when the young woman ate a full meal last. I can feel her ribs under her dress. I back into the door to open it, as one of my arms rest under her neck and the other under her scabbed knees. When I open the door, I’m immediately uncomfortable. The guest room is far too cold for her. Someone has left the window wide open.

I lay her softly on the bed, take off her sandals, and put the thick bead spread over her. Then I close the window. The room should warm up quickly.

I look back before I close the door. Without the bad attitude, she looks like an angel when she sleeps. She’s so young.

“Goodnight ma petite voleuse.”

I close the door to play one last game of chess in my office.

Swim Lessons

Lauren

I don't remember how I got to bed, but it was the best sleep I've ever had. It was as if the mattress sucked me in and wouldn't let go. I don't even remember dreaming. I'm still in the yellow sundress that I was wearing yesterday, and my sandals are arranged neatly on the floor. Still a bit groggy, I make my way across the room as the morning light trickles through the window. I know it's early because the garden outside is covered in dew and the sky has that early morning lavender hue still lingering in it.

Looking through the gigantic closet, I see a beautiful silk robe hanging on a padded hanger. A pair of fuzzy white slippers sit beneath it on the floor. I let the sun dress drop to my feet and wrap the robe around myself. The slippers are like walking on air. My wounds don't seem as bad as they were yesterday. As I look down at my bruised legs, I can see the scratches healing.

There's the sound of splashing water coming from outside the window. I look down to see Toussaint swimming. He's

doing laps in true multi-millionaire style—fast, graceful, and totally effortless. He pushes himself hard all the way to the far end of the pool, and does a somersault before pushing himself off the wall to have another go at it. The water must be heated because there's steam coming off of it. I can't help but want to watch him in action, so I make my way downstairs.

Next to the kitchen, there are two large French doors that open up into the backyard. I open them and follow the splashing—and there he is, a Roman god in a swimsuit.

Next to the pool is a small round table with a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a carafe of hot coffee on it. An empty ceramic cup sits next to it. I take a seat and watch the show. In typical French style, he wears a black Speedo, taking long smooth strides one by one. It's really quite beautiful. The strokes he performs are as fluid and strong as the man himself.

Looking down at the table, I would have thought that he'd have a laptop, a tablet, or some kind of technology waiting at his command, but there's nothing more than a copy of *Le Monde*—the French daily afternoon newspaper.

“Hello, Ms. Levesque.”

I look up, a bit startled. “Hello there.”

“I know what you're thinking,” he smiles breathlessly, taking off his swim goggles. He leans his crossed arms over the edge of the pool. “Why does the man read *La Monde*?”

“Yes,” I laugh. “That's exactly what I was wondering.”

“I don’t like to get sucked into social media or news on Sundays. I refuse to even think about it. Sundays are a day for rest and reflection.”

“Wow. That must be nice.”

“It is.” He runs his hand through his wet silver hair. “Would you like to join me? The pool is heated.”

“At this hour?”

“Sure, why not? It’s only 5:45 a.m.”

Is it? Why the hell am I awake right now? ”Um, I’m not dressed.“ I’m trying to come up with any excuse not to get into the water.

“There are swimsuits of every possible description in the pool house.” He nudges his head over to a wooden building past a row of white rose bushes.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, how can I put this?” God, I’m such a loser. “I can’t swim.”

He pulls himself out of the pool, tight Speedos and all. As the water drips off his tense muscles, he grabs a towel from the back of a chair next to the table. Fuck, the man is built like an athlete. His chest hair is as silver as what grows from his head. He is truly stunning. I don’t even mean that as a compliment. It’s just the cold, hard truth.

“You can’t *swim*? Do you live in the South of France, or somewhere else?”

“Yes.” I look down, completely embarrassed. “I live in Toulon. On a boat, in fact.”

He looks at me like I have two heads. “You live on a boat and you can’t swim?”

“It’s tied to a mooring and I have plenty of life jackets. If I were to ever have the need to swim, it would mean something went terribly wrong. I’d probably be as good as dead anyway.”

I don’t know why I have the need to explain, but I do. I’ve always been ashamed of not being able to swim. “I was raised in a small town where there weren’t any oceans to speak of, and the nearest lake to where I grew up was an irrigation ditch used for watering crops. I never learned how to swim, and now the idea of it makes me uncomfortable.”

“Go change.” He looks over at the pool house. “I’m going to teach you how to swim.”

I don’t argue. Now’s as good a time as any to learn, and the pool doesn’t look that deep. I make my way to the pool house as Toussaint pours himself a fresh cup of coffee and waits for me. The way he leans back against the table should be illegal.

He was right. There are tons of different bathing suits in the pool house. Two pieces and one pieces, Speedos and trunks. In every size known to man. I pick a red two-piece that doesn’t show off too much skin. I slip off the robe and slippers and put it on. It fits like a glove.

I make my way back to the pool. He's waiting with a smile.

"Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

He takes my hand. Shivers run through my body. He can see it.

"Are you cold?"

"A little."

"Okay, come on. Let's get you in the water."

He walks me over to the steps leading down into the water. I can't go any further. A half naked woman shaking like a leaf is not a good look. Neither is unadulterated fear.

"It's alright. I have you." His voice is soft. It puts me halfway at ease.

"Okay."

I walk down the first step, then the second. He has my hand firmly in his grasp. The water's warm, almost the same temperature as the morning air. I'm waist-deep in a matter of a few more seconds. He slowly lets go of my hand and walks into the shallow end of the pool.

"Come to me." He has his arms stretched out. "It's not that deep."

I slowly push off the step and glide into the water. He catches me. Just for a second, I'm like a child in his arms. It feels wonderful; innocent and intimate at the very same time.

He hugs me and lets me kick as he walks slowly backward into the deeper area of the pool.

“We won’t go too far. Don’t worry, you can still touch. Trust me.”

As he holds me in his arms, I *do* trust him. I can’t remember the last time I felt safe like this. We practice lowering my head into the water. It’s too much for me at first, and I panic. But he quickly grabs me and lifts me up. We try it a few more times and the fear slowly goes away.

The lesson ends with the two of us splashing around like children in the shallow end. He has this trick that he does with his hands. He squeezes them together just underneath the water line, and they shoot out a perfectly formed spurt of water. I can’t do it and he won’t show me how. He just laughs at me when I try to do it.

“How the hell are you doing that, Toussaint?”

“Family secret,” he laughs.

In the middle of trying to splash back at his water torture, I feel an icy chill rush up my spine. I know exactly what it is, too—someone’s watching us. I always know when someone’s watching. It’s like a sixth sense.

I look around the yard, but no one’s there. I look back at the house, and I don’t see anyone there either. But we’re being watched. I can feel it.

“What’s wrong?” asks Toussaint.

“Nothing, I just got a shiver down my back, that’s all.”

“Let’s practice kicking for a few more minutes, then we need to go. There is a train from Cannes to Paris that leaves in three hours, and we need to be on it.”

“Okay, just a few more laps in the shallow end.”

He smiles. “Wonderful.”

Gare de Cannes

Toussaint

In typical Sunday fashion, the train station in Cannes is packed with all the weary Parisians traveling back home for the workweek. As fun and relaxing as the Côte d'Azur can be, its visitors have to go back to reality at some point. Even if their reality is a place like Paris, it still can't quite compare to the beach cities along the crystal blue Mediterranean coast. The French Riviera charms even the most jaded Parisian.

Gare de Cannes is a beautiful train station. It is almost completely made of glass, with wide open space, and a clean, well-organized boarding area. It's a pleasure to travel out of.

Thankfully, we've arrived in plenty of time. In fact, we're half an hour early, giving us additional time to board. I've never met a woman who could get ready in less than two hours, but *ma petite voleuse* as I have begun to quietly call her, got ready in less than fifteen minutes. I was barely showered and dressed when she was packed, ready to go, and waiting for me downstairs. Imagine, a girl who lives on a boat and can't

swim. I wonder what other secrets she's hiding. There are plenty of them, I'm sure.

"Are you ready to board Ms. Levesque?"

"Ready." Her eyes dash around the station. She's antsy. It's actually rather charming. Lauren is a different type of creature. This kind of experience is new to her. The car, the villa, everything. I have the distinct feeling that the life of a successful thief isn't as glamorous as it's made out to be.

She found a lovely ruffled blouse and high-waisted shorts in the closet. Her blond hair has fallen in tight waves down her shoulders like a mermaid's. The woman certainly cleans up well.

"Which car are we in?" she asks.

"The one up near the front." I grab her hand to keep her near me. I don't want the girl to get lost.

I've purchased a first-class ticket for she and I, along with Ms. Fournier. I can tell Evelyn is not happy with our new guest. I've seen her shoot daggers at her more than once, but she's shown enough professionalism to not do it in front of her. She knows very well that I wouldn't allow it.

"Here, let me take your bag." I hand it to the porter, who stows it away with my bag.

After we climb aboard, it only takes us a few minutes to find our seats. She looks around the train car with a huge smile on her face, just like a kid in a candy store.

The First Game

Lauren

The first-class cabin of the train is not quite as packed as the other compartments. I didn't have to hurry to get ready. I could have stayed another ten minutes in Toussaint's luxurious shower. And, of course, he had his driver take us to the station. A man like Roger Toussaint doesn't have to deal with traffic, lines, or even ticketing. It's all handled for him. All he has to do is give the orders. The man is under no stress whatsoever as he directs us to our seats. The cabin is totally plush and quiet. I *might* just be in love with it.

Toussaint only carries a small briefcase that he puts on the table between us. The seats in this cabin are nice too. They're clean and cushy, way nicer than the ones I'm used to. I've never bought a first-class ticket before—only coach. The seats there are hard and the material is stiff, but they've always gotten me where I need to go.

“What's in there?” I ask.

My electronic chess set, a small laptop, some pens, and a pad of paper. Usually, I play chess against my computer, but

I'm lucky enough to have you here today. Would you like to play?"

"You mean the rematch that you owe me? Sure."

"Do you remember how the pieces move?"

Nice. He's being condescending. "Absolutely."

"Wonderful. Let's play." He smiles.

I know that I'll only see this man for another week or so before saying goodbye forever, but I love the way he smiles. I don't think I'll ever forget it, in fact. I enjoy the way his hand wraps around the pieces as he places them on the board. If I'm being honest with myself, I love the way he does almost everything. Whoever winds up with the man sitting in front of me will be one lucky woman. It might not be *my* fairytale, but he'll be someone else's dream come true, that's for sure. I'm starting to envy her already.

When he finishes setting up the board, he looks at me in eager anticipation. "I've set you up as the white player. Make your first move, Ms. Levesque."

I make the first move and advance my pawn.

"Your turn, Toussaint."

We play for over an hour. Even after he has my king in check, I fight off checkmate for three more moves.

"Checkmate, Ms. Levesque."

Damn. There's that smile again.

"Do we have time for another game?" I hate losing.

“Yes, we have over three hours until we reach Paris.”

After we eat our lunch of *salade verte* and *Jambon beurre* sandwiches, he sets up another game, this time with my side in black and his side in white.

Another hour of play goes by. The beautiful French countryside speeds by us, but I don't look at it. I'm too focused on my next move.

I see Toussaint's eyes raise to look at mine sometimes, but I don't look back. I know I can beat him.

“You're a stealthy player, Mr. Levesque.”

“Thanks.” I know he's trying to break my concentration, and know he's smiling that luscious smile, but I still don't want to look up. My entire life has been a series of planning my next move. I'm not going to stop that practice now. Even if I'm sitting across from Mr. Universe.

He finishes his next move when I see it—a way to put him in checkmate.

A make my set up move. He doesn't see it.

Then he makes the move that I know he's going to make.

The blood rushes quickly through my veins. “Checkmate.”

He's stunned, and he doesn't hide it. After staring at the board for a few long seconds, he starts to laugh. “Good job Ms. Levesque. I underestimated you.”

I am so proud of myself that I don't know what to do. I've beaten Roger Toussaint at chess. But you never know how a

man like him will react to losing. I'm sure he's not exactly used to it. "I hope you're not upset."

"Not at all." He flashes that smile again. "I'll beat you in the next game."

I'm excited at the thought of playing him again. "Great. Can we set one up now?"

"No, I'm afraid not. We only have another half an hour before we arrive in Paris."

He puts his arm up to his chin as he smiles, showing the Patek Philippe front and center. The loss had to sting just a little bit, but he doesn't let it show. Toussaint is that kind of gentleman. Unwavering.

"Toussaint, I have something I need to get off my chest."

"Oh really, is it that you're hiding the fact you're a chess master? That would actually make me feel better."

I laugh. "No."

"I'm on the edge of my seat." He crosses his arms. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"My name is Lauren." The words just fall out of my mouth. I don't know exactly why, but he's been a complete gentleman to me. I feel I owe him the truth somehow. I mean, at least *part* of the truth.

"Is it?" He feigns a look of shock.

"You knew all along, didn't you?"

"Yes, Ms. Ellis, I knew all along."

“Wow, you even know my last name. How?”

“You’ve already beaten me at my favorite game. Let me keep some of my secrets will you?”

My cheeks start to blush. “Will you call me Lauren from here on out?”

“Only if you’ll call me Roger.”

“Okay...Roger.”

The countryside starts to give way to the outer reaches of Paris. In another few minutes, we’re in the heart of the most magical city on earth.

“Are you ready for Paris Fashion Week Lauren?”

“That I am.”

Butterflies start to flutter in my stomach.

Traveling in Style

Toussaint

As we pull up to the Gare De Norde, I'm in the grips of two emotions. The first is utter devastation that I've been beaten at chess, a game I play almost daily, by a woman who was caught red-handed in my study, the other is a sense of happiness that *ma petite voleuse* trusts me enough to tell me her real name. I don't know why it matters to me, but it does. I feel like I've tamed a feral cat.

Lauren is a nice name. It's a popular one in the US. Far more popular than Marceline.

She was thrilled to beat me. I could see it in her eyes. I'll give her the win, but I'll be sure to not let it happen again. I'm rarely beaten by men. I don't think I've ever even played a woman other than my ex-wife. If I'm being honest, it bruised my ego a little. The girl is reckless and headstrong, but she isn't stupid.

The car that I've hired for the trip is waiting in front of the station. A driver stands in front of it with a sign that bears my name. He quickly greets us and ushers the three of us into a

black Bentley, then our bags are loaded into the trunk. Lauren is acting like this happens to her every day. She's quite the little actress.

“So, where are we staying?” she asks, with her eyes darting back and forth, watching the traffic speed by the window.

“The Four Seasons.”

“Nice.” Her tone is one of subdued excitement. She's trying to keep it under wraps, as if I can't see right through her. There's something about her excitement that is infectious. It makes me smile to myself. If I had a dime every time one of my driving companions looked woefully out the window of a town car, I'd be richer than I already am. I like Lauren's exuberance. I can't help it. There's something about her that's—I don't know—*alive*, maybe? Whatever it is, I don't see it as often as I'd like.



The lobby of the Four Seasons is always changing. They have masses of fresh flowers cut to decorate the entryway. Sometimes they are pink, other times they are lavender or rose. Today, the grand lobby is filled with white peonies and larkspur. I have to admit, the scent is glorious. I leave Ms. Fournier to take care of the check-in, while I escort Lauren to the hotel's bar.

She doesn't have a cell phone or passport, which makes things more difficult, but certainly not impossible. I've asked for the connecting suite to my usual room, and they've obliged

without question. She's not an official guest, but having her room connected to mine will make it easier for me to keep an eye on her. Ms. Fournier has her own room reserved down the hall.

It's midday, and there aren't many people in the bar. The bartender comes to greet us.

"Bonjour Monsieur et Mademoiselle, what can I get for you?"

I look over at her. "What would you like to drink, Lauren?"

"I'll have a Kir Royale, thank you." She smiles at the bartender.

"Perfect. I'll have a Manhattan, merci."

Our drinks are placed in front of us.

"So," I take a quick swig of my drink. "Here's is the plan, young lady..."

She listens intently.

"I'm going to leave you for a few hours to conduct some business in La Défense, and then we are going to have dinner. I'll be back here at seven, so please be ready by then."

She takes a small sip of her drink. "Got it."

"Did you bring something to wear?"

"Yes, of course. It's the gold dress with the spaghetti straps," she says, as if I have all the dresses I buy for women memorized. I almost expect her to describe the shoes she thinks I'm aware of, but she doesn't. Instead, she looks around

the bar, taking it all in. I don't blame her. I am always impressed with the Four Seasons' bar. It is the epitome of understated luxury and they make the best Manhattans that I have ever tasted. Velvety and smooth, they go down like warm thin honey. I can tell Lauren isn't a big drinker. She slowly sips her drink as we talk, barely raising her lips to her glass.

We take a few minutes to finish our drinks while Ms. Fournier has our bags taken to our rooms. She finally walks up behind us.

“Your rooms are ready, Monsieur Toussaint.”

“Wonderful. Thank you, Ms. Fournier.”

“You are very welcome.” She smiles and bows her head.

I take one last sip of my drink. “Please escort Ms. Ellis to her suite. I'll wait for the car down here.” I don't care to explain the name change right now. I'll deal with that later if I care to explain it at all.

“Yes, monsieur.” She says with a little less warmth.

“I'll see you at seven, Lauren.”

“Okay, see you then.” She smiles a Kir Royal induced smile.

Sabotage

Lauren

I walk to the elevator as Toussaint disappears into the lobby. Mr. Fournier stands next to me like a stoic prison guard. Finally, after the longest wait I've ever had to endure, the bell rings. As the door opens, we walk inside. She remains completely silent as it ascends to the highest floor. Once we get to my room, she hands me the key card and walks away without a word.

“Merci, Ms. Fournier.”

I watch her walk down the hall to her room and close the door behind her. I'm not even upset. I think the Kir Royal has made me giddy. I haven't had a drink in over two years. Alcohol puts me off my game. But since I'm not going to *be* in the game this week, I figure I might as well enjoy it.

My room is breathtaking. The king-sized bed is soft and white with fresh bouquets of flowers on the surrounding nightstands. Giant windows offer views of the entire city of Paris. An early evening sky has turned a darker blue since we arrived, and wispy clouds float way up high in the atmosphere.

I take off my clothes and slip on a hotel robe. As with everything in this place, it is the absolute height of luxury. Soft and wonderfully sumptuous.

“A girl could get used to this.” I whisper under my breath. I wonder what business Toussaint has to take care of? I bet he’s wheeling and dealing, offering bottom dollar for high-end sunglasses or something. I’m willing to bet he’s a real shark in the bed—I mean, the boardroom.

I leave my feet bare as I visit the mini-fridge and grab a candy bar before crawling into bed.

Just like visiting Paris or drinking a Kir Royal, I do something that I haven’t done in years. I turn on the TV. I don’t own a TV and it’s nice just to veg out for a little while and watch something completely mindless. A childlike excitement flows through me as I change the channels.

Ah, perfect. A rerun of *Le Juste Prix* —The Price is Right.

I’m blissfully happy at this very moment. Happier than I’ve been in a long time. Watching TV in a hotel eating a candy bar in bed. It’s perfection.

I watch the entire episode, and I have to say that I was right on the money with most of my guesses. I don’t know how Charles from Saint-Germain-des-Prés thought that a luggage set was €450.00, but I would have gotten it right and gone to the showcase if I were there. I look at the clock.

Time to get ready.

It’s hard to get out of bed, but I manage it.

The porter left my bag on the luggage rack at the foot of the bed. I zip it open to find sabotage.

Someone has squeezed my conditioner bottle onto the gold dress that I planned to wear this evening. I pull it out along with all of my other clothing to see if anything else has been tampered with, and as I suspected, there's more. My toothpaste lid has been removed and most of the blouses I've packed for the trip have splotches of the white minty past all over them.

I see Ms. Fournier has been hard at work.

