

*A Million Different Ways*

by

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## *Prologue*

1985

Santa,

Hi. I am 6. I can rite becuse I have a tuder. Can you make my mom and dad like  
eech other. thanks

love sebastian

1987

Santa,

Hi its Sebastian. I live in texas and my parents dont fite anymore. I dont see my  
dad much. my mom drinks that stuf that smells can you help her?

Thanks you are grate.

love Sebastian

1988

Deer Santa,

My mom is in the hospitol agan!!!!!! A boy in my class said you are NOT REAL. I  
really hope he is rong!!!!!! can you rite write me back. I am not going to rite  
you anymore. I stil still live in texas.

Love Sebastian



## *One*

Geneva, 2012

Winter had worn out its welcome, dragging its feet well into April, but signs that spring had finally arrived were everywhere now. Daffodil stalks had timidly begun to sprout up from cozy beds of dirt, and a dust of color covered the naked branches of the platanus trees. The banks of the lake were packed with people emerging from hibernation. Their rolled up shirtsleeves revealed skin as bleached as an uncooked baguette.

We sat on an old iron bench that faced the Geneva fountain, the Jet D'Eau, and watched it soar 138 meters into the clear blue sky. A watercolor rainbow appeared in the down-turned arc of the spray.

“You can work at Yuri’s nightclub if you want.”

I glanced at Emilia and found her inspecting the cheese in her sandwich. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Em—I appreciate the offer,” I said in the most diplomatic tone I could muster. “But I’m not interested in getting out of one bad situation and into a worse one.”

She wrinkled her slender nose at the cheese and picked it out with long pale fingers. I devoured mine. I hadn’t eaten a decent meal in days. On cue, my stomach growled, nerves churned its paltry contents like a wash and rinse cycle. I placed my hand over it but only managed to reduce its angry roar to a low moan. Emilia stared at my stomach. An apostrophe between her brows marked her delicate features.

“How are you doing with money?” she asked in Albanian, our common