I took particular care in putting my toiletries in a bag and zipping it. This wasn't an accident. Evelyn must take great pride in her craft. I wonder if she thinks I'm going to run and tell Toussaint? Because I'm not. He doesn't need the headache and neither do I.

It only takes a few minutes of running the dress under warm water to get the conditioner out. I'll worry about the toothpaste in the morning. Right now, I need to use the hair dryer to dry it before Toussaint comes back to pick me up for dinner.

It takes longer than I expect to get the wet spot dry, but I pull it off just in time to put some lipstick and mascara on before he knocks on the door.

I open the door, and there he stands in all his glory. Wearing a dark suit that was cut just for his body. It hangs beautifully on his tall frame. He's the only one standing in the hallway, but somehow, he seems to fill it up with his presence.

“Hello, Lauren.”

“Hello, Roger.”

He takes my hand and we make our way into the elevator and down to the lobby.

Stories of the Past

Lauren

Why does it feel so intimate to use the man's first name? It sends a charge through my entire body. I try to not let it show. I walk with my arm in his, acting as if this happens to me every day. As we venture into the hotel lobby, I have no clue as to where we're eating. Toussaint is a hard nut to crack—he could take us to the top of the Eiffel tower to eat, or we could wind up eating burgers from a food truck.

“Where are we going?”

“We will be eating in the L'Orangerie, one of the hotel's restaurants.”

He gently takes my hand and puts it in the crook of his well-built arm.

“Follow me.”

We're led by a hostess into the heart of the restaurant. The place is buzzing with people. As we pass the tables, people look up and stare at Roger. That's how magnetic the man is. I have to admit, that gray hair on a relatively young guy is a

unique look, and people see that. The way he looks in a suit is a miracle of nature.

We are ushered to an intimate table next to the window. Our silverware is immaculate, and the fresh flower bouquet is stunning. The table is as opulent as the rest of the place. I don't think, in all my time in France, that I've seen a building this magnificent, and I've stolen from millionaires. Each and every one of them owns the nicest homes in the Cote de Azure, but nothing compares to what I'm experiencing at this moment—and Roger Toussaint lives like this every day.

The L'Orangerie is situated in the courtyard of the Four Seasons. Through the window, we can see the darkening sky. It has all the elements of magic tonight. Puffy gray clouds floating under a full moon. Paris usually doesn't have stars that you can see, but way up high, they begin to twinkle. Maybe they know I'm watching.

I look back at Toussaint.

“This has got to be one of the nicest hotels on earth. I can't believe you actually live like this.”

“Surely, you can't be *that* impressed. You're a woman who made a million euro tax-free last year.”

I'm glad he thinks I'm that wealthy, but I'm really not. Maybe I should explain. “Actually, I live quite modestly. I don't spend the money. I take what I need to live and invest the rest in a US-based mutual fund account and let it compound. I have quite the little nest egg for retirement. My

career could end in a heartbeat. There's always the risk of injury, capture—“

“Sex slavery?” he laughs.

“Don't laugh about that Toussaint, it's a real thing.” I can't help but smile when he smiles. I don't think I've ever seen one so damn beautiful. “To tell you the truth, I dream of one day getting a day job answering phones or something. Or maybe in a bakery kneading dough.”

Toussaint laughs a deep laugh. “A life like that would never be enough for someone like you, Lauren. Once you've lived the kind of life you have, taken the kind of risks you've taken, working in a bakery would bore you to tears.”

“Don't be so sure, Toussaint.”

“Roger.”

“Excuse me, *Roger*. I envy those who can work jobs that they consider mundane. Thievery isn't like working for a corporation. Like every other worker, I have to put money aside in case of emergencies. But the emergencies I face are a little bit different than the typical ones that corporate employees face. I need money for bail if needed, maybe lawyer's fees. I need money stacked away in case I get injured and can't climb up the side of walls during the night. You know, things like that. A job as a checkout girl doesn't come with those types of responsibilities.”

Roger doesn't realize that this life was thrust upon me. I never asked for it. He probably thinks that I have exciting

adventures of barely making it out of villas by the skin of my teeth, or running for my life after getting chased by my mark's vicious dogs. Maybe he's watched *To Catch a Thief* one too many times. I know I have. Truthfully, stuff like that rarely happens to me. In fact, it rarely happens to any thief—not the successful ones, anyway. My life can be painfully solitary. Isolated even. A man like Toussaint would have a hard time imagining just how lonely it is.

“But you've never needed those things, correct?” He crosses his arms, his Patek Philippe in full view, just to taunt me. “Because you've never been caught.” He winks at me.

Damn, he's adorable. “I was caught once...*just* once. Before meeting you, of course.”

“Or really?” Toussaint's face lights up. I think I amuse him.

“Yeah, by a man named Henri Le Bault. He lives not far from me in Toulon. I broke into his antique shop over seven years ago now. He had some valuable turn-of-the-century paintings that I wanted to get my hands on. Anyway, I always thought he left for the night out the back door. I had no idea he slept in the back room. He caught me.”

Toussaint is silently hanging on every word I say, and I love it.

“But instead of calling the police, he offered to be my fence, and he taught me valuable lessons I needed to know about casing my jobs, about timing, and about human nature. The insights Henri gave me I still use to this day. Our relationship is useful to both of us. I have the benefit of not getting caught

again, and he gets the benefit of twenty percent. He's like a father to me. The only real friend I've ever had in my entire life. Even my life before France."

"And what brought you to France to begin with?"

The waiter comes to our table before I can answer. His timing is perfect, because I really don't want to answer. I don't enjoy talking about the past. It doesn't bring back good memories, and it's not something I like to revisit.

"Bonsoir Mademoiselle et Monsieur." He explains the specials in precise detail. Each one is at least forty euro a plate. I order the French beef tenderloin with the sauce of the day. It comes with roasted vegetables and rice pilaf on the side. Toussaint orders the grilled sea bass.

When the waiter steps away, I begin the conversation, so he can be the one in the hot seat instead of me.

"So, Toussaint..."

"Please, Roger."

"Roger." I swirl the tip of my finger around the rim of my water glass. "A man like you has to have been married before."

"Oh really? Is that part of your studies in human nature?"

"Yes. It is." I take a sip.

"As a matter of fact, you're correct. I was married once. Her name was Katherine."

Suddenly I feel sad. It's a feeling that I wasn't expecting. Someone got this man's time and his attention all to herself. Not just a few days mostly filled with business meetings, but *every day—and night*. "Tell me about her."

"She cheated, and we divorced. There isn't much more to say."

"She cheated? On *you*?"

He laughs. "Yes, on me."

"How?" I put down my water. "I mean, how is someone unfaithful to a man who can give her everything?" It suddenly occurs to me that he might not want to talk about it. He invited me for pleasant conversation, not as an unwitting psychologist. I correct myself as fast as I possibly can. "I'm sorry. Of course, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine. It was a long time ago." He takes a deep breath and plunges into the story.

"Okay, picture it." He put his hands up like he was making a box with his fingers. "Paris... hmmm ten years ago or so." His voice is overly intense, like he's telling a horror story. "After five years of wedded bliss to my adoring wife, my car pulls up in the pebbled driveway of our château in Cannes. I walk up the main staircase of our beautiful home after a long flight from New York. I open the door to our bedroom and there she is—on top of the CFO of one of my largest companies. She's so into fucking him, that she doesn't even hear the door open. But *he* does. The guy freezes just as she starts to climax. She screams in ecstasy as I stand there watching. I say her name,

but she's too caught up in riding out the rest of her orgasm to hear me. But the man she's riding, the CFO of Toussaint Property Holdings, sits up and pulls her off of him. She turns around breathless and sweaty, and after a moment of pure shock, she just smiles and says 'welcome home darling'."

He takes a sip of water.

"She didn't have one iota of remorse. It was later that she blamed me for putting my work first, never having time for her, you know, the same complaint that many women have when they've been caught screwing other men."

"Ah, the blame game. It's a classic."

"It is. The only problem was that I loved her." He pauses and looks down at his drink. "I loved her as I'd never loved another woman in my entire existence. She was strong, and sexy, and utterly gorgeous." He turns his head to me. "And she was the only woman that I ever knew who could..."

"Who could what?" I'm *all ears*.

"Beat me at chess." He smiles a beautiful smile. "Until I met you, of course."

I sit in silence. I don't know what to say to that.

"After I closed the bedroom door that night, the property was on the market by the next week. We interacted through lawyers for a short while, then I never heard or spoke to her again."

"And what about the CFO?"

“He still works for me. He broke it off with her then and there.”

I cock my head and resist an eye roll. “Isn’t that a double standard?”

“Yes, it certainly is,” Toussaint says flatly. “But he had remorse. She didn’t. He called me that afternoon, assuming of course, that he’d lost his job, to apologize for what happened. He felt horrible about it, but she was an exceptional woman. I couldn’t blame the guy.”

He bit his lip, hesitant to speak. “She owned men, heart and soul. It was a gift she had. When we married, I protected my assets with a prenuptial agreement *only* on the stern and repeated advice of my lawyer. Otherwise, she would have gotten a huge portion of everything I owned.”

“Where is she now?”

“On her fourth marriage, so I’ve heard.” He raises his blue eyes to meet mine. “I love what I do. All of my businesses bring me a great amount of pleasure. But I’m just a man. Like any other man, my heart was broken for a long time. But I found Ms. Fournier after that. She was there for me. When she came into my employ, she got my life organized and up and running again. I owe her a great debt of gratitude for that.”

If I had any intention of telling him about the suitcase sabotage, I definitely won’t do it now. He’d probably feel pretty let down by it.

When our food comes, the talk of past love ends. Which is good, because I've never been truly loved. I don't want to have to admit that to him. Not here, and definitely not tonight.

The Women of Paris Fashion Week

Toussaint

Paris is abuzz with fashion week. I can feel it in the air. Everyone can. There are TV reporters on every street corner reporting on the latest trends. Fashionable men and women are stopped on the boulevard and asked who they wear. It's an excitement that I never get tired of seeing and feeling. Lauren is looking around like a little kid at the zoo. If she were just a few inches taller, she could easily be mistaken for one of the runway models. Her flared slacks hug her waist perfectly. Her puffed-sleeved sweater is tasteful, but the fact that she isn't wearing a bra underneath, makes it a little naughty—and she knows it. She might look like she belongs here, but she could never truly fit into this world of vacuous party chasers. She's a unique animal all her own. Too intellectual for this crowd. Too inquisitive.

We are trying to make our way through the massive crowd in front of the Le Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées. This is where the Chanel show is. But we are headed elsewhere. A large warehouse further down the street. That's where the

aspiring designers are. The hungry ones with unique designs that rarely follow trends.

The crowd begins to thin out as we leave the hordes of the fashion elite behind.

Lauren notices.

“Where are we going?” She looks behind us. “I think the action is back that way.”

“It might be, but I’m trying to find someone new. Someone undiscovered that we can purchase from. I want the edge that established designers can’t offer. They don’t need me any more than I need them.”

“That’s interesting. I would have never looked at it that way.”

I take her hand and pull her closer.

“Last year, we bought from a little-known designer named Raphaël Léandre. His designs flew off the shelves at a markup that we were extremely happy with.”

She looks up at me. “You’re not selling his designs this year?”

“No. He became too famous. It can be a double-edged sword, this business. One is young and hungry one year, then Toussaint Group gets a hold of you. The next year, you are too famous and too rich to care.”

“That’s too bad.”

I look at her and smile. “Not at all. He had a great run, and we kick-started his career. The excitement starts all over again when we find the next diamond in the rough. Scouting new talent is one of my favorite things about Fashion Week. I like the spring/summer shows more than I do the fall/winter ones. They are full of life. Full of new beginnings.” We continue down the street.

“...here we are.”

The place is almost invisible from the outside. It looks like a warehouse just like any other in the industrial park that inhabits it. But inside is a different story. It has all the frenetic energy of the larger fashion shows, just in a smaller space. The warehouse is packed to the rafters with people young and old hoping to be the first to unearth the next superstar designer. Goosebumps rise on my arms as we move quickly through the crowd. The excitement is palpable.

We make our way to our front-row seats. I squeeze Lauren’s hand so she doesn’t get swept away by the mob of people getting ready for the show.

We almost make it to our seats before I’m recognized.

Fuck. Not Delphine.

“Bonjour Roger.” She greets me with a seductive smile and then kisses me on both cheeks in typical fashion. With the five-inch stilettos she’s wearing, we practically meet eye to eye.

“Ah, Delphine.” The woman is good at what she does. Both on the runway and off.

She whispers in my ear. “It’s been a long time. Do you remember that night in the hotel bathroom?” I remembered it well. I bent her over the edge of her gigantic bathtub and screwed her until she came...*twice*.

“I remember, darling.”

She sees Lauren holding my hand.

“And who is this...*girl?*”

“This is Lauren. A friend of mine.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” She starts laughing.

The fucking insolence of the woman is astounding.

“Have a wonderful show, Delphine.”

“I shall. Call me if you want to get naked Roger.” She looks at Lauren when she says it, just to be a brat.

I don’t say anything. Neither does Lauren. How did I surround myself with these women for so long? Don’t get me wrong, they make great temporary lovers. They are young and willing to do whatever it takes to feel the next thrill. But I think I’m beginning to want more in life. Or maybe it’s just a mid-life crisis. Either way, I have no intention of *getting naked* with Delphine.

We make our way to our seats as I pull Lauren forcibly by the hand.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” There is something in her voice that I can’t put my finger on. But I don’t have time to worry about it now, because the lights are going down and the show is beginning.

Lanky models take the stage one by one as the baseline begins to thump in unison with their steps. It’s the fall line, so the stick figures are bundled up in wool cardigans and leggings, paired with masculine leather boots.

I’ve been waiting for a designer by the name of Lapine—that’s *Bunny Rabbit* in English. She’s supposed to have a unique style all her own. Her designs come in at the twenty-minute mark of the show. As expected, she doesn’t disappoint. Her designs are fresh and unique without being overly dramatic. She’s steered away from the drab browns and grays of winter, and she’s introduced reds, pinks, and avocado into her wool and cotton designs. Lapine doesn’t use synthetic material, and we will be able to market that concept as well. She will be the one showcased next year by the Toussaint Group. I’ve already made up my mind.

The lights come up as everyone rises to their feet and applauds. There are three designers on the stage, but Lapine is the one I’m interested in. I will have Ms. Fournier contact her publicist in the morning.

“How did you like the show?”

“It was wonderful. Very exciting. I loved that red jacket that came out after the blue cardigan set. It was stunning.” Lauren is still looking up at the stage. “Listen, I need to use the bathroom real fast. I’ll just be a second.”

“Okay, meet me—”

Before I can finish my sentence, I’m accosted by another model—Gabrielle Devine.

“Roger Toussaint! It’s been so long.” She kisses me on both sides of my face and I return the gesture.

“Bonjour, Gabby.”

“What have you been up to, Roger? Scouting out new talent?”

“Yes, it was an excellent show.”

“I wasn’t talking about the show.” She smiles.

I laugh and try to put her off. “I’m here on business, my darling.”

“What kind of business?” She grabs my crotch in front of anyone who happens to be looking. I take her wrist. “I’m looking for new designs.” I pull her hand away from my dick. It’s not particularly interested right now.

“I’d like you to meet—”

I turn around to introduce Lauren, but she’s gone.

“*Un moment* Gabby. I’ll be right back.”

I leave Gabby standing there, confused. She’ll get over it. There are plenty of agents, publicists, and wardrobe people to go home with her if that’s what she desires. I sometimes think that’s the only reason straight men get into this business.

Where is she? I start to get a little nervous. *Where the fuck is she?*

She couldn't have run off. She has no phone. No passport. Nothing.

I make my way through the crowd to the women's lavatory. They've rented luxury mobile toilets for the occasion. I walk up to the aluminum steps and stick my head through the door.

"Lauren, are you in here?"

No answer. There are five stalls in there. She has to be in one of them.

"Lauren!" I yell louder this time as a team of models squeeze by me, giggling.

No answer. She's disappeared.

A Working Vacation

Lauren

The warehouse that Roger has taken me to has all the energy of a nighttime rave. It's electric. Exquisitely tall models hover over the crowd like angels on earth. Each one is scantily clad, waiting to be dressed by the next up-and-coming clothing designer. Toussaint is definitely in his element. As models quickly change from one winter outfit to another, and hair and makeup people turn them into flawless creatures with a flurry of tools and brushes, the man is a bastion of calm in the chaos of the room.

He's decided to dress casually today, with a black turtleneck and tailored gray slacks. The gray brogues that he's wearing on his feet finish off the look perfectly. And of course, he's wearing the watch on his wrist. The dude looks good enough to eat. I can't imagine what that's like, being hunted and adored by the opposite sex. He can have his choice of any model in this place.

We bump into one of his past conquests on the way to our seats. She's as tall and thin and gorgeous as all the others. I

think she says her name is Delphine or Daphne or something. She says a few words in his ear, but I can hardly think in this place, let alone hear what she's saying. He introduces me, I say hello, and she starts to laugh. The kind of laugh that says, *hey, I've already fucked your man, and I liked it.* Little does she know, Toussaint is not *my man*, and her catty laugh means nothing to me. She looks down on me. But I don't care. Because at this moment, I'm scanning her body for what I'm going to take off of it.

She's wearing a gold bracelet and necklace that looks like it has a two-carat diamond hanging from it. It is small and understated, but probably very expensive nonetheless. She's really into herself. Those are the people that make the best marks.

After the show, which was magnificent by the way, I find her backstage. There is limited security in the smaller shows. I get right through without being asked for identification. I tell Roger that I need to use the restroom, which I do, but not until I get what I want from this hideous excuse for a woman.

She's talking to one of the makeup people. He hangs on her every word. I can tell she wants a lover for tonight, and the guy isn't bad looking. I bump into her, almost knocking her over. No one is off their game like when they're startled. The five-inch heels she's wearing prove to be a valuable asset to me.

I act like it was an accident. "Mon Dieu, I'm so sorry." She doesn't even know her bracelet is already gone.

She's as annoyed as I expected her to be. "What do you think you are doing?"

"My apologies. There are so many people back here. I think I might be a little lost." I look at her innocent and wide-eyed like a kid who's gotten lost buying groceries with her mom.

She smiles an evil smile at me and comes closer. She bends down to my ear. "Will you please tell M. Toussaint that he was the best fuck I've ever had in my *entire* life?"

I don't respond. I've gotten her necklace.

For my finale, I look at her and pretend to get emotional. Not a full-on blubbering cry mind you, just sniffles and watery eyes. As if on cue, a single tear runs down my face. It's an Oscar-worthy performance if I do say so myself. I stumble away from her as if I've been punched in the gut. She's smiling ear to ear when I leave her sight. What a moron.

The makeup guy is clearly impressed with her domination over another female. He probably thinks she's that way in bed too. And maybe she is. I couldn't care less. As for Toussaint, I don't blame him for sleeping with her. She's beautiful, and he's a red-blooded man. He can do what he pleases.

I decide to wait for a few minutes before using the bathroom. I didn't exactly plan on this being a working vacation, but why not? Scanning the room, I spot a few pieces that are worth taking. Within the frenzy of this backstage crowd, it won't be hard to relieve some well-healed people of their more expensive pieces.

By the time I've finished with this clueless gathering of fashion's elite, I've picked up a diamond tennis bracelet, two Omega watches, and a necklace worth at least ten grand on the black market.

Now I really *do* have to use the bathroom.

Don't Call It Jealousy

Lauren

“Where the hell have you been?”

Toussaint is standing with his arms crossed in front of the women's restroom. He looks cool and casual with his sweater hiked up to his forearms. He isn't happy with me. But if he wants to charm the panties off every model that comes off the runway, then I can steal their diamonds. It's only fair.

The crowd is thinning out now that the show is over. The only people left have a reason to be there. They look like industry people, makeup artists and models, camera people, and press agents.

“I asked you a question, Lauren.” He doesn't realize how sexy he is when he's commanding.

“I'm sorry. I got lost.” I look around the large open space. “But I figured you had plenty of people to talk to around here.” I lower my voice. “You know... *women* friends.”

“Oh.” He starts to laugh. “I see.”

“See what?”

“Nothing.”

“See *what?*”

“Don’t be upset. They’re just casual acquaintances.”

“I’m not upset.” But I *am* irritated. What an arrogant bastard. Laughing at me as if I could possibly be jealous of these airhead models. If he wants to screw beautiful women with fake hair and plastic parts, that’s his business. “I need to use the restroom.”

He grabs my arm. “Why do Americans call it a *restroom*? You’re not *resting*.”

I roll my eyes. “Congratulations Toussaint. That is literally the millionth time I’ve heard that.”

“Really?” He pulls me closer and looks me square in the eye. “What do I win?”

I’m trying desperately to stay mad at the guy. But he’s sexy and funny and crass and he knows I like it. Every woman he’s ever known likes it. And judging by the women who’ve been calling his name all night, there are *lots* of them, and they’re all willing to do things that I won’t. Thankfully, another model tries to get his attention. She shouts his name from across the warehouse.

He looks over at her without letting go of my arm.

“Let me go.”

“Meet me here when you’re done resting.”

“Cute.”

He releases my arm to speak with the five-foot-nine redheaded waif walking over to him. I can hear her laughing his name as I walk up the steps.

“Bonjour Roger. It’s been such a long time!”

I’m sure it has, bitch.

The Bar Overlooking the Seine

Toussaint

She comes out of the restroom within about five minutes. Vivienne Aristide, the model who I was chatting with, took up most of the time. She wanted to go back to her hotel room and do what we did together last year. But I'm not in the mood for bondage or role playing, so I politely refused. She didn't take it very well.

Losing Katherine to a wandering eye, damaged me for a long time. I didn't realize that having sex with exotic women with equally exotic sexual desires was just a bandage over a deeper wound. It was fun. *Lots* of fun. But I've been missing something—an intellectual equal. A woman who doesn't use sex to fill an unnamed void in her life. Lauren has that. Seeing a woman walking this earth completely alone is something that you don't see very often. It demands a strength that very few people have.

“Did you enjoy your rest?”

“I think that joke is done,” she says with a face completely void of humor. It makes me laugh. Everything she does makes

me laugh. She's reapplied her velvet red lipstick, and it looks good on her. It brings out the freckles that dot her nose.

"Glad I can humor you, Toussaint. So, what's next on our agenda?"

"Cocktails, of course."

She smiles. "Of course."

"There's a small bar overlooking the Seine. It's one of my favorites. I thought we could go there for a drink. It's nothing fancy, but it's a lot of fun."

The warehouse is almost half empty now. The catering team is picking up the plastic cups and napkins. A cleaning crew is sweeping the floor. I'd like to get out of here before we run into someone else who hasn't 'seen me in a long time'.

"That sounds nice. I hope it's quiet."

"It is."

Macua is a bar that specializes in South American drink recipes. It's quiet, well-designed, intimate, and the drinks will knock you on your ass in no time. It only took the driver ten minutes to get to our destination from the heart of the fashion venues. I was impressed.

We're greeted by a fiery red scalloped awning and smoky windows. There are chairs and tables along the outside of the bar, but the early evening chill is setting in, so we decide to drink inside. I find a seat for us by the corner window. Every year after each show, I usually end up in some beautiful model's hotel room. But not this year. This year, I'm excited to

partake in my new favorite activity—conversing with Lauren Ellis. The girl makes me laugh. What can I say? I like it.

She orders a Caipirinh—a Brazilian drink made of cachaca, lime, and sugar. She cautiously runs her nose over the top of the glass before taking a small sip.

“Yummy.” She smiles.

I am not so cautious. I order a Macua, the bar’s namesake, and drink it down in one sip. The spicy fruity drink goes down my throat like a beautiful fire. It cools in a matter of seconds.

I ask for another.

“So, tell me about Lauren Ellis.” I say, as my next drink comes. “What brings a girl from the Midwest to Paris?”

She looks at me funny.

“What’s wrong?”

“How’d you know that I was from the Midwest?”

“You mentioned it.”

“Did I?” she scrunches her forehead.

She didn’t, of course. I know from finding the report of her disappearance.

“There’s nothing much to tell, really. I came here on vacation and didn’t have the means to go home. There’s really nothing more exciting than that.”

I’m truly disappointed. She doesn’t trust me. She thinks of me as a man who screws models in the back of limos, and truth be told, it’s an activity that I’ve partaken in more than

once. I want her to see me as more than that, but I won't push. My goal in having her come with me on this trip was to have her get away from everything for a few days, not to explain a difficult past. I need to remind myself of that.

“How did you enjoy the show?”

“I loved it.” She takes another small sip of her drink.

“You don't have to drink it all.”

“I don't intend to, although it's really tasty.” She holds up the glass, as lime wedges float among the ice cubes. “It's fruity and spicy at the same time.”

She looks down at her drink and bites her lip. Her cheeks are already flushed from the few sips she'd taken.

“I'm sorry Roger.”

The admission is confusing. “Sorry for what?”

“For what I did to Delphine.”

The second part of her apology makes even less sense. I laugh, “Why? Is her body in a trunk somewhere?”

She lightens up. “No, she's perfectly safe. It's her bracelet and necklace that are missing. She might be annoyed when she finds out.”

I can't help but be amused. If I knew it only took a few sips of liquor to make the girl talk, I would have tried it when we first met. Lauren pulls the pilfered items from her bra. What is it with women using their bras as a hiding place? Her pants *do* have pockets.

“Are you feeling a bit guilty?”

“No.”

“Then why are you admitting to me that you are working on your vacation?”

“Because I like you.”

“But you don’t trust me.”

“But I *like* you.”

“Okay... that will have to be enough, I suppose.”

I look down at the pile of gold on the table. “How did you get those pieces off of her without her feeling it?”

“It’s easy. I take her attention away. Look her in the eyes and cut off the piece.”

I can tell she’s impressed with herself. Hell, I would be too.

“You *cut off* these pieces?” I pick one up, and she’s not lying. The chain is cut. “How did you manage that? I took your kit away.”

“I hid my cutters.”

“Where?”

“None of your business.”

She flashes an innocent smile. It’s the same smile she gave me when she beat me at chess. Like she doesn’t know how fucking smart she is. But it’s not a lie; I really don’t think she understands how smart she really is. That’s the beauty of the

girl sitting in front of me. She's spent so long surviving on her own, that she doesn't know how special she really is.

After my third drink, I am truly smashed. But I try to take some deep breaths to hide my inebriation. Lauren managed to finish her first drink. As we talk about the show, her eyes droop into a happy drunk-from-a-single-drink haze. She is a beautiful little thief. That I'll admit.

"Let's get ourselves back to the hotel, shall we?"

Our driver is waiting in front of the bar. I help strap the seatbelt over her lap as we pull away from the curb. She's asleep before the car reaches the end of the block. I know that I've said it before, but she looks like an angel with a freckled nose when she sleeps.

When we finally reach the hotel, I almost feel guilty waking her up. She leans against me in the elevator, and I help her to her room.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just tired from all the alcohol."

"That drink was something, wasn't it?"

"It was."

She's almost comatose from a single drink. It's cute in an innocent kind of way. Lauren is streetwise. She has survived living on her own in Cannes using her wits to survive, but she never succumbed to the partying, the drugs, or alcohol that usually seduces young reckless people like her. It only makes

me more interested in her past. A past she refuses to talk about. I pour her a glass of water.

“This will help clean that drink right out of your system.”

“Thanks.”

As she sits on the edge of her bed, I bend down on one knee and slip off her shoes.

“Go to sleep, ma petite voleuse.”

“Oui, bonne nuit, Roger.”

“Bonne nuit.”

I close the suite’s connecting door behind me.

A Moment in the Bath

Toussaint

Fuck. I'm still buzzed by the liquor. I start to fill the bath. The steam rises from the water into the air and the mirrors start to fog. It isn't quite halfway full before I strip my clothes off. I get through only half the buttons of my sweater before I pull it over my head and drop it on the tile floor. Shoes, socks, pants, I slowly start to slip them off, making a path to the tub. There is a small jar of milk soak on the counter. I remove the lid and pour it into the swirling water. The smell is somewhere between vanilla and fresh orchids.

Delicious.

It feels good to be naked after kissing the models and shaking all the hands. I want to wash it all off of me. Watching Lauren feel like a fish out of water makes me happy. She's different. She can't hide it. It's like a new world for her. One in which she doesn't belong. I don't either, I suppose. I think we'd both be just as happy over a chessboard or talking about the quirks of human nature. I enjoy great sex, but I enjoy great conversation even more.

I grab a towel and fold it over the edge of the bath before sinking into the milky white water. Leaning my head back onto the cotton, I close my eyes. Today was a good day. I enjoy being in Paris. I enjoy finding new talent. I enjoy being with her.

I'm halfway between being asleep and awake before I hear the door to my room open. *Did I forget to put the do not disturb sign on the door? Wait, it can't be the maid at this hour.*

“Bonjour?” I call out, but I don't hear anything.

There's a rustling, but I'm too deep in the pleasure of the bath to get up.

“Hello?”

I open my eyes to see Lauren standing in front of the bath. She's naked.

Apparently, she hit her second wind. Feeling the silky coolness of the bedsheets will do that to a person sometimes. Her body is creamy white. Her breasts are small and pert. She is not shaved, but completely natural. At this moment, as I look at her, she's perfection.

Lifting my head off the edge of the tub, I whisper, “Come here.”

She silently walks towards me, trembling.

“I thought we agreed. No sex slavery.” I smile, but she's too nervous to get the joke. “Come into the bath. Let me bathe you.”

She softly lowers herself into the bath with her back to me. I spread my legs, and she sits cross-legged between them. The hotel offers silk sea sponges in addition to washcloths. I lather soap on one, and rub her back, slowly squeezing the water out. It flows down the curve of her spine as goosebumps rise on her body. She grabs my wrist and pulls my hand to her breast. I swirl the sponge around it, squeezing again.

“Lower,” she whispers.

I lower the sponge into the water and rub her inner thigh.

“Closer.”

That’s when I stop. “I don’t want anything from you, Lauren.”

“You don’t want to make love to me?”

“Of course, I do. Desperately. You have the body of an angel.” I kiss her on the back of her neck and lift the sponge to her shoulder again.

“Isn’t this what you wanted all along?” she asks.

I kiss her again. “What I wanted was for you to be safe. Not to worry about your next score. I have no intention of taking advantage of you. You’ve been through enough, and I’m not going to add to those memories.”

“How do you know what I’ve been through?” She grabs my hand and brings it to her mouth, kissing me on the inside of my wrist. It makes me hard in a matter of seconds.

“I know because walking onto strangers’ homes in the dead of night through open windows and up brick walls is preferable to whatever it was. That’s why. I can’t fuck you. Not here. Not now.”

“Your body says otherwise.” She can feel my erection under the hot water.

“I’m not that much of a barbarian. I’m not going any further with you tonight. Sit next to me and let me wash you.” I lift her hair and bring the sponge up to her neck. A woman like her always expects to pay for what she’s given. But I want to give her this time for free, and take nothing in return.

“When was the last time?” I ask.

She takes her time to answer. “About ten years ago. A man—a boy really—took me to Paris and left me here with nothing. The last time was with him.”

“And you stayed?”

“Yes. I had nothing to go back to.”

I lift her arm and put the soapy sponge under it. She giggles.

“So you started stealing?”

“Yep, it was easy. Maybe too easy. If I’d been caught early on, I would have probably been deported. But I didn’t get caught, so I stayed.”

I lift her other arm. She giggles again.

She turns herself around to face me. She’s so fucking beautiful. Her cheeks are flushed from the heat of the water.

Tiny beads of sweat dot her forehead.

“It’s my turn.” She takes the sponge from me and kneels between my legs.

“Tell me about your past. Other than that stupid bitch who left you.”

Her words make me smile. I like when other people get angry on my behalf, there’s something tender about it. Maybe because getting angry at someone else’s hurt means that they truly care, I’m not sure, but I like the feeling.

“My father started Toussaint Group from a small storefront on Avenue Montaigne. He would buy material from small-scale wholesalers and my mom would sew them into ready-to-wear pieces. I’d be in the back playing with my toys. It wasn’t long before he started hiring professional seamstresses, bringing them in from the countryside. My father cultivated the business over the next twenty years to become one of the largest ready-to-wear designers in the country. It was only the last five years of his life when he got into accessories—sunglasses, jewelry, bags—that the income began to skyrocket.”

She rubs the sponge up my chest and I grab her wrist and playfully bite it as she squeezes the water out. I can’t take it. My dick is starting to ache for her. If I let her continue to wash me, I’ll succumb to my desire.

I take her hand and rise out of the water, pulling her up to meet me.

“Come to bed with me.”

She starts to silently shiver.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” I grab an oversized towel and wrap it around her. Then I carry her to my bed just like I did the first day she was an unwilling guest in my home. But she’s not in a yellow sun dress and she won’t be sleeping alone. She’ll sleep next to me tonight, with nothing on.

I take her from the towel and dry her off. Then I dry myself.

“Come under the covers with me.”

Comfortably nestled under the billowy covers, I wrap my arms around her. She squeezes me, then quietly falls asleep. I know she wanted more. So did I. But I know she’s not ready by the way her body trembles.

Unlike the beautiful thief lying next to me, I don’t want to take what isn’t mine.

Under the Covers

Lauren

I wake up next to him. His body is so warm. I don't ever want to get out of this bed. I want to stay here forever. After he lifted me out of the bathtub last night, and I saw all of him in his absolute naked glory, I wanted him—and he knew it. But he wouldn't budge. I don't know whether to be insulted or impressed that he didn't give me an experience that I wasn't prepared for. I was caught between lust and fear, and he could clearly see it. His arms are strong and they've stayed wrapped around me all night. This must be what heaven feels like.

“Are you awake, ma petite voleuse?”

I can't help but laugh. “Is that your name for me?”

“Yes, it is.”

Voleuse is the French word for thief. It was one of the first French words I learned. It came right after “Hello”, and “Where is the toilet?”. He squeezes me tighter.

The bed we're lying in feels like a cloud in the sky, and he's the sun. I want to bask in his warmth for the rest of the

morning, but I'm sure he has business to attend to. Turning around to face him, all I get is an eye full of rock-hard chest. The hair on his chest curls in little gray ringlets. His chest hair is salt and pepper, just like all the *other* hair on his body. I look up at his clear blue eyes and the dark rings underneath them.

“Where did you get those eyes?”

“From my mother. She was French and had light blue eyes. But the darkness around them came from my father's father. He was from Bangladesh. He met and married my grandmother, who was a British tourist. They fell in love and moved to Lyon before finally settling in Cannes. My Grandmother liked the coast.”

I silently try to track the globe in my mind for where Bangladesh fits into it, when he says...

“It's east of India.”

“Ah, right.”

He smiles.

I smile back. “You're beautiful.”

“Words like that will get you into trouble, young lady.”

“Oh really, are you going to spank me?”

“Don't tempt me.”

I roll over on my back. He sucks on my nipple. I'm not frightened like I was last night. Toussaint is a good man, a trustworthy one. He knows when to show restraint and when not to. I feel safe with him. Warm and comfortable.

When I'm around him. I get the same thrill that I experience when I walk into someone's darkened mansion in quiet anticipation of my prize. No, Toussaint won't hurt me. He won't do anything to me that I don't want to be done. He doesn't need to be the ruthless hunter. He wants his prey to come to him. He knows deep down that I *want* to be caught. We both need it to be this way. I bring his face to mine and kiss his lips. They're warm like honey. I like the way they taste.

He rolls on top of my body with both of his golden arms on each side of me. He has a small tattoo that I didn't notice before. It's made of cursive script on the side of his neck. In tiny writing it says, *Petit a petit, l'oiseau fait son nid*. It's a charming little phrase. *Little by little, the bird makes its nest...*

He's certainly a patient man. I run my finger along the words.

Toussaint kisses my neck before disappearing under the soft white covers. I can't see him. I can only feel him. He licks my belly button, then he goes down further. He follows the center of my body lower, with the tip of his tongue. I've never had a man do this to me. I don't know what to expect. But I feel content knowing he's in control. He's always in control.

He spreads my legs apart with his arms. I take a hurried breath.

For just a few seconds, I lose my ability to think. I can feel his warm fingers spread me open wider. My body shudders. He puts his tongue inside me and my back arches in pleasure.

“Roger.”

He doesn't respond. He licks me over and over and puts one of his fingers inside me. The pleasure is too much to bear. Tears run down my face as he goes deeper. My body starts to move uncontrolled, back and forth, following the rhythm of him inside of me. Then the tension builds until I can't take it anymore. I scream out in utter pleasure.

That's what it feels like? To orgasm. I've never had one.

He comes up out of the covers and kisses me on the mouth, wiping the tears from my cheek with his thumb. Then he brings his eyes to mine.

“How do you feel?”

I can't even bring myself to say the words. “I've never...”

I bury my head in his chest. I'm embarrassed. I can steal from someone with twice his wealth, but I've never felt the warmth of a man, a real man, between my legs. Not like this. I've had sex, but I've never been seduced until I scream out in ecstasy. Roger Toussaint, a titan of industry in his own right, must do this every day.

“Come here, sweetheart. Are you okay?” He kisses the top of my head.

“Yes. I'm fine.”

“You've never been pleased properly, have you?”

“No, I guess I haven't.”

He kisses the lingering tears off my face. We stay in been
for another hour talking, laughing, and kissing.

I'll never forget this morning for as long as I live.

The Next Stop

Toussaint

The next three days are a blur of obscure fashion shows. Each one, a different set of flavors and textures than the last. Ms. Fournier has already contacted Lapine's people and they've agreed to offer the entire fall collection, followed up by whatever she comes up with for the spring and summer seasons. We will have her under contract for an entire year—no more no less.

The experience this week in Paris has only been made more enjoyable by the woman I've been spending it with. Lauren is smart and funny and her eye rolls make me laugh. She performs them a lot; every time a past lover comes up to greet me, in fact. I don't blame her. Even *I* didn't realize how many there were. I've made her promise not to steal for the rest of our trip, and she has reluctantly agreed. I can still see her eying the room like a tiger on the hunt. But I pull her back next to me, trying to keep her tame.

She's sneaked into my bed the last two nights trying her best to seduce me, but I refuse to succumb. Some men get off on

seeing women shed tears in bed. But I don't. She's not ready for the full extent of pleasure that I intend to give her. She doesn't know how hard it is for me to show this kind of restraint. I know she thinks I'm being aloof, or perhaps that I'm not interested at all. But I am. The girl has no idea how many times I've had to pleasure myself in the shower because of her.

My little thief has a story, and I want her to feel comfortable telling it to me. A quick screw isn't the kind of intimacy I am looking for. Not from her. I want more than that. In fact, I want her to stay for longer than I originally anticipated, and I'm used to getting exactly what I want. Where we're going next, she won't be able to crawl out the window.

"These have got to be the best pain au chocolat I've ever eaten." She licks the chocolate off the side of her mouth.

"I believe you said that yesterday."

She laughs. "I take it back. These are definitely the best."

I've ordered room service for us this morning. It's just she and I tucked safely away from the mass exodus that always follows Fashion Week in Paris. The couture houses get to work on fulfilling orders while the throngs of buyers, photographers, and magazine editors make their way back to the four corners of the earth. It's a complete madhouse.

"Our car is going to be here in an hour, sweetheart. Finish your food."

“Yes, sir.” She smiles. “I hope we can get in a game or two of chess during the train ride.”

“I’ll make a point of it.” I smile at her. “I still need a rematch, you know.”

“Is security still at your house?”

“Yes, I had them stay while we were gone.”

“Great. I’d like to say hi to Jean-Marc.”

An unintentional laugh escapes my lips. “I’m sure he’d be happy to see you. But we’re not going back to my villa from here. We’re going to spend a few days on my yacht. I need to teach you how to swim properly. Then you are free to go.”

She’s in the middle of putting the last piece of pain au chocolat in her mouth when she stops. “Like in the open ocean?”

“No, of course not. *Le Caneton* is moored in St. Tropez near shore and we can take the tender to the shoreline. I will teach you in the shallows.”

She smiles and finishes her bite. “*The Duckling?* What a cute name for a boat.”

She’s adorable. Little does she know that name was meant to be ironic. *Le Caneton* is what they call a *mega-yacht*. I was an idiot for buying the thing. I thought it would establish Toussaint Group as a wealthy brand competing with the likes of Louis Vuitton and Yves Saint Laurent, but it costs a literal boatload of money to keep up. I want to sell it soon, but not until Lauren has learned how to swim. It’s worth seeing the

joy in her eyes when she can swim in the ocean on her own, and she'll be safer at home on her boat. When I picture her alone on it, I get a pain in my stomach. I don't know if it's the fact that she can't swim, or the fact that I won't be with her on it. Maybe I'm not ready to let the little thief go after all.

“But we'll only go if you want to. I certainly won't force you. A deal's a deal.”

“Not at all.” She takes a sip of coffee. “It's always been a dream of mine to be able to swim in the ocean like everyone else. But I didn't pack a bathing suit.”

“We'll pick one up for you. Now get ready. The train leaves in an hour.”

She rubs her hand together. “I can't wait.”

On Our Way to St. Tropez

Lauren

The car will be arriving soon to take us to the station. We only have a few minutes to wait in the lobby, then it's off to St. Tropez.

After a couple of days of teaching me how to swim, he has promised to let me go home. As we descended in the elevator, his exact words were: *I promise you'll be free as a bird after that.*

It cut like a knife to hear it. I know he's trying to be reassuring, but the problem is that I don't want to be free. I love his company. His warmth. His conversation. There's not a single part of the man that I don't respect and enjoy. It makes my heart sink a little when I think of going home alone. I wonder if he feels the same.

I don't want to dwell on the future while I'm still standing next to him. I've never had so much fun or so much freedom as I've had in the last few days. The fashion, the excitement, the best of everything at my fingertips. It was fun. But the man giving it to me was the best thing about it by far.

No wonder the women flock to him. I've felt his magnetism since day one.

He's a beautiful silver fox running around free. I want to catch him and never let him go. But he hasn't...he hasn't got as close as I want him to. It's okay. I'm not upset. I respect that he wants to protect me. It makes me want him even more. I'll miss him when I'm gone.

A lump rises in my throat.

But I can't think about that now. We have to catch the train and get to St. Tropez. I've been there before on a three-day weekend. I scored over twenty grand worth of jewelry, watches, and cash. But I never took the time to really enjoy it. I didn't even sunbathe. My trip was nothing fancy, and I certainly didn't stay on a yacht.

"Are you ready, Lauren?"

"Yes, I'm ready." Roger has used the hotel's laundry service, and every piece of clothing I have smells fresh and clean like a warm spring day.

Toussaint helps me into the car.

Ms. Fournier sits between us on the way to the train. I can feel the cold hatred emanating from her body.

"Bonjour, Ms. Fournier," he says to her with a smile. "Please let the security team know that we will be a few more days before returning."

"Oui, Monsieur." She types a reminder into her phone. I'd half expect someone like her to have a small spiral notebook

and a fountain pen, but all of her calendars and reminders are digital.

“Oh, and please order three swimsuits for Ms. Ellis. They must be suitable for ocean swimming.”

“Oui, Monsieur.” She writes it down, but refuses to look at me.

The torture of sitting next to her finally comes to an end as we reach the train station.

As we find our seats, he turns to her. “Au revoir, Ms. Fournier. We will see you in St. Tropez.” She smiles at him and then makes her way to her first-class seat a few rows back from ours.

The five-hour ride begins as the train slowly leaves the station.

“Are you going to set up the game, or should I?” I rub my hand together.

“Allow me.” He flashes me a wry smile.

Moored in Paradise

Lauren

A five-hour train trip, two *barely* lost chess games, and a ten-minute car ride later, we finally get to St. Tropez Harbor—the short-term home of Toussaint’s mega yacht. The thing is unbelievable. I don’t know why I thought it would be anything less. As we pull up to the enormous dock, I can see it floating on the water like an ocean-bound mansion. A man comes down the gangway to greet us.

“Bonjour M. Toussiant!”

“Bonjour Pierre, I’d like you to meet a friend of mine, Lauren Ellis.”

“Enchante, mademoiselle.” He politely bows his head.

“And of course, you know Ms. Fournier.” Toussaint touches her delicately on the shoulder.

“Yes, bonjour Evelyn.”

She silently smiles back at him and bows her head. I have a feeling she really likes Pierre, and I can see why. He is almost an exact copy of her—slim, well-dressed, dark-haired. He’s

clearly just as competent and efficient as she is. They're like two peas in a pod.

"May I take your bags?"

"Yes please, thank you."

We follow Pierre into the heart of the giant ship.

As I suspected, the yacht's interior is as amazing and luxurious as the exterior. It's top of the line from bow to stern.

There's a gigantic living space accented with marbled mahogany from floor to ceiling. A set of oversized leather couches and a large wooden coffee table complete the furniture arrangement. There's a full liqueur bar. A full coffee bar. The works. He's hired an entire staff for the next three days. That means a cook, a butler, a captain and crew, just for us. He's even hired an on-call masseuse. I'm sure he wants me to enjoy the next few days before sending me back to my own tiny boat alone, but I'm not going to worry about that right now. I'm going to live in the moment for once, and enjoy these next few days.

Pierre disappears for a few minutes to drop our bags off at our rooms.

"How do you like it?"

"The *Duckling*, huh?"

He smiles. "That's what they call *irony* Lauren."

"I see that." I look around the cabin, taking it all in.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?"

“Yes, please.”

He goes behind the espresso bar with all the confidence and ease of a college-aged barista. He grinds the beans, tamps the espresso, pulls two perfect shots, then hands me a small cup of espresso with a tiny gold spoon on the side of the saucer.

“Thanks. Where’s your tip jar?”

“Your enjoyment of the drink is all the tip I need.” He puts his cup up to his gorgeous mouth before taking a sip of his drink. “Oh, and please don’t steal that. It’s real gold.”

“Very funny.”

Pierre darts back into the room, a little breathless from running up and down the stairs.

“Dinner will be ready in about forty-five minutes.” He pays special attention to me. I wonder if Roger asked him to.

“Would you like a few appetizers to hold you over?” Then he looks at Toussaint.

“Lauren?”

I hate to admit it, but I’m starving. “Yes, please. That sounds wonderful.”

Pierre clasps his hands together. “Parfait mademoiselle. Would you like crab cakes or a chef’s salad? Perhaps a vegetable tray? Or would you prefer to look at our full menu?”

“Crab cakes sound wonderful. Thank you so much.” I smile back at him.

“Two servings, M. Toussaint?”

“Yes please Pierre, thank you.”

The crab cakes come, and after that, the main course of stuffed lobster tails and baby greens is brought to us. It’s melt-in-your-mouth delectable. If I could lick the clarified butter off the plate without being seen, I would. Pierre comes just in time to serve the final dish—two small ramekins of crème brûlée.

“Do you always eat like this?”

Toussaint laughs as he takes a bite of dessert. “No. I’d be three hundred pounds if I ate like this all the time.” He puts his spoon down. “I have an idea.” He looks at me with a gleam in his bright blue eyes. “Would you like to take a walk through the city tonight?”

“I’d love to.”

“Perfect.” Then he looks out of the giant windows to the darkening sky. “The sun is on its way down. How about if we leave in two hours? The promenade will just be starting to liven up by then.”

I follow his gaze out the window. The sky is beautiful. It’s turning purple, with wispy white clouds over a tranquil blue sea. “I’d like that.”

We sit on the couch for the next two hours, getting lost in conversation. We talk about the fashion shows and the excitement of Paris in the fall. Before you know it, it’s time to go into town. Toussaint swipes his phone and Pierre magically appears.

“Hello, Pierre. We’d like to go to the city this evening. Are you available to pilot the tender?”

“Oui, tout à fait,” says Pierre. “Come this way.”

He walks us down into the heart of the ship. There’s a small stairway that leads down to a boat garage, and there it is—the tender. A *tender* is a fancy word for a dingy, but what we’re looking at isn’t one of the blowup kinds you find on sailboats. Toussaint’s is wooden, sleek, and a beauty to behold. It’s about the same size as the boat that I live on. She sits silently in the water, bobbing up and down.

“Wow, that’s quite a beauty,” I say, as if I’m some kind of boat expert. I mean, I do live on one, and I can operate it and maintain it, but other than that, I really don’t know much about what makes one better than another.

Toussaint looks down at it. “Wait until we get on board. It has a lot of power.” He’s smiling from ear to ear like a kid on Christmas morning,

My heart flutters just looking at him.

He holds his hand out to me and I make my way aboard. He follows, then Pierre sits behind the helm.

“Are you ready?” asks Pierre as the wall behind us rises above the ocean.

“Absolutely.”

We aren’t too far from the main promenade of St. Tropez. It only takes us two minutes to get there and moor the boat.

“Thank you, Pierre,” says Toussaint as he helps me onto the pier. I’ll call you in a few hours.

“Thank you, monsieur.”

Will all the expediency of a true concierge, He starts up the engine and speeds off.

“He’s the model of efficiency, that one.” Toussaint watches the boat go out of sight.

I smile and grab his hand. “He and Ms. Fournier would make a great pair.”

“Absolutely,” he laughs, and leans down to my ear. “Their children would come out with a smartwatch and a limited sense of humor, that’s for sure.”

I can’t help but laugh with him.

The lights of St. Tropez twinkle as we walk down the cobblestone streets. Toussaint is casual. He’s wearing a light sweater and indigo-washed blue jeans. He towers over me as we walk. I can feel the warmth coming from his body. Why are men such furnaces anyway?

As we walk by a curio shop. My heart practically stops.
How could I be so stupid?

I stop walking.

“What’s wrong?” He puts his hand up to my cheek.

“I—I’m sorry,” I start to stutter. “Can I use your cell phone?”

“Sure. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I just need to make a quick call.”

He hands it to me without hesitation.

I start to frantically dial the numbers. Without speaking, I mouth the words *just one minute* to Toussaint. He gives me the privacy I need.

“Bonjour?” The voice on the other end of the line is groggy.

“Henri?”

“Marceline?” He clears his throat. “Where the hell are you? I’ve been worried sick. Were you caught? Are you calling from prison?”

“No...no, I’m fine. But I was caught.”

“You were caught? Where *are* you? I’ll come and get you immediately.”

Henri hasn’t driven in years. But it makes me smile that he would even offer to pick me up. “No, I’m fine.”

I hesitate for a second. “I didn’t get the watch.”

“The watch is unimportant, ma chérie. I just need to know that you are all right. I’ve been up for days without sleep.”

I could cry. “I know, I’m sorry.” Tears well in my eyes. “But I’m fine. I’ll see you in a few days. I’ll explain then.”

“That’s fine, Marceline. I’m relieved to know that you are okay.” I can practically hear his smile on the other end of the line.

“Thank you Henri, and I’m sorry.”

The relief echoes in his voice. “Don’t be sorry.”

“I’ll see you in a few days, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodbye, my friend.”

“Goodbye, my darling.”

I end the call, utterly relieved, and run back to Toussaint.
“Thank you so much.”

“You’re quite welcome.”

He takes my hand and we keep walking up the hurried streets of St. Tropez. He doesn’t even ask about the phone call or who it was that I was calling.

“Roger?”

“Yes?”

“I want you to know that I’d never...”

He turns to me with a warm smile.

“You’d never what?”

“I’d never steal from you.” I lower my head. “I don’t know. I just want you to know that...and thank you for these few days. They’ve been wonderful.”

The fact that he let me use his private phone without question was a trusting gesture. One that I really appreciate. If I were in his shoes, I don’t know if I’d be so understanding of someone who, just a few days ago, was attempting to steal from me. I’ve never met someone quite like the man walking

next to me. It's like he's a character from an earthy fairy tale. No wonder he's so desired by the many women who he's come into contact with. When I think back to the fashion shows, I swore to myself that I wasn't jealous. And maybe I wasn't, but I am now.

“Believe me, Lauren, I've enjoyed them just as much as you have.”

We walk in warm silence the rest of the way down the promenade. The night air is delicious as we slow our stride. The thump of music from a local dance club called Nocturne is deep and low. As we get closer, it gets louder. Finally, we're at the front entrance.

“Do you dance?”

“Do I dance?” I can hardly believe the question. “I haven't danced since my eighteenth birthday.”

“Don't worry,” he laughs. “I'll lead.”

“What? You mean we're going *in* here?”

“We are.” He pulls me inside and gives the bouncer some money...for a cover I guess.

“Are we really doing this?” The music is loud, and the bass is deep. It goes right through my entire body. The people move around in all directions, talking, dancing, and laughing. I don't even know how they can hear each other. The lights move from marine blue, to red, to green. It's like an indoor carnival of liquor and lust. I've never seen anything like it in my life.

“Yes sweetheart, we’re doing this.” Toussaint grabs me by the waist and pulls me onto the dance floor. He starts twirling me around to the overwhelming bass treble. We stay connected by a single clasped hand as he guides me around the dance floor, gently pushing and pulling me to the beat.

Then he twirls me into his body and wraps his giant arms around me. I feel drunk, but I’m completely sober. We stand there and sway to the music. I never want it to end. The pleasure is an intoxication all on its own. Then I feel it again.

Someone’s watching us.

Lauren, don’t be silly. Who would be watching us here? Just like when we were swimming, I look around us. But I only see a mass of dancers on the dance floor, young and alive. I’m so in love with this moment that I doubt my own intuition. But something in my mind says *Lauren, your instincts are never wrong.*

Whoever it is can’t hurt us. I continue to dance with him, this marvel of a man, and I put my fear aside. I know if he had to, Toussaint could stop a speeding bullet. I’m safe as long as I’m around him.

We stay in the club for three hours. Finally, high on each other’s energy, and sweaty from dancing, he whispers in my ear. “Let’s get back to the boat. I’ll text Pierre.”

“Wonderful,” I giggle.

He pulls me off the dance floor and out of the building. I’m still high as a kite floating on air. The cool breeze of night air

fills my lungs, clearing my head.

He takes an equally deep breath. “Ah, the night air of St. Tropez.”

I start to laugh again, grabbing his hand, twirling, and pulling him across the cobblestones as we walk. I keep laughing and spinning. Because I know this will be over soon—I want to enjoy him while it lasts.

He smiles as I dance alongside him as we walk. My idiotic behavior doesn't bother him in the least. He pulls me in when I twirl away from him.

Soon, we've reached the pier where Pierre is waiting.

He greets us with a smile. “Bonsoir.”

“Bonsoir Pierre,” I laugh. “We had a great time, didn't we Roger?”

“We had a blast.” He smiles.

He takes my hand and helps me into the boat, following close behind me. I pop my head over to Pierre. “I'd like to drive us back to the yacht.”

Both men look at each other. I believe *fear* is the overriding emotion in the air.

“It's his boat.” He keeps his gaze locked on Toussaint. “He's the one to ask mademoiselle.”

Roger cocks his head to the side. “When was the last time you drove a boat, young lady?”

“Five years ago. They were doing renovations on the pier where I dock my boat and I had to move it. We can see your yacht from here. It’s not very far.” I look out at the water. The Ducking’s lights glisten off the calm Mediterranean Sea.

“Okay then.” I can tell he’s still nervous. “Start her up. If you need Pierre, he’ll be right here to take over.” He winks at Pierre and crosses his fingers right in front of me. I start the engine and make a b-line for the yacht.

We make it back in under two minutes, just like I had expected. The garage door raises and I take a cleansing breath. The confidence I had when we first started off the pier is wearing off, but I’ve made it this far. I can’t quit now.

“Okay.” I slow the motor and get the boat just outside of the open garage door.

“Slowly ma chérie.” I can detect concern in his voice, but it only makes me concentrate harder.

We pull into the garage perfectly. Pierre leaps out and ties us up, and the garage door goes down for the night.

“Wonderful job, mademoiselle Lauren.”

“Thanks.”

“Yes, great job,” says Toussaint. I can breathe again,” he laughs.

“Hilarious.”

I turn to him. “Wait a minute. You didn’t think I could do it, did you?”

“Honestly, I thought you might chicken out at the very end there. These aren’t cars. They can be tricky.”

I cross my arms and stare.

“But I was wrong. You did a great job.”

“Thanks.” I relax and unfold my arms. “I’m sleepy.”

“So am I.” He looks at Pierre. “We will be going out around 10 o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Perfect sir.”

Toussaint tilts his head toward me. “You know Pierre, she can’t swim.”

He looks stunned. “You took control of this boat—at night—and you can’t swim? I’m very glad I didn’t know that mademoiselle.”

“I’ll be an Olympic swimmer in no time with Roger here to teach me.” I take in a long yawn. I’m ready for bed.

Swimming Lessons

Toussaint

The morning is glorious. The sun's rays shine through the blinds of the master suite. I put Lauren to bed in the guest suite, but somehow she ended up sleeping next to me. I heard her tiptoeing across the floor in the middle of the night. For a thief who's never been caught, she made little attempt to be quiet. I can hear her lightly snoring under the covers. She is curled up against my back with her arms wrapped around me.

“Good morning, Roger.” *Ah, she's awake.*

“Good morning sleepy head.” I turn to her and yawn. She puts her head against my chest.

“Are you ready to learn how to swim in the ocean today?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

“Great. well have breakfast and I'll have Pierre start up the tender.” I pull strands of hair behind her ear and smile. “Unless *you'd* like to drive.”

She smiles a sleepy smile. “It was fun. I liked being behind the wheel. But if I'm going to risk my life today, it will be *in*

the water, not on top of it.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let you drown.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay in bed all day with me?”

Her soft hazel eyes gaze at me.

“What I *want* to do and what I’m *going* to do are two different things, my darling.”

She pulls down the covers, exposing her pert breasts. She’s doing it just to tease me. But two can play at such a game, so I bend over her and lick one of her nipples with the tip of my tongue. It tightens into a point.

“Take a shower.”

“Sure,” she says. “Come with me.”

“No.” I wrap my hands around her firm butt. “We have to be ready by ten and it’s already eight thirty.” She gives me a disappointed look and then crawls out of bed.

“Wait.” I grab her wrist and pull her back. I kiss her breast, then her neck. Then I pull down her face to kiss her plump pink lips. She takes a deep breath and slinks on top of the bed to straddle me. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I want to pleasure her the way she wants, the way she deserves, but she’s not ready.

“Please go, sweetheart. *Please.*” I don’t mind begging.

“Okay.”

When I hear the water of the shower start, I put my hand on my cock and start to rub. I think of her breasts, her lips, her laugh. Even her fucking eye rolls get me hard. I'm dripping so much, that I don't need lubrication. Trying to be quiet, I come in a matter of minutes. I don't want her to know how she affects me. It isn't the right time.

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After two croissants, orange juice, and coffee, we're ready for Pierre to take us to the coast. Lauren is wearing a beautiful red one piece, perfect for ocean swimming. She found a floppy woven hat in one of the closets. It fits her perfectly.

I take my last sip of orange juice. "Ms. Fournier, would you like to come with us to the promenade to get some sun, perhaps?"

"No, merci. I need to coordinate lunch and dinner and a cleaning schedule with the crew."

"Alright then, we'll be back in a few hours. Hopefully, in time for a late lunch."

"Oui, Monseur. Do you have any special food requests?" she asks.

I look over at Lauren. "Is there anything special you'd like to eat?"

"No. Whatever we have is fine."

Ms. Fournier doesn't even look at her. I think I will have a conversation with her about how she is expected to treat my guests. But for now, I have other things to think about. Like how to keep Lauren from drowning in the ocean.

Pierre comes in through the main doors. "The tender is ready. I have towels and all the necessities I think you will need."

"Wonderful. Shall we?" I take her hand as we make our way down to the tender.

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The sun shines a brilliant golden light over the Côte d'Azur. Lauren's blond waves flutter in the wind as our boat cuts through the crystal clear water. She holds her hat down with one hand. I love seeing her so happy. I can't help but grasp her waist in my arms. Hordes of people bask on the main beach in St. Tropez, but that's not where we're going.

I have a long time friend, Gerard Fischer, who owns a villa on the outskirts of town. He has a private beach where we won't be disturbed. Right now he is traveling in Belgium, but his staff is aware of our visit. Pierre pulls the tender up to the private dock.

Lauren's eyes open wide.

The gigantic Italian style villa is impressive, even I will admit that. The tile walls rise up out of the sand like a life-

sized sand castle.

The backyard faces the ocean and Gerard's yacht bobs up and down in the water. A man dressed in a white polo and back slacks greets us at the pier.

"Bonjour M. Toussaint! We've been expecting you. My name is Karl.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Karl." I look at Lauren. "My friend can't swim, and Gerard assured me that his private beach is the perfect place to learn."

"That is true sir," says Karl. "The breakwater keeps the large waves out. You should only feel the natural swells of the sea. Come this way."

We say goodbye to Pierre and follow Karl. He walks us out to the pebbled backyard. "Here are beach towels and sunscreen I've got you'd like. We also have ice water and lemonade for your pleasure. If you need anything, simply ring the back doorbell, and I will be at your service."

"Thank you so much, Karl." I shake his hand and he retreats back into the villa.

My attention is fully on Lauren now. "Are you ready for this?"

"I think so."

"Come here. Let me put some sunscreen on you."

"Okay."

I slather sunscreen on her shoulders and arms. I can feel the goosebumps rise on her skin as she looks out into the water. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Including a sunburn.”

When I finish her arms, she takes off her floppy hat and places it on the table with the lemonade.

I squeeze more sunscreen into my palm and get it nice and warm before rubbing it on her back. She’s tense.

“Turn around.”

“Yes, sir.” She smiles.

I finish the job and rub it into the rest of her body.

“Your turn.” I give her the bottle and she squeezes lotion onto my lower back and then my middle back. She tries to get my upper back by jumping. I don’t bend down because I’m having too much fun. Having her jump on me makes me laugh.

“Bend down, you giant.”

“Yes, mademoiselle.”

I cave to the pressure of her demands. I bend down on one knee and she rubs the soft coconut smelling cream into my neck.

I stand up again as she rubs it into my stomach. She’s doing her best to tickle me. I laugh and pull her closer.

“Two can play at this game.”

“No! No! Please don’t. I’m super ticklish.”

She starts heaving breaths. I pull her close and kiss her.

“Time to learn how to swim, ma petite voleuse.”

Like Fish in the Ocean

Lauren

The moment Toussaint takes his shirt off, I'm completely breathless. I've never considered the male anatomy to be "beautiful", but there's just no other word for it. His body is wide and his shoulders are strong. The sides of his torso come down into a "V" shape at his waist. It is absolutely flawless.

He's wearing the same Speedo that he wore when he taught me how to swim in the pool. My body shakes as I put lotion on him, but I try to stay cool.

Last night I sneaked into his room while he was sleeping just to be with him. He put his arms around me. I don't know how to get further attention from him, but I'll take laying next to him. I'll take his kisses. I'll take anything that he's willing to give, but I refuse to beg.

I look out into the waves, and I am terrified. I know they can pull me out into the deep blue ocean. Toussaint is strong, but they look stronger. Maybe there's a riptide. I don't exactly know what a riptide is, but I know damned well that I couldn't survive one.

He takes me by the arm. “Are you ready?”

“I think so.”

“We’ll go in slowly, just like the pool.”

“Okay.”

The water is colder than the pool and there’s a constant energy to it. The waves surge back and forth. The pool was nice and still.

“I’m scared.” The water is so vast. It continues out on the horizon forever. A dead body could float out there forever. *My* dead body.

“It’s okay. I won’t let you go,” he whispers. “Just remember what we did in the pool. Kick and stroke.”

Kick and stroke. I can do this.

We are waist-deep in the water when a swell comes. He holds me by the hand and lifts me up. I feel safe in his arms. He’s like a human giant. I know he won’t let me drown.

“All right sweetheart, I’m going to put my hand under your body. You’re going to feel the waves and swim into them and out the other side.”

“Okay.” I look at him. “Please don’t let me go.”

“I won’t. I’m right here.”

I walk deeper into the tide. He has one hand on my stomach and the other on my back. I leap into the first wave and my feet come off the sea floor. I swim into it. His powerful hand

lifts me as I glide into the water, coming up on the other side of the swell.

“I did it.” I can’t help but smile.

“You did it.” he kisses me on my cheek. “Try again.”

The next swell comes, and I dive into it again, going a little deeper this time. I come out the other side.

“Perfect. Lauren.”

I wipe the salt out of my eyes. He takes me by the hand further into the water.

“Wait. I can’t touch.” The fear comes back.

“Don’t be afraid. I have you. We can go back anytime.” He grabs my waist. “I want you to be able to tread water.”

I take a deep breath. “So let me get this straight. My head is not going to go under.”

“No, you’re just going to kick with your legs and paddle with your arms, letting the swell lift you up and down. I’m right here.”

He lets me go. Not in the most darkened mansion have I ever been this scared. I even did a job with the entire family eating downstairs—with their Doberman—and *this* fear has that fear beat.

I bob up and down in the water and remind myself who I am—a master thief with nerves of steel.

It’s okay.

I get more confident as each swell of water pushes me up, then back down again.

“How do you feel?” asks Toussaint.

“I’m good...calmer.”

“Okay, now take a breath and swim to the bottom of the ocean and come back up.”

“Excuse me?”

“We’re only about six feet above the surface, and I’ll be right next to you. Don’t forget to keep your eyes open.”

Trust him, Lauren.

I sink my head under the water and swim down about six feet to the ocean sand. He’s right there with me. Toussaint smiles under the water as bubbles come out of his nose. He gives me the thumbs-up sign.

I take a handful of sand and let it run through my fingers as it gets washed away with the tide. Then I swim up to the surface and let out a big breath.

“There you see? You did it.”

“Thank you Roger for—well, for everything.” I swim over to him and he wraps his arms around me. He can touch the bottom as the waves come to his upper chest, but I can’t. He holds me and lets my body sway in the water.

“I knew you could do it.”

Next to Toussaint, I feel like I can accomplish anything.
“One more time?”

He smiles. "I'll race you."

"What?"

Without warning, he dives down to the sand and I follow. We touch the bottom and come back up. My head pops up out of the water after his, and he laughs, flicking me with water.

"I believe I won."

"You cheated."

"Maybe a little." He smiles. "How do you feel?"

"Wonderful. Can you teach me how to race cars next?"

He smiles a radiant smile. "Absolutely."

Damn, that smile will be the death of me. I'm getting completely pulled in by him and I don't even care. No one has ever taken the time to teach me to be a better human being. I don't ever want to lose this feeling—the feeling of being wanted.

I look out into the sunlit ocean and I realize all the things I've been missing out on by not being able to swim.

Roger Toussaint has brought me back to life.

I look at him. "Roger?"

"Yes?"

"I'll never forget you."

He brings me closer. "I don't want you to forget me."

I want to cry.

"Don't you dare start crying, young lady."

Great. The man can read my mind.

“I won’t.”

“Let’s get you out of the water before you start to prune. I have a surprise for you back at the yacht.”

“A surprise for me?”

“Just for you, sweetheart.”

Please stop calling me sweetheart. It’s too much for me to take.

He pulls me out of the water and takes me to the table with the towels. Then he helps dry me off and puts my hat on my head.

After typing a few words on his cell phone, Toussaint knocks on the back door of the villa. It opens.

“Bonjour Karl. Tell Gerard that we appreciated using his beach. I look forward to seeing him at the Monte Carlo Grand Prix next year.”

“Wonderful monsieur. I’ll pass along the message. He wanted me to convey to you that the pleasure was all his.”

It isn’t even two minutes after we bid Karl goodbye that Pierre pulls up to the villa’s private dock.

A Pink Box with a Red Bow

Toussaint

I had Ms. Fournier prepare the box with a red bow. She's placed it on the coffee table in the salon. Lauren notices it immediately.

“Oooo...what's that?”

“It's the surprise I was talking about.”

“You've given me the gift of being able to swim in the ocean. What more could I possibly want?”

“Open it and see.”

She opens the package carefully, untying the ribbon and taking the lid off the pink box.

She takes an enormous breath. “I—I can't believe it. It's the jacket from the Lapine show.”

“Yes, so when the weather changes, you'll be warm and utterly stylish.”

She starts to cry.

“Please don't cry, sweetheart.”

“I can’t help it.” She puts the coat pack into the box and sobs into my arms.

I hold her. “What’s wrong Lauren? I thought the jacket would make you happy.”

She is still crying. She can’t even speak. I hold her tight and remain silent, caressing her hair.

Her sobs turn quiet as she buries her head in my shirt. “You don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me.”

“I’ve never been truly loved by anyone, *ever*. Only Henri, and I think he just took pity on me. I’m an extremely intelligent gutter rat, and that’s all.” She looks up at me. “But unlike most rats, at least I can actually swim.”

I can’t believe the words that are coming out of her mouth. The woman standing in front of me is the most intelligent, funny, remarkable woman I have ever met, and I’ve met many. From models to fashion CEOs, this woman takes the prize for most all-around fascinating.

“Please, Lauren.” I haven’t the faintest hint of a smile on my face. “Don’t ever speak about yourself that way again. I fucking *forbid* it.”

Her entire body softens. “But it’s true.”

“It *isn’t* true.”

“Why have you been so good to me?”

“Because you are the most fascinating woman I can ever remember meeting—*that’s* why.”

She wipes her eyes. “Oh, really?”

“Really.”

“Then why don’t you make love to me?”

I pull her to the couch. “It hasn’t been easy to not rip your close off and take you right here on the floor.”

She crosses her arms. “Then why haven’t you?”

“Because I’m a wealthy man who takes care of himself. I’ve done it *all* with all types of women—on tabletops, floors, and back seats of Rolls Royces. There isn’t a sexual position I haven’t tried or a sex toy I haven’t experimented with. I want something *else* from you. I want to get to know what made Lauren Ellis the woman she is, and what turned her into a survivor of the utmost resilience. Thieves of your caliber aren’t born, they’re made.”

Her body goes soft, and she puts her head on my lap. She snuffles, and then she takes a deep breath. The words start to come as she exhales.

“It’s simple, really. Desperation made me who I am. My childhood was ideal. I mean, until it wasn’t. My mom and dad loved each other very much. Then one day he died. It was a sudden death that no one really expected. I couldn’t really understand how someone could be here one day and gone the next. I remember waiting for him to come home every day when I got home from school.” She turns her head and looks

up at me. “Pretty soon, I understood that he wasn’t going to walk through the door ever again. My mom started dating this guy soon after—Leo was his name. I didn’t like him from the moment I set eyes on him. My mom chalked it up to me not wanting my dad to be replaced. But she was wrong. There was something sinister about the guy. The way he looked at me. It was inappropriate.”

I wipe off a tear that has fallen down her temple.

“One day we were out walking out on a trail in the woods, and my mom had to use the bathroom. So she went behind some large bushes to relieve herself. The creep reached down and touched my butt, then he slid his hand even lower, between my thighs. I knew right away that he had done it with intent. It wasn’t an accident. He wanted to see my reaction. After that, I made sure not to be alone with him ever again. I learned how to lie. How to feign illness. How to crawl out of windows. Anything not to be alone with the guy, anything to survive. I’ve been surviving ever since.”

So that’s what it was. I suspected something like that. She’s so distrustful.

I remain silent.

“My mother,” she whispers. “She didn’t believe me when I told her.” She chokes out the words. “That’s the worst part of all.” The tears flood her eyes and roll down her cheeks. I hold her. I want her to let it all out. The hurt. The pain. All the rejection she’s ever felt. I wish I could take it away and endure it instead.

“Please,” she sobs. “I don’t want you to feel sorry for me.”

Amazing. All she is concerned about is that I do not feel pity for her. This strong, cunning, perfect woman wants to retain her dignity more than anything in the world. I’m in awe of her.

“I don’t feel sorry for you. I only feel admiration. You absolutely amaze me.”

“I do?”

“You do.”

The Parents Who Made Me

Lauren

I've never told another living soul about my past. I never realized how ashamed I was of it. I thought the memories were gone, but today I realized I had just buried them deep enough to forget about them almost completely.

He got it all out of me. I feel free, and I'm not ashamed. He won't *let* me be ashamed. I'd be letting him down if I continued to think less of myself, so I've decided I'm not going to do that.

We've moved from the unintended psychiatrist's couch to the dinner table in the salon. Pierre has graciously served us a dinner of seafood linguini and baby greens.

"You know what Toussaint? You've gotten it all out of me. My entire past. But it's occurred to me that I know very little about you other than you're a great swim coach. I mean, I know how your business got started, and the story of your ex-wife, but I want to know about *you*."

“Ah, so you want to know all the deep dark secrets of Roger Toussaint?”

“Yes. Yes, I would.”

I *do* want to know it all about the man sitting in front of me. The good, the bad, and the ugly of Roger Toussaint. Just like a thief, a man of his wealth and compassion isn't born, but made.

“Well, I've already told you about how my father created Toussaint Group. I've managed to increase earnings year after year by investing in the company's future, and always do in living by my father's words: *Remember quality*. It has served me well. I chose Lapine not only for the designs that she creates, but because she is a stickler for quality and craftsmanship.”

He takes a sip of wine. “My father was a wonderful man and my mother was a wonderful woman. They always encouraged me to use my imagination and to communicate any thought that came into my head. They never once judged me—for *anything*. I crashed my father's Maserati going 150km on the Route des Crêtes. I woke up in a hospital bed with two broken legs and a skull fracture. He was sitting next to my bed, crying. Both my mother and he had been crying—for *three* days. I decided then and there that I would never again act foolishly like that. I had his heart, *both* of their hearts, in my hand and I would never abuse that privileged again. All my father cared about was my safety.” Toussaint

looks up at the ceiling. The tip of his nose starts to get red and his eyes start to water. “He never even mentioned the car.”

“Many years later, after I already had the reigns of the company well in hand, as I mentioned, my father died of a broken heart. He was a strong man of only 62 when my mother died in an accident. We had a driver, but she *loved* to drive. She went out for groceries and ran into an embankment. The car rolled over twice. The police suspected that she had an aneurysm before the accident, but my father refused to have her body autopsied. He was too distraught to care why it had happened. He just knew that he didn’t want to live without her. Within a few months, he was gone. They say it was a heart attack, but I always knew that even with all of his money and business prowess, he didn’t want to be on this planet without her. I’m glad that wherever they went after death, they are together there.”

Perfect. Now I’m tearing up.

“It was only a few days, maybe a week, before his death that he gave me his watch.”

The watch. I almost forgot about it.

“One day he sat me down and said it was *my* time in life now, and that I should take over the business fully. He had already been speaking to his lawyers about the transition. He said there is no better way to keep track of time than a Patek Philippe, so he took it off his wrist and gave it to me.” Toussaint looks at the watch on his wrist. “At the time, I had mixed emotions about it. He was giving up on life at the same

moment that I was just catching my stride.” He swallows down the lump in his throat, then he raises his eyes to me. “But it all worked out in the end.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me.”

Toussaint is a strong man, but it’s his sensitivity that sets him apart. He sees more in people than what lies on the surface, just like he sees more than dollar signs in his business.

He saw the CEO of his company as more than the man who his wife cheated on him with. He sees more in me than the woman who tried to steal from him. Even clothing means more to the man than money. It’s texture, life, and beauty. I’m afraid that one day he’ll get hurt by his own sensitive nature, like he was hurt by Katherine. What a fucking remarkable man.

“You know,” he paused, “I’ve never shared that story with anyone but Katherine. He had only been gone for a few months before we met. Maybe that’s why I fell so hard for her. I wanted to build a replacement family, I suppose.”

I look him straight in the eye. “I hate Katherine.”

He starts to laugh. “That’s got to be the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

Now we’re both laughing.

He gets up from the table and extends his hand to me. “Come.”

“Where are we going?”

“To bed.”

All in Good Time

Toussaint

That's right. I'm taking this woman to bed. I'm going to make love to her until she understands what it is to be cherished, adored, and respected by a man. As I suspected, she's been hurt by those who knew absolutely nothing about the woman that she was, or the woman she became. There is nothing left to hide. By either of us.

“To bed?” She smiles.

“Yes, sweetheart to bed. Like men and women do.”

She starts to giggle.

With her hand in mine, I pull her close to me. We make our way into my stateroom.

Halfway down the hall, we are greeted by Ms. Fournier.

“Ah Ms. Fournier, I'm glad we ran into you. We will be having dinner in my stateroom in two hours.”

I can see her body tense up. “Qui, Monsieur.”

Ms. Fournier has been uptight this entire trip. I'll have to talk to her about it. But right now I have far more important things to do.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Opening the door to my room, I usher Lauren in before me.

I whisper in her ear, “You will need sustenance after this.” I smile.

She smiles back and unbuttons my pants.

She is only wearing a swimsuit and a light swim cover. It only takes a second to remove every last stitch of clothing she's wearing. The same amount of time that it takes my body to react to hers. Blood flows to my dick from every corner of my body. Her figure is magnificent. Small pert nipples, a flat stomach, and girlish hips. The sun has made her shoulders brown. It's a stark contrast from her milky white breasts—a body part that has never seen the light of day.

I take off my shirt and slip off my shoes.

She gasps as I pick her up and carry her to my bed. I want to take my time giving her pleasure.

As I lay her down, she spreads her legs and arches her back, raising her arms over her head. I know she's ready. There is no sense of fear in her.

I open the side drawer of the nightstand and remove a condom. I'm so hard it almost hurts. I pull it on all the way to

the base. Rubbing it to ease the pain.

I pull my body on top of hers, kissing her gently at first, then deeper. I don't want to push her too hard.

“If you want me to stop. Just say so.”

“I don't want you to stop. I want all that you can give me. Please, Roger.”

Without a word, I slip slowly inside of her. She moans with ecstasy.

She is the tightest woman I've ever felt. I can feel her from my head to my base. It's fucking phenomenal. There has never been a model or celebrity or fuck—*anybody*—that has ever compared to the way she feels.

She rolls her hips in time with mine. But I go slow. Painfully slow. I want her to want it. Her arms raise up my back as her body hurries the pace. “Harder baby. Please, harder.”

I do as I'm told and quicken the pace. She brings my hand to her face and sucks my finger. I go faster and faster as she begins to moan louder.

Then I stop and pull out.

“Don't stop. Roger, please don't stop.” She grabs at my cock and pulls it towards her.

“How badly do you want it?” I smile and bite my lip.

“Badly. *Please.*”

“Yes, my dear.” I shove it in full force and continue to thrust.

Her body jerks with the force, but she takes it. “Yes, baby like that. I’m going to come.”

She moves her body faster. We are beyond words now. We are like feral animals in need. I hold her arms down against the bed.

In a few more seconds, she arches her back and screams. It only takes a few more thrusts before I come, filling the tip of the condom to its limit. I fall to her side in a heaving, sweaty mess. My heart is beating out of my chest.

“Fuck,” she’s breathing heavily. “It must have taken all of your willpower to stop like that.”

“It did, but it was worth it.”

A Master at His Craft

Lauren

That was the best sex I've *ever* had—by far. I'm almost in tears, just like the first night. But this time I have no fear, only unadulterated desire. I know I haven't had much experience, but I don't need it to understand that Toussaint is a master in bed.

“Give me a few minutes to recover, my darling. Dinner doesn't come for another two hours. I want us to work up an appetite before eating.” His huge arms pull me in closer.

Wetness is dripping down my legs. “You mean to tell me you can do that all over again?”

“Absolutely.”

I smile and kiss his cheek. “Did I just win the lottery?”

He lets out a laugh and pulls my mouth to his.

“No, Lauren. I did.” He kisses my mouth.

He parts my lips with his tongue and pushes his mouth harder against mine. I want him again. I can't help it.

“Roll over onto your stomach.”

I do what he says. I wonder what pleasure he has in store for me this time.

I hear the rip of the condom.

He straddles me with his large hand on the small of my back. They're warm and firm.

Then he pushes them up the side of my back, massaging me all the way up to my neck. It feels so good. I let out a moan of absolute pleasure.

He puts his hand next to my neck and rubs me gently. His hands come back down to my waist. He pulls me up by my waist with my butt in the air. I let go of all embarrassment about how wet I am.

“Are you ready for more, sweetheart?”

He knows there's only one answer to that question. “Yes.”

He puts the tip of his dick inside me, then he puts his thumb over my clit and starts to rub it. The feeling is unbelievable.

Then he takes it out.

I can feel him smile as he slowly puts it back in. Just the tip again.

I push myself against him.

He laughs. “There you go, baby. I want you to *want* it.”

“You know I want it.” I'm breathless with desire.

My lips stretch around his full dick as he thrusts all the way in.

I am completely aroused. No shame or embarrassment.

We move together. His thrusting gets more intense as he pulls me towards him. I'm almost there.

Without a word, he thrusts fully into me. Taking his hands off my hips, he starts rubbing my nipples. He thrusts harder and harder as he grabs the sheets in my fist and scream for more.

We come almost at the same time. Then we both lie in a heap on the bed. This time he is sweatier than before, and so am I.

I try to catch my breath. "You are a master at your craft, M. Toussaint."

"Thank you, my darling."

He takes his finger and removes a tiny piece of hair stuck to my forehead. "I've never felt so good in all my life" My chest is heaving up and down and my nipples are still erect.

"I'm glad that I could bring you pleasure." His smile is so warm and his dark-rimmed eyes are so blue that I think I'm looking at a Roman god come to life. He rolls over on his back, and I sink my head into his massive chest. It gently rises up and down. His breathing has finally calmed.

"So, what's for dinner?"

"Crab legs with a winter salad and dinner rolls with butter."

"Wonderful. I'm already starved."

“So am I.” He kisses me on the forehead.

We lay entwined for a while as the beads of sweat cool and our heartbeats slow.

“Sweetheart?” he whispers.

“Yes?”

“I don’t want you to have to steal anymore. I want you to live a comfortable life.”

I raise my head and rest it on my arm. After all these years, I don’t know how to survive without stealing. It’s all I know. Sure, I’ve always had fantasies about going on the straight and narrow, but I have no marketable skills whatsoever.

“But—how?” I ask.

“I want you to work for me.”

“Under an assumed name? Marceline Levesque barely exists.” I lean down and kiss him. “I’m too deep in my world to fit into yours.”

He looks back at me.

“There is nothing that we can’t do together. You will go straight under your own name. I will get you a job with one of my companies.”

I rack my brain for another excuse.

“Just because you’ve never tried to go straight doesn’t mean that you are incapable of succeeding at it. If there is anything I’ve learned about Lauren Ellis, it’s that she is capable of anything.”

I start to get sniffly. This man of the world, beautiful, and charismatic, actually *cares* about me.

“Don’t cry.”

“I can’t help it. You are the only person who has seen me for who I really am. You see more in me than I see in myself.”

He pulls my face to look at him. “That isn’t true.”

“What do you mean?”

“Someone reported you missing in Ohio ten years ago.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“No, I’m not kidding.”

The news makes me even more emotional. I bid the US goodbye when my rat of a boyfriend left me here. I vowed to myself that I would never go back. But I have to know...

“Who?”

“I don’t know. The security team that I hired for the party gave me a copy of the report. There was no evidence of who filed it.”

I suddenly feel sad. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Then we don’t have to. I just want you to know that I intend to take care of you. I want you to feel safe—and *free*.”

I appreciate what Toussaint is saying. I really do. But I don’t want to be *safe*, and I don’t want to be *free*. I know what I want. I want to be *loved*. I fall asleep with my head on his chest. He curls his arms tighter around me.

After an hour or so, there's a knock at the door.

Roger opens his eyes. "Put your robe on, my darling. Dinner's ready."

A Social Call

Toussaint

Lauren was distracted at dinner last night. She was fidgety and distant. It took over an hour of lovemaking to get her to finally relax and go to sleep. I'm beginning to doubt if telling her about the missing persons report was a good idea. I'm sure it dredged up memories that she thought were well and truly buried. But the truth is, I need her to start living under her own name and I don't want her lying or hiding or stealing. She's better than that.

My angel is still sleeping next to me with her head on my chest. She says she likes to hear my heartbeat. I'd like nothing more than to lie here and stroke her hair all day, but I have to talk to a business associate who lives here on St. Tropez. It should only take me away for a few hours. I'm getting mushy for this girl. I vowed never to make that mistake again, but the woman's irresistible.

"Morning Roger," she says before opening her hazel eyes.

"Good morning ma chérie. Did you sleep well?"

“Yeah, I slept like a log.”

“Speaking of logs, you snored like a chainsaw.”

She laughs. “I *don't* snore.”

“You do, my dear. You *do*.”

Lauren punches me playfully on the shoulder. She bites her lip. “Kiss me.”

“Yes, ma'am.” She's very demanding in the morning. I bring her face up to mine and kiss her as she wishes. I squeeze her butt so that she knows I'm serious.

“If I wasn't sore from your shenanigans last night, I would insist on more than just a kiss.”

“Was I too rough on you? I really don't take pleasure in causing a woman pain.” I really don't. I enjoy intimacy and I want my partner to enjoy it too. Discomfort isn't a thing that I'm into.

“I'm fine.” She smiles.

“Good.”

“So, what are our plans today?”

“We'll, after breakfast I have to meet with a client. It's mainly just a social call, but he's an important investor in a startup that my team is creating.”

“Oh really? Another fashion empire?”

“No,” I pull her closer. “This one has to do with tiered driving ranges. One can practice their golf swing, drink, and eat at the same time. We'd like to build two of them this year

and perhaps a third if they are successful. The concept is extremely popular in the US and the UK. Hopefully, it will be just as successful here.”

“I’m sure it will. You can do anything.”

“When you heel up, I’m going to show you *exactly* what I can do.”

“I can’t wait.” She puts her hand under the sheets and rubs my cock just for fun. I bite the side of her neck.

“I’ll have Ms. Fournier set up breakfast in the living area so that I’ll be forced to keep my hands off you. It’ll keep us away from the bed. Besides, I know you have a problem with sex slavery.”

She laughs. “Very funny. So what is the name of this investor of yours?”

“Louis Archambeau.”

“Would he be any relation to *Sophia* Archambeau by chance?” Lauren squints her eyes.

This can’t be good.

“Yes, he’s her older brother. Her *very* protective older brother.” I hold my breath. “Why?”

“I may or may not owe her a set of diamond earrings.” She flings the covers over my head.

I grab them and quickly pull them off. “You little thief... come here!” I try to grab her, but she’s too fast. She runs to the bathroom and closes the door. I hear the water go on in the

shower. I hear her voice through the door. “You can punish me when I’m clean,” she laughs.

“You can count on it, sweetheart. You have to come out of there sooner or later.”

The Ocean Deep

Lauren

Breakfast was as delicious as all of our meals have been. Pierre is cleaning up while Roger gets ready for a meeting he has with one of his investors. I can't believe I stole from his sister. France's wealthiest people are a pretty small group, and most of them know each other in one way or another. I shouldn't be so surprised.

I've decided to lay out in the sun until he gets back. He comes out of the master stateroom looking like a million bucks in a casual white linen suit.

"Wow, you look great."

"Thank you, mademoiselle." He smiles and kisses me on the cheek. "So do you."

"Thanks," I say, looking down at the two-piece I found in one of the closets. "Look at what else I found." I put a pair of gigantic black glasses on.

"Nice glasses."

“Thanks.” These aren’t just any sunglasses, and he knows it. They are oversized two-toned oval glasses by Chanel. They retail for over a grand for a single pair.

“Bonjour, monsieur. My name is Lauren. What’s *your* name?” I raise my pinky in the air, pull the glasses down, and blow him a kiss. “They’re fun. I think I’ll wear them when I lay out.”

He smiles. “That’s the perfect way to spend a morning in St. Tropez.”

Pierre comes in from up the stairs. “Bonjour, monsieur.”

“Bonjour Pierre. Are you ready?”

“Oui, monsieur,” he smiles brightly.

Roger turns his head to me. “Pierre is going to take me to shore in the tender. Ms. Fournier will be here if you need anything.”

She looks silently through me and then back at him.

“That’s fine. How long will you be?”

“Not more than an hour or two. It’s a casual hello. We might have a bite to eat. I’m not sure.”

“Enjoy yourself. I’ll be on the sun deck.” I put the glasses over my eyes.

He laughs. “You look like a child who raided her mother’s closet.”

“I know.” I have a baby face. It helps me conduct my business. No one would ever guess that I’m almost thirty, just

like no one would ever guess that Toussaint is only forty-one. We're similar in that way, and I like it.

I do as I promised, and lay out on one of the lounge chairs on the sun deck. They are soft and white, perfect for the Mediterranean. I can hear Pierre start up the tender from below deck. The engine starts to roar as the sound of the garage door opening bounces off the water. I walk barefoot over to the side railing to see the boat pulling out of the toy garage on the far end of the yacht. Toussaint waves as Pierre puts both hands on the steering wheel. "Behave yourself ma petite voleuse," he yells up at me.

I laugh and wave as they turn the boat toward land. As the boat gets smaller, I find myself leaning over the railing. Beneath my feet is a Persian-looking rug that follows the perimeter of the boat—to keep people from slipping, I guess. I look down into the dark water below me. It feels like it goes on forever. I wonder what sort of sea creatures lurk beneath the boat. *Sharks? Jellyfish? Whatever's hiding down there can eat me alive, I'm sure of it.*

I grab the railing in front of me. Suddenly, my sunglasses fall down into the water.

Damn it.

To my surprise, they don't sink. They just float upside down on top of the water. The large, domed lenses act like floating saucers on top of the swirling ocean.

Thankfully, there's a long net leaning on the side of the wall next to the wading pool, because the ocean just isn't enough.

Toussaint *also* needs a pool. I quickly scoop it up and dangle it into the water.

“Ah... got 'em!”

I'm leaning over the rail, plucking them out of the net, then when I feel the runner slip out from under my feet. The next thing I see is dark blue water. An entire ocean of it. My head is underwater in a matter of seconds. It's not like the shore, warm and turquoise, it's dark; overwhelming. I can't breathe. I do what Roger taught me and try to paddle, but I can't get my head out of the cold, dark water. Finally, my face comes out of the ocean and I let out a scream. I don't know if anyone heard me because I'm back beneath the surface now. I'm scared. I still can't breathe and I can't make my way higher. Water is coming in through my mouth somehow. I can taste the salt. I'm drowning. My surroundings are a flurry of bubbles. Dark blue, then black. I don't know what happens next, except I know my eyes are closing and I'm getting tired. My chest has a pressure I can't bear. There is only blackness after that.

Somebody, help me...please.

It's a Miracle

Toussaint

It was a miracle that I looked back. I just wanted to see her one last time waving back at me. But I *couldn't* see her. That's when I thought I heard a scream over the engines, but I wasn't sure. I had Pierre cut the motor, and that's when I saw her flailing arms. Then she was gone. I had Pierre push full speed ahead back to the boat.

I jumped in to see her lifeless body sinking further into the ocean. A few seconds later, it would have been too late. Fuck, I can't even think about it. I grabbed her and carried her into the tender. Water gushed out of her mouth and her eyes were glazed over. When I got her back on the yacht, I stripped off her swimsuit and put a cotton robe on her.

Now she lies in my bed drinking hot tea.

"The doctor is on his way. Pierre is picking him up from his home."

"I don't need a doctor." She's upset. Upset that I canceled my social call because her life was in danger.

“You almost *drowned* Lauren. Don’t be blasé about this. It’s unnecessary. He’s going to examine you and that’s final.”

She crosses her arms in defiance.

“Is that supposed to change my mind?” I laugh.

She tries to hide a smile, but it doesn’t work.

“That’s better.” I kiss her on the side of her face. “You *really* scared me, Lauren.”

“I scared myself even more. I’m sorry.”

We hear a faint knock at the door. It’s Ms. Fournier.

“Hello mademoiselle Ellis. I wanted to make sure you were feeling better.” Her tone is kind. It’s quite a difference from the way she’s been treating her this entire trip. “I’ve brought you another cup of tea, my dear.” She places it on the nightstand.

Lauren uncrosses her arms and smiles at her. “Yes, thank you. I feel much better. M. Toussaint wants to call a doctor. Perhaps you can talk him out of it. I know your words carry a lot of influence with him.”

Ms. Fournier laughs. “M. Toussaint is right. You need to be seen by a doctor.” She looks at me. “They are pulling in now.”

It seems Ms. Fournier has had a change of heart where Lauren is concerned. She truly seems concerned for her well-being. It is clear by the way she hurried to follow me into the stateroom with her. She was truly terrified that Lauren was going to die.

She comes closer to the bed. “Are you sure you feel fine? Are you coughing up any water?”

“No, I think it all came up on deck.”

“All right. I shall leave you two.” She flashes a warm smile at Lauren, then at me.

Lauren takes a sip of tea. “Thank you, Ms. Fournier.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle Ellis.”

She turns to me. “Let me know if you need me, M. Toussaint. I’ll be in my suite.”

“Thank you.”

It is only a few more minutes before Dr. René Lavigne comes in. He is a good doctor, and a good man as well. He helped me with a painful jellyfish sting a few years ago.

After hearing the circumstances of her accident, he gives her a full examination. Other than a small amount of residual seawater in her lungs, the doctor says that she will make a full recovery. He recommends bed rest for the remainder of the day. Being the man that he is, he has offered to return at a moment’s notice if she shows any signs of infection.

“Thank you, doctor.”

“My pleasure Roger. Have you been staying away from jellyfish on this trip?”

I laugh. “Yes sir, I have.”

“Good man.” He smiles.

Breakfast in Bed

Lauren

Ah, the St. Tropez sun. There is nothing quite like it. I kept Roger up for most of the night coughing. I offered to stay in my own room, but he wouldn't hear of it. He kept his arms around me as my lungs rattled through the night.

How did I do it? How did I walk this earth alone without him? I understand just how completely alone I was without the man deep in sleep next to me. Sneaking into people's homes and taking what I wanted. Going home all alone at night. I want this man in my life forever.

I love to look at him sleep. He's adorable. I slide out of bed without waking him. I don't know if it was the saltwater in my lungs or what, but I'm really thirsty this morning. I throw on one of his shirts and knot it on the side. Then I slip on my shorts from the day before. Quietly, like a little church mouse, I slip on my tennis shoes to complete the early morning I-just-got-up look. Putting my hair in a loose bun, I convince myself that I'm cute, then I quietly shut the door to our room. The man needs his rest.

Tiptoeing across the floor, I don't want to wake anyone up. But to my surprise, Ms. Fournier is sitting on the couch reading.

"Good morning Ms. Fournier," I whisper.

She looks up at me from her book. "Good morning, Lauren." She smiles. She's just as pleasant as she was yesterday.

"May I get you some coffee?"

"Oh, no thank you. I just came down for a glass of water."

"Ah, I see."

I don't even recognize the woman in front of me. I have never even seen her with a smile on her face. But here she is, soft and kind, letting down her guard completely.

"I'd like to make a suggestion, if I may. I've worked for him for a long time now, and I've learned the way to his heart is through his stomach. Although," she smiles. "I believe you already have that."

I don't know exactly what to say. "I hope so. He's a good man."

"My dear," she whispers. "There is a place in town. La Italia. It serves his favorite coffee and a special Italian cookie called a *Lemon Amaretti*. He always takes time to get a bag full when he visits St Tropez."

"Oh, really?" I can feel excitement well up in my stomach.

“I’m sure if you took the boat now, you could surprise him once he wakes up. Mind you, it’s just a suggestion, my dear.” She puts her book on the table. “I’m glad to see that you’re doing better. You had us quite worried.”

“Thanks Ms. Fournier. On both counts.” Maybe I was wrong about the woman. Maybe she has a heart after all. Or *maybe* it was just seeing me so close to death. I know she was honestly worried when I almost drowned. It was clear she wasn’t faking it.

“If he wakes up, I’ll tell him that you’re in the galley getting something to eat to... how do you Americans say... *buy you some time?*”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “That’s a saying I use more than most Americans.” It only takes me a few more seconds to make up my mind.

“I’ll be back.” I’m still nervous about getting this close to the water, but it’ll be worth it to see his face when he sees the Italian cookies that I went all the way to shore to get for him. I’ll get him a drink too. I turn to Ms. Fournier just before leaving.

“What’s his favorite drink?”

“A small latte with a double shot. He likes his coffee drinks strong.”

“Perfect. Thank you, Ms. Fournier.”

“You’re welcome, my dear.”

I close the mahogany door behind me and race down the stairs to the tender garage.

Okay, how the hell do I open the door?

There's a large button on the wall next to the door. I think I saw Pierre push it last time. *Here goes nothing...*

I press it, and the door starts to open.

“Awesome!”

I race around to the boat. I mean, I am Christmas morning giddy about this.

Finally, I untie the boat and put it in reverse. I slowly maneuver it out of the garage. Making a three-point turn on the water isn't the easiest move, but I finally get the boat to point to shore.

“Let's do this.” Floating on the water, I look up to the window where Roger is sleeping. “I'll be right back sweetheart.”

The shoreline comes closer as the engine purrs. By the time I get around the other boats in the harbor, docking is easy.

Just like Ms. Fournier said, Il Italia is only about a block away from the marina—and it is *packed* with people. I take my place in line with the rest of the early morning risers in the café. Finally, it's my turn.

“I'll have four lemon cookies and a double short caffè latte, si vous plait.”

“Bon,” says the girl at the counter. “It will be just a few moments. We are a little behind this morning.”

“I’m in no hurry.” Which is a lie. I can’t wait to get back.

I just hope he’s still asleep.

A Living Nightmare

Toussaint

I open my eyes to the Mediterranean sun shining through the windows. It's a scene that I've witnessed many times, but it never gets old. I stretch, yawn, and reach for her. "Lauren sweetheart, are you awake?"

I roll over to find her gone.

She couldn't have gone far. Her sheets are still warm. I pull my blanket off and rub my aching cock. It wants her, and so do I. I throw on my robe and peek my head inside the bathroom.

"Lauren sweetheart?"

No luck.

The deck is empty. She's not lying out. So I try the kitchen.

Ah, finally another human being.

Ms. Fournier is sitting at the kitchen table writing in a little notebook that she keeps. I think it's a diary, because she puts all of my events on her phone.

"Hello Ms. Fournier, have you seen Lauren this morning?"

“Non, monsieur.” She pauses and turns her head. “Oh... *un moment*. I think that I saw her walking down to the tender garage.”

“She can barely swim. Why would she go near the boat by herself after what happened?”

“I don’t know, monsieur.”

Thoughts of her near drowning flood my mind. *Fuck.*

I walk through the back sliding windows and look over the water.

“Lauren!”

She’s nowhere. I run back into the suite to put on some clothes. My mind can’t even fucking think straight. *Where the hell is she? Why would she just disappear?*

I put on a pair of shorts and pick up my tee shirt from the back of the chair at the side table.

That’s when I notice it. My watch. It’s gone.

I slip on my shoes.

The tender. My heart sinks into my chest. It’s all beginning to come together. *I bet it’s long gone.*

Slowly, I walk down to the garage. Just as I thought, it’s nowhere to be seen. Just like my Patek Philippe. She’s taken it. The pain that I’m feeling at this moment almost makes me want to cry. A dull ache rises in my throat.

This can’t be. Maybe I’m confused. I walk back up to the room and look at the table. Then I pick up papers that it might

be hiding under. The watch isn't there.

Ms. Fournier is standing behind me. I turn to her.

“Are you sure she didn't say anything?”

“No monsieur. She didn't say a word.”

I look back at the table.

“Please leave me for a moment.” I can't even turn around when I say the words.

I hear the door close behind me.

After I told Lauren what the watch meant to me, she took it all the same. *How could she do this to me?*

Tears start to fill my eyes. Anger floods my entire body. She was the scorpion. I was the frog. I knew who she was when I invited her to come with me. And I was stupid enough to ask her anyway. *How could I have been so fucking blind?*

I take the table and throw the fucking thing across the room.

The door slowly opens.

“Is everything all right?” I turn around to see Ms. Fournier looking at me. Her eyes flash from me to the table turned over in the corner. It's left a giant dent in the wall.

Ms. Fournier slowly walks up behind me and places her hand on my shoulder. “I'm sorry Roger.”

It takes all the patience I have left not to scream at her. I'm crumbling under the grief. It's—It's as if I've been physically stabbed and blood is pouring onto the floor, but there *is* no blood to relieve the pain. I offered her a job. A new life.

“It’s *M. Toussaint*.” I say coldly. *Too* coldly, but I want professionalism from all my staff, including her. “Tell the captain to return to Cannes immediately. We will dock there until I decide otherwise.”

I don’t have to look at Ms. Fournier to feel her pain and disappointment, but at this moment I am only concerned with my own.

“Yes, monsieur.” She closes the door behind her.

It only takes about thirty seconds before the yacht engines rev up to low power. The coastline slowly begins to move.

Her words come back to haunt me ... *ill never steal from you. I just want you to know that*. She fucking lied to my face when she said those words to me.

“Ah...the long con. She could probably swim the entire time.” I say the words out loud. I want to remember them; to remember this pain.

I am overwhelmed by grief. It’s not the fact Lauren shared a bed with me. That’s meaningless. It’s the fact that I *gave* something to her that I’ve only given to one woman in my entire life—my trust. I gave her my friendship, my lo—don’t even fucking say it Toussaint. You didn’t love her. She certainly didn’t love you.

The pain comes flooding back. I told her about Katherine, my mother, my father, everything. I completely let my guard down. How could she do this to me?

I haven't felt so hurt since I was a child. I drop to the floor and cry. I feel no shame. No guilt. I need to let the pain out one god-damned tear at a time.

A Missing Mega Yacht

Lauren

“Merci beaucoup.”

“You’re welcome. Have a good day.” The counter servers at Il Italia are super friendly.

“Oh, I will,” I say with the widest smile I can muster this early in the morning.

The cookies and the latte are both piping hot when I leave the café. I can’t *wait* ’til he has a bite of them. I’m glad Ms. Fournier finally softened up. I don’t particularly like having enemies. Especially someone so close to Roger.

The morning sun over the Côte d’Azur is extra glorious today. It matches my mood. I can’t help but smile when I think about him. My life will be forever changed because I met Roger Toussaint. These past few days have been the very best of my existence, and the latte and lemon cookies are just a small token of my undying appreciation. Honestly, I can’t even believe men like him exist. If I was Katherine, I would have pleased him every day and night—and that’s just what I’m

going to do. The guy is going to have to peel my body off of him on an hourly basis. I take a deep breath and smile as I step inside the tender, placing the brown café bag in the passenger seat next to me. The small boat rattles as I start the engine and slowly sail away from the dock. I'm extra careful in the marina. I'm comfortable operating the boat, but I don't want to get overconfident and start speeding.

Once I'm out of the highly trafficked marina, I push the throttle to go just a bit faster. I can't wait to see Toussaint's face when he sees his breakfast. I raise my eyes over the splashing of the mist on the side of the boat.

I'm not quite prepared for what I see next.

Where the hell is the yacht?

The floating marker where it was docked is there, but the yacht is gone. The water that I find myself in is churning. I can still feel the wake it left behind. The smile leaves my face. How does a mega yacht just disappear?

And why?

My mind starts to wander. *Maybe pirates came aboard. Maybe it needed emergency repairs. Maybe...*

It takes me just a second to realize—to *actually* realize—that the boat is really gone. It wasn't an accident or a mistake. It was done on purpose. So, here I find myself. Just where I started. Sad. Alone. Drifting in a sea of uncertainty.

Is this the man who made love to me? Who promised to take me away from a life of crime? I mean, really...is this the

same man? How could he have just sailed away, leaving me here? I don't even have identification.

I don't even realize I'm crying until the first tear falls from my cheek onto my chin. Then the downpour comes.

I'm on a boat on the coast of France. With another man disappearing from my life. I can hardly believe this. To make things worse, I have to make the four-hour ride to Toulon on a tender I can barely drive in the harbor. The tears stream down as I point the boat in the direction of the shoreline.

Lauren, you are capable. You can do this. Whether he thought you were or not, you know that you are strong. It was nice not having to be so strong just for a day or two. But now it's back to reality.

As I look out into the open ocean, I promise myself that I will never be so utterly stupid as to give my heart away again. *Never. Ever. Again.*

It will take me at least four hours by boat to get home. And I have no idea how much gas is in this thing, but I don't see another way. Seeing as I have no money. Or identification. Or food. Or clothes.

Let this be a lesson, Lauren. If you let someone run your life, they can take it away at any time. You were born to be a thief. Remember that.

As I pull out of the St. Tropez harbor, I silently wish I'd never met Roger Toussaint. The pain I'm feeling at this moment is the worst pain I've ever experienced. I *never* want

to feel this way again for as long as I live. I don't care how long it takes. I will wipe the memory of that man out of my mind someday somehow.

I wipe the tears from my eyes. I need to be strong right now. I can break down when I get home. #

***#

I stay close to the shoreline as the hours pass in the tender. If I run out of gas, I can swim to shore and hitchhike home. Better yet, I can steal a motorbike or a car.

As the afternoon sun lowers over the water. I finally reach the Toulon harbor. The engine is sputtering on fumes. I bet Rog—excuse me, I mean the man that I spent the past few days with, had it filled up the day before.

When the harbor comes into view, the motor starts to give out, starving for fuel.

Come on, just a few yards more. You can do it.

The engine finally gives out a few feet from the dock. I maneuver it to the wooden structure and begin to tie it off. I remove the empty brown bag that sits on the seat beside me and throw it in the trash. I devoured the cookies inside it hours ago.

The sun dips below the horizon as I make my way to my boat. As I walk through the common area, I hear a noise coming from behind the marina restroom. It sounds like a newborn baby crying.

What could that be?

I decide to take a look. Why not? With my luck, there just might *be* an abandoned baby behind the restroom. That's how my day has been going so far, at least. I get closer to the sound and find a bush behind the building; I look underneath it. What do I find but a baby kitten? An orange one. Abandoned just like me.

“Come here, little guy.”

The tiny thing is scared and crying. It looks like it's only a few weeks old. His eyes have just opened, and he feels underweight, shaking in the palm of my hand. “I know how to feel, little one.” It's a tough world to be brought into, afraid and alone.

I put the tiny creature under my shirt and hold him to my chest.

“I got you, little one. I won't let you go, either. That's a promise you can count on.”

I make my way down the pier to my boat. I'm finally home where I belong.

“We're home, little kitten. Let me get you some food.”

Breaking open a small can of tuna, I put him on the kitchen counter and watch him as he laps up each tiny bite. He starts to purr.

“Thanks, little guy.” I pet him behind his ears with my finger. “For giving me hope.”

I thought for sure that I would want to cry when I finally made it home, but I don't. I want to be strong for this little

kitten. I want to be there for him like Toussaint said he'd be there for me. He was right about one thing—I *am* strong and I *am* capable. Maybe I will go straight one day. I suddenly have a little mouth to feed. I wouldn't want to get caught and have to leave him alone.

Nothing will make me abandon this little life purring on my kitchen counter.

When he's done with his food, he sits back on his hind legs and his eyes start to droop. I read somewhere that kittens need to be wiped on the butt in order to poop, so I grab a paper towel and pour some water on it from the tap. As I wipe his little behind, his eyes close and the greenest, stinkiest poop I've ever seen in a human or animal comes out of his backside. It makes me laugh so hard that his little eyes open and he stares at me.

"I'm sorry dude. It was just too funny."

Petting his little orange head, I come up with a name. "I think I'll name you Claude." He looks up at me and whines. "So you agree?"

"Perfect. Claude it is." Once he's done with a poop that I thought would never end, I take him to bed with me and cover his little body with the covers, keeping his head out so I can watch him and make sure he lives through the night.

"You're the only one who's going to share a bed with me from now on, Claude. I hope you know that."

His purring is all I need to hear. I finally close my eyes and go to sleep.

Secrets Revealed

Toussaint

It's been a full three days since Lauren left with my watch. I've decided to moor the yacht outside of Cannes for a while before going home. I don't know why, really. Maybe because when I go home, it will truly be over. Both she and the watch will be gone forever. My lesson will finally be learned.

Every day Pierre puts my meals at the door and knocks. I wait until he is gone to open it. I have left strict instructions not to be disturbed during the day. I eat my meals on my private balcony. Today, the pain has actually subsided just the tiniest bit. I know that I'm going to be okay... *one* day. I'll get over Lauren just as I got over Katherine.

The crystal blue water that radiates from the Côte d'Azur is magnificent. It seems to stretch out forever. I think it might be time to go home soon. I haven't made up my mind. What I *do* know however, is that I need to apologize to Ms. Fournier for my behavior the other day. I push away my empty breakfast plate. Now is as good a time as any.

I walk downstairs to her suite and knock on the door.

Her voice floats thought right through it. “Entrez.”

I open the door.

She is facing her bed with her back to the door. She has her suitcase open with her clothes folded next to it. She spins around.

“Bonjour Pierre—“

Clearly, she wasn't expecting me. The smile drops from her face.

“Bonjour Ms. Fournier. I want to apologize—“

Suddenly, there on the bed, I see it—the Patek Phillipe.

“Ms. Fournier?” My eyes shoot from the bed to her face. “What is my watch doing on your bed?”

She stands for a moment in stunned silence. “I don't know...” she stutters. “Is it yours? I found it in the girl's room as I was cleaning?”

“I wear the watch every day. You know damn well it's mine.” I keep my gaze firmly on her face. “You're lying, Ms. Fournier. Aren't you?”

Tears begin to fill her eyes. “Roger. You need someone to take care of you. Not that little thief. She is beneath you.”

Unrequited love. It hurts like nothing else on earth. I walk to the bed, pick up the watch from the bedspread, and put it around my wrist. I turn to her. She looks up at me with red, swollen eyes. I can't be upset with the woman standing in

front of me. I lean in and give her a hug. She grabs me with an intensity that I didn't even know she was capable of.

She knows it's over. Her infatuation, her plans to win my affection, and her employment. It's all over, after five wonderful years.

"I will give your next employer the best reference I can."

"Merci," she sobs.

"Finish packing, and I will have Pierre take you to shore. Your last paycheck will be deposited into your account next week and I'll have your things sent to your sister in Marseille." I make my way to the door.

Then it hits me.

"Ms. Fournier?" I turn around to face her. "Did you pull the boat rug out from under her feet?"

Her sobs turn into a full-blown cry. "I didn't realize she couldn't swim. Please believe me. I saw you in the pool with her. It looked as though she loved the water."

The rage in me grows to its boiling point. "I was teaching her how to swim." I am trying desperately to stay calm as I speak. "You could have fucking *killed* her."

"I didn't mean to. Please, I'm so sorry." She wipes snot from her nose with a pair of socks from her luggage.

"You have five minutes to get your things together."

I walk into the salon and summon Pierre. It only takes him ten seconds to appear.

“Bonjour M. Toussaint, is there anything I can get for you today?” He looks me up and down. I think he’s caught off guard by the white stubble on my face. It’s grown into a short beard in a matter of days.

“Please have a seat.” I direct him to the couch.

“Okay.” He slowly sits down. I can feel the tension coming off of him.

I want to get to the point as quickly as possible. “Is there something going on between you and Ms. Fournier?”

“I’m sorry?” He looks bewildered. “What do you mean Monsieur? Like *romantically*?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely not. My fiancée lives in Nice. In fact, I will be taking an extended break to get married in a few months. That is, when my assignment with you is over.”

The man sounds like he’s telling the truth.

“So there is no partnership of any kind between you too?”

“I’m not exactly sure what you mean, but no, there is no... *partnership* between us.”

“Okay, thank you. That will be all.” I can’t understand why she thought I was Pierre when I opened the door.

He gets up from the couch, but he doesn’t leave. He seems like he wants to say something.

“Spit it out, man.” I’m not in the mood for hesitation right now. My anger and frustration are getting the best of me.

“Forgive me. I just wanted to know if Miss Ellis is okay. I don’t quite understand what happened.” He puts his arm up to the back of his neck. “You two seemed close...and the fact that you wanted extra security detail while you were with her... I’m m just surprised to see that you left St. Tropez alone.”

“Extra security detail? What are you talking about?”

“Yes, Ms. Fournier said that she wanted me to follow you both and to report back to her. I watched you dancing at the nightclub and when you went swimming at M. Fischer’s villa. I anchored the tender far offshore and used my binoculars to keep you under watch, then I told her you two were fine. She wanted to know if you were being followed or harassed. I assured her that you weren’t.”

“What else did you tell her?”

He takes a minute to think. “I just reported on your actions, really. Nothing more.”

“I see, so you were her eyes and ears.”

“Yes, sir.” He hesitates. “But she said that she was only following your instructions—to keep Miss Ellis safe.”

“I see.” That’s why she thought Lauren could swim. She knew things were becoming serious between us.

“Thank you, Pierre... for everything. Since the tender is gone, I’d like you to take the dingy to shore with Ms. Fournier. She will not be coming back on board. I only need you for a

few more days, then you will be free to get the hell out of here and marry your fiancée.”

He smiles. “Thank you, sir.” He pauses. “Is she okay?”

I look at him. “Ms. Fournier or Lauren?” I ask. “You know what? Never mind, the answer is *no* on both counts. They’re both *not* okay. I caught Ms. Fournier stealing from me, and she has been terminated.”

He lets out an audible gasp.

“And...” I swallow down my frustration. “I blamed Lauren for the thievery. Like a fucking idiot, I abandoned her in St. Tropez.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to have the captain take us to Toulon and beg for her forgiveness. But there is one thing I have to do first. We can discuss it when you return.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Lost is Found

Lauren

Henri's curio shop is always filled with a warm tobacco smell. The old man smokes like a chimney. An old rickety chimney with soft eyes and a warm smile. I love nothing more than sitting in the back room with him eating a sandwich and drinking tea—and at the moment, that is exactly what I'm doing. Henri is so excited to see me that he's bought cookies for dessert and poured some lavender tea for us.

“Please don't worry me like that again, young lady. My old heart can't take it.”

“I'm sorry Henri, I won't—and I'm sorry about the watch too. We could have both retired.”

“It's fine, my darling. I have no intention of retiring. People my age die when they retire.” He flashes a smile at me.

“I'm already planning our next score. A home in the hills of Avignon. The family is away in a few months and I can take care of the dogs, no problem.”

He looks up at me wide-eyed. “What kind of dogs?”

“Dobermans.”

“Ah...they live by their stomachs. That’s for sure. You know ma chérie,” he takes a smoke of his cigarette. “I hoped the Patek Philipe would be your last job. I want you to go straight. Find someone. Have children and stop sneaking around. You have plenty of money saved.”

“That life wasn’t meant for me, Henri.” Even *thinking* about going straight makes me furious with Toussaint all over again. No—he took that fleeting dream away from me and I don’t want it back. I will be sneaking into homes, taking what I want for the rest of my life. When I turn eighty, I *might* retire, but I doubt it. Who would suspect such an old lady to be a thief anyway?

“What are you smiling at, my dear?”

“Nothing.”

The hanging bell on the door rings as someone comes into the store.

Henri puts his cigarette down and gets out of his chair. “I’ll be right back.”

Listening to the murmur of voices in the shop, I eat my sandwich. I don’t know who came up with the idea of putting pear and brie between two slices of a toasted baguette, but I’m glad they did. It’s an ingenious flavor combo. I can hear the customer leave as I take the last crispy bite.

Putting my phone in my pocket, I go to say goodbye to Henri. My little kitten Claude, needs to be fed. He’s made it

through his first week on my boat, and I think he's going to survive kittenhood. I've set up a food station and a litter box for the little guy. He's my redheaded cutie pie.

"I'm going to go Henri."

"All right ma chérie, I'll see you tomorrow." Henri's not looking at me. He's looking out the window as we talk.

"Did you make a big sale?"

"I did. The Austrian Strauss Chandelier that I've had on sale for two weeks finally sold." His eyes stay focused outside the window. "Have you noticed that we've been having more rich tourists than usual?"

"No, I haven't really been paying attention."

"That's the second giant yacht I've seen in the last two months. Maybe they are getting tired of St. Tropez and Marseilles."

I follow his gaze out the window. I'd recognize that mega yacht anywhere. That's Toussaint's boat.

"What the hell?"

"What's wrong Marceline?"

"I'll see you later Henri, I have some ass to chew."

"Darling, I love your American sayings, but I'm not sure that I know what that one means."

I give him a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll explain later." Leaving his shop, I make my way to my boat.

Who do I see but the mighty Roger Toussaint himself, on the bow of *my* boat, holding *my* kitten.

“Leave him alone.” My voice is all business. I need this jackass gone. “He has fleas.”

“I’m not concerned with his fleas.” Toussaint’s gaze is as warm as the sun. He’s grown a scruffy beard that makes him all the more handsome.

“I was talking to the kitten, asshole. Get off my boat.”

“I’m sorry Lauren.”

“Fuck off.”

He is undeterred. “My watch was gone, and you were gone at the same time. I—“

“I don’t even want to hear it. I was getting you some fucking lemon cookies and a coffee for breakfast. When I got back, you were *gone*. I drove that fucking tender to a yacht that was nowhere to be found. After your disappearing boat trick, I had to drive it all the way here on the tender. Alone. For *hours*.”

He pulls Claude up to his chest. His purring gets louder. “I know. I’m sorry.”

He steps off the bow of the boat and onto the dock. I almost forgot how tall and utterly beautiful the man is.

“I had Henri sell the tender. I hope you didn’t want it back.” I cross both arms. “Give me my cat.”

Toussaint takes a few steps closer and hands me Claude. Our fingers touch. I forgot how warm his skin was too.

“Ms. Fournier is no longer in my employ.”

“Good. She was a witch. I think she might have been in love with you. Or maybe she hated me just for the fun of it. Not sure.”

“I want you to come back to Cannes with me.” He looks at me with warm, pleading hazel eyes. “Please.”

I am truly floored by his audacity. “Not on your damn life Toussaint.”

“I’m sorry Lauren. Ms. Fournier took my watch, and you were gone.” He looks down at me. “I thought you had taken it. I found her with it red-handed, with the watch in her possession.”

“You were quick to believe her, I see.”... *Lauren don’t let your emotions get the best of you, damn it. Swallow down that lump.* “If someone had told me that *you* had committed a crime, I never would have believed them. I would have asked you myself before I jumped to that kind of conclusion.” Claude starts to whine. “Please get the fuck off my pier and leave me alone...*forever.*”

I start to turn around toward the boat’s entrance and Toussaint grabs my arm. He utters one word:

“No.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“I said *no*. I love you, Lauren.” He pulls me up to him as his scent fills my nostrils. I feel like my knees are going to give out. His voice is firm and fully in command. “I’m going to stay moored in Toulon for as long as it takes to prove my devotion to you. I was wrong for ever thinking that you could steal from me.” His lips tremble as he speaks. “I made a rash decision. One that I deeply regret.”

He pulls me even closer. “I won’t let you go.”

My chin begins to shake. I can’t control it. I want nothing more than to curl up in his arms and never be pulled out of them. But the hurt was just too much. I’ve never felt so much pain. I’d rather go on wanting him for the rest of my life than feel it again.

I turn my face away from him. I can’t bear to look him in the eye. “I’m sorry Roger. I just can’t.”

It takes more willpower than I’ve ever had to muster to push myself away from him. I make my way into my boat and close the door. His footsteps slowly grow faint as he leaves the pier.

After I feed Claude, I have the cry that I should have the day I got back. The heart-wrenching ugly cry that you don’t want to do in front of other human beings. Then, finally, I go to bed still sobbing into my pillow.

One Last Try

Toussaint

Lauren was right. I never should have assumed for a moment that she had taken the watch. I was wrong. I will do anything to make it up to her. As the sea breeze rushes past me, the air-filled dinghy struggles to move as I push the motor faster. I miss the tender. I can't believe she drove it all the way here from St. Tropez. The woman can do anything she puts her mind to.

That's why I love her. I have not one ounce of doubt when I say those words...*I love her.*

I want her so damn bad, and I know that she wants me. It must have taken all the strength she had to turn her back on me. But I could see the longing in her eyes when she looked at me. I've loved once before. But I've never respected a woman as much as I respect her. I love her strength, her beauty, and I'll do anything to get her back.

The garage opens as I pull the dingy in. Pierre is waiting as I enter.

“Bonjour M. Toussaint. How did things go?”

I look him straight in the eye and tell the truth. “Not so well. She’s upset with me. I certainly can’t blame her.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

I smile as I jump off the tiny flotation device. “So am I.” I look back at the dinghy. “At least the raft didn’t capsize on my way back.”

He laughs as he walks with me up to the salon. We stop before making our way inside. I’m sure he can see the disappointment on my face, because he asks me what my next move will be.

“I don’t know. I’ll go back to her boat tomorrow and invite her to lunch. Honestly, how can she say no to lunch? The woman loves to eat.”

“Do you mind if I make a suggestion?” asks Pierre.

“No, not at all.” I’m quite interested in what he has to say.

“Let *me* go instead. I can talk her into coming aboard.” He smiles. “I’m sure of it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I can be very persuasive when I need to be. It’s part of my job.”

“Okay.” I’m glad he offered. I don’t want to come on too strong. “If you can convince the woman to come aboard after I left her abandoned miles away from home, I’ll consider you a magician.”

Pierre laughs. “Leave it to me, sir. It’s as good as done.” Before we go inside, he asks, “Are you ready for something to eat?”

“I suppose so.”

“Shall I set up a table for two?”

“Yes, that would be perfect.”

“The chef has ordered scalloped and fresh caught swordfish. Which would you prefer?”

“Swordfish sounds wonderful.”

“Perfect, I’ll let him know.” We enter the salon. The sun breaks through the windows, lighting up the entire room. It is warm and golden and the sea stretches out for miles on the other side of the tempered glass. The only thing missing is her.

“Thank you, Pierre—for *everything*.”

“It is my pleasure, sir.” He bows his head and leaves.

I turn my attention to my guest.

“Did you see Lauren? How did she look?” asks the woman on the couch.

“Yes, I saw her. She looked lovely as usual.”

An Unexpected Guest

Lauren

The next morning, I hear a knock at the cabin door. Claude, who I think has gained double his body weight since I first found him, looks at me with wide-open eyes. They are the most unique shade of blue-green I have ever seen. He meows at me.

“I don’t know who it is either Claude.”

When I open the door, I’m surprised to see Pierre standing at my door. He has a box in his hand.

“Hi, Pierre. It’s nice to see you again.” I’m going to ignore the fact that I just woke up and have a rat’s nest for hair. I’m also going to ignore the fact that Pierre looks like a million bucks first thing in the morning. His clothes are pressed, his hair looks fabulous, and I bet, unlike me, he’s brushed his teeth already.

“Good morning, Miss Ellis.” His smile is big and bright. “M. Toussaint wanted me to bring this to you.”

I open the box to see the red Lapine jacket that he bought me from the show.

“Thank you, Pierre. Tell him that I appreciate you bringing this to me.”

I feel better this morning. Better knowing that he didn't just leave me in St. Tropez for no reason. Better that he found out the true intentions of Ms. Fournier. I can't even be upset with her. She loved him. Every woman who's ever met the man loves him. I hope someone can make him truly happy one day.

“He has asked me to invite you to lunch this afternoon.”

I smile at Pierre. He's a good guy and probably doesn't want to be the middleman in an ex-lover's quarrel.

“Thanks, Pierre. Tell him that I have to respectfully decline. But I wish him well. I really do. Please let him know that there aren't any hard feelings.” The words coming out of my mouth make me a little sad. But they're the truth. I *do* wish him well. He's one of the most wonderful men I've ever known. But a woman with a grudge was able to convince him that I was someone I wasn't. It was just too easy for her to do it. Something happened when I pulled up to that empty place in the harbor that neither one of us can change now. I was utterly heartbroken.

Pierre looks at me.

“I will do that. But I think you are making a mistake.”

I wasn't exactly expecting the words that came out of Pierre's mouth. I don't even begin to have a response. So he

keeps talking...

“I see a lot of people in this job mademoiselle. Wealthy people. People who have loveless marriages—wives, mistresses, multiple lovers, you name it. The ultra-wealthy can be out of touch. Arrogant. Even *cruel* sometimes.”

“Roger Toussaint is not one of those people.” His stare is one of the truest gazes I’ve ever seen. There’s not an ounce of bullshit in it. “I will tell him that you respectfully decline if you wish. He will respect your wishes and eventually leave this harbor. But I know—and I think *you* know—that such a decision would be a mistake.”

So much for Pierre being merely a messenger. I take a deep breath before responding. “Okay, Pierre. I’ll have lunch with the man. But only this once.” I relax my shoulders. “I know he’s a good man. It’s the good ones that cause the most pain.”

“Oui, Miss Ellis.” He smiles. “I’ll let him know you’re coming. I’ll be back at twelve thirty to pick you up.”

“Sounds good Pierre.”

He starts to walk down the pier

“Pierre wait!”

“Yes, mademoiselle?”

I smile back at him. “Thanks.”

“Thank *you* mademoiselle.”

He turns around, walks down the pier, and gets onto a tiny dingy that looks like it can barely support the weight of a

single passenger. He has to pull a cord just to make it start. He speeds off to Toussant's giant yacht in the distance.



It is twelve thirty on the dot when Pierre comes to pick me up. I've put on a fresh white sun dress just for the occasion. I want to be *cute* for our lunch—but not sexy. Pierre's words have been rolling around my head since this morning. He must really respect Roger, not only as a contract employer, but as a man. He didn't have to say those things, he *chose* to say them.

He helps me onto the blow-up boat. I don't even respect the craft we're on enough to call it a "dingy". I hope it lasts until we get to the yacht. I haven't been swimming since I almost drowned in the ocean, and I don't need a replay of that scenario.

"Bonjour, mademoiselle."

"Bonjour, Pierre."

I sit on a poor excuse for a seat as he pulls the engine cord.

It only takes a few minutes to get to the other end of the harbor where Toussaint's yacht is waiting. We enter the garage and go up the stairs.

Pierre opens the doors to the salon.

Roger is sitting at the table with a bottle of champagne. He is absolutely breathtaking. He's shaved the beard he was growing, and he's gotten a fresh haircut. His blue eyes pierce

right through me. The man is perfection itself in a light linen suit.

Stay strong, Lauren. He left you in St. Tropez remember?

“Hello Lauren,” he stands up and walks over to me. Then he wraps his arms around me and lifts my feet up off the floor. He smells delicious. I bet he used his vanilla milk bath just to seduce me with his smell. There’s no way in hell that I’m going to let on how well it’s working.

“Hi, Roger.”

“I’m glad you decided to come.”

“You can thank Pierre for that.” I turn to him and smile.

“Thanks, Pierre for convincing her to come aboard.”

“I hope there’s lots of food,” I say to him. “I’m starving.”

“There *is* a lot of food,” He smiles. “But before we eat, I’d like you to meet someone.”

I’m immediately confused. “You want me to *meet* someone?”

“Yes, I’ve hired a new secretary.”

“Oh, really?” The man certainly doesn’t mess around. Ms. Fournier has only been gone for a few days, tops.

“Yes. She’ll be working remotely from the United States. But I want you to meet her and see if you approve. I will only hire her with your blessing.”

He looks past me and I turn around.

I recognize the woman behind me. She's a bit older, and her hair has grayed, but she's just as beautiful as she's always been.

"Mom?"

"Hello, sweetheart." Her eyes are filled with tears.

I'm utterly stunned. I can't even move. She comes closer to me and looks at my face. She wraps her arms around me and squeezes them tight. She even smells the same.

"You're all grown up."

Seeing her again does something to my heart. It feels *lighter* all of a sudden. I never thought I'd see my past appear right in front of my eyes. But here she is. My mom. I raise my arms to return her hug. I don't say anything. For once in my life, I am utterly speechless.

"I love you, sweetheart." She starts to sniffle. "Please know that I love you."

Roger's voice lingers in a whisper. "I'll leave you two alone."

He and Pierre close the door behind them.

I take my mom's hand. "Let's go out onto the sun deck and talk."

"That sounds wonderful, dear."

When we get outside, the breeze is light as the salt air whips around us. There is no place in the world like the Mediterranean Sea. I never thought my mom would be here

with me to enjoy it. I hold her hand as we walk over the deck to the bow of the ship. I take a moment just to look at her. It's like I'm meeting my own mother all over again. She's so beautiful. I grasp her hand tighter.

“I know you always dreamed of the sea sweetheart.”

She's right. I always looked at that old irrigation ditch back home and dreamed of a wide-open ocean. “That's true.” I flash a knowing smile. “I did.”

My mom doesn't waste any time before saying what she has to say. “I want you to know that I'm sorry for everything. I thought Leo was a good man.” She pauses. “I was wrong.”

I knew he wasn't a good man, and I don't need my mom's recognition of the obvious for validation, but it's nice to hear it all the same. As she talks, I listen.

“It wasn't long after you went away that I found the evidence of who he truly was.”

My eyes widen. “What evidence?”

“He went away to visit family when I saw pictures of you on his computer. He had taken them when you were sleeping, when you were playing, even when you were on the playground at school. There were hundreds of them.” Tears run down her face. It breaks my heart a little bit.

“I was wrong. And I'm sorry. There is absolutely no excuse for not understanding that you felt threatened by him. I'm sorry—“ She brings me in for another hug.

It feels good having the weight of the secret off my shoulders. I didn't even know it was still there. "You don't have to keep apologizing mom. It's all in the past now."

"It's not that simple, Lauren. I missed out on so many years with you." she pauses. "Please understand how much regret I have."

"What about Caleb?" I'm not exactly sure why I'm asking about him. But as long as we're talking about the past, I might as well see the whole picture.

"When he came back without you, I was completely distraught. The low life couldn't even tell me where you were. He and the girl he came back with split up after only a few months. Then he moved away, and I never saw him again. Leo was gone and Caleb was gone too. I had nothing to do but think about you, wondering if you were okay. I thought for sure you were in the US, but it was as if you disappeared off the face of the earth." She takes a tissue from her pocket and wipes her eye.

"That was exactly what I did mom. I didn't have much of a choice at the time." Now I'm the one who feels sorry.

"You have no idea how happy I am that you're alive."

Suddenly, I'm pretty happy to be alive myself. It never occurred to me that anyone back home even realized I was missing. I was so hurt and so alone, that I couldn't even think about anyone but myself. It took everything I had just to survive until the next day. Then months went by. Then years.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Lauren. Strong and brave. It’s everything I ever wanted for you. I just wish I could have instilled those values in you myself. Without all the pain.”

“I know mom. It’s okay.”

“Do remember when you were little, and you loved to watch *To Catch a Thief*?”

I laugh. “I remember.”

“Roger’s been telling me all about your life in France. He says that you practically became Cary Grant’s character...what was his name? *The Cat*?”

“Yeah mom,” I giggle. “*The Cat*.” I can’t believe she remembers that.

The look on her face changes from a smile, to one of quiet sincerity. “I don’t want you to accept me if you don’t want to sweetheart, but I hope you will.”

Her words cut like a dull knife. I have felt anger and resentment for so long, that I don’t know how to replace those feelings. But the woman standing in front of me loves me and I know it would break her heart to turn my back on her now.

I answer her in the most truthful way I can. “I don’t need a mother anymore, but I *do* need a friend. And if what Roger says is true, and he wants to hire you as a virtual assistant, then that can be a start. If it’s what you really want.”

She pulls me in and hugs me.

“It’s a start sweetheart.”

“I love you, mom.”

“I love you too my dear.”

I walk her over to the edge of the ship and look out over the Mediterranean. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“Yes, I think it’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.”

“Did Roger tell you that he taught me how to swim?”

She smiles “You can *swim*?”

“Yep. I’m no Olympian, but I can tread water. Even in the ocean.”

“Roger’s a good man.” She raises her eyebrows. “Handsome too.”

“He’s alright.” I smile. I put my arms around her waist and we gaze out into the never-ending blue water.

I’m deeply in love with the man who brought me here. I never thought a single human being could be so good. So strong. The man saved me. All I wanted was his watch, and he gave me my entire life back. I will be forever grateful.

“Let’s go get some food.”

My mom gives me one last hug before we go inside. “Great. I’m starved. You know sweetheart, they have the best seafood here.”

I laugh. “So much better than Ohio huh?”

“So much better.”

“Toussaint comes in and we all sit at the table. He can’t stop smiling, and for that matter, neither can I.

“Who would like champagne?” he asks.

My mom and I both raise our hands...like twins.

He starts to pour.

I raise a glass. “To forgiveness.”

They both raise a glass and we all clink them together. I look at the two awesome people sitting across from me. “I love you both.”

“We love you back,” he says.

My mom beams as a tear falls down her cheek.

Epilogue

Lauren

The dress is white and so is the tux. The man I tried to steal from six months ago is marrying me. With all of his money and all of his status, he has decided to do what we both wanted, and go small. There are seven special people in attendance at our wedding. Pierre and his new wife Sophia, my mom, Henri, and you'll never guess who else. That's right, a gorilla named Jean-Marc. The man who hurled my bruised body over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

The last two are the bride and groom: Lauren Ellis, the luckiest girl in the known universe, and Roger Toussaint, the most wonderful man I've ever met. We are standing at a small altar in his backyard.

Tears run down my face as the priest has us repeat our vows. "I now pronounce you husband and wife," he says. "You may kiss the bride."

"I love you, sweetheart," I say through teary eyes.

"I love you too, my darling."

He bends down to kiss me and fireworks explode in my mind, down my spine, and other palaces I don't care to mention. He lifts me up and holds me as people clap.

This is one of the best moments of my life. Who knew that when I was caught that day that it would be forever?

“May I have this dance?” asks Roger.

“You may.” He takes my hand and leads me onto a small dance floor. I've come to the conclusion that every celebration that Roger throws has to have a dance floor. There's a small five-piece orchestra that we dance to side by side. They aren't playing Tchaikovsky or Vivaldi. No, they're playing a lovely rendition of Frank Sinatra's *My Way*.

I've always loved the song, and it's only fitting. We do things our own unique way, and it brought us together in the end—the thief and the handsome millionaire.

My mom's second big assignment for my husband was to assist with the planning of our wedding. Both she and I enjoyed every second of it. I'm glad to have her in my life as a friend and a confidant. We talk on the phone at least three times a week. I love it. I'm getting to know her; to make up for lost time.

What was her *first* big assignment? Planning my twenty-eighth birthday party. It was a blast. With Roger's help, my twenty-seventh was indeed my last year in the thievery game. My job was exciting and lucrative, but I'm glad it's over.

When the song is over, the tiny dance floor slowly fills with all the other guests. Roger dances with my mom while I dance with Jean-Marc. For such a big man, the gorilla sure can dance. He twirls me around like a rag doll, and I don't know if it's the champagne or what, but I kinda like it.

“You look beautiful today, Lauren. That's a lovely gown,” he says. He's wearing a perfectly cut black pinstriped suit.

“Thanks, Jean-Marc.” I hug him as we spin. “You know, you really clean up well.”

“I do, don't I?” he laughs with his gold tooth gleaming.

He's become our personal bodyguard, and he loves the job.

After congratulations have been accepted, my mom goes to sleep in the guest bedroom, and all the other guests go home. I find myself in my white dress, sitting across from my husband over a chessboard. I never beat him after that one time on the train, but I'll never stop trying. That's what he loves about me. My determination.

I started a job on his finance team a few months ago, and I pay attention to every detail of what comes in and what goes out. I love the work, and the team I work with loves me. I never thought I'd say the word “team” with a smile, but here I am, happy. Part of a team at work, and part of another team at home.

All of Roger's business associates and friends will have their time with him to celebrate our nuptials. We've decided to have a huge wedding party in a month or so after we get back

from our honeymoon. You won't guess where we're going—a little town called Deerfield, Ohio. Yep, it's the place where I was born and raised. The place I escaped just to come back in ten years' time. I left an unaware little small-town girl in a big scary world, and I will come back older and hopefully wiser; able to take care of myself. I hope I can see it in a new light this time around. I see everything in a new light now because of the glorious man sitting across from me. I can't believe I get to call him my husband.

“How are you feeling?” asks Roger with a warm lingering smile.

“I feel like if I loved you anymore, I'd explode.”

He laughs and looks down at the chessboard. “If you're trying to romance me off my game, it won't work.”

I can't help but gaze at the man. He thinks he has me beat—*again*.

“Roger?”

“Yes, my lovely wife?”

“Do you know how much I adore you?”

He bites his lip and whispers, “Yes, because I adore you too, my darling.”

“Okay, then don't be mad.”

He looks at me with an assuring gaze. “Nothing you do could ever make me angry, sweetheart.”

“Good.” I smile. “Because I don’t enjoy saying what I have to say next...”

“And what’s that?”

“Checkmate.”

He starts to laugh as he leans back in his chair. “I didn’t see that one coming.”

“I *see* that M. Toussaint.”

“Let’s go to bed, *Madam Toussaint*, so I can take my revenge.” He smiles.

He gets up from the table and takes my hand in his.

“I like the way you think, sir.”

He pulls me in so close I can smell him. “I don’t care that you took my king my darling, because I have my queen right here.”

He kisses me. And he doesn’t stop for the rest of the night.

About The Author

Iris Katherine Quinn was a painter until she put down her brush and picked up a pen. She writes stories about romance, travel, and mystery. Her stories usually take place in the metropolises of the world – Paris, New York, London, Rome – all of them. See more at IrisKatherineQuinn.com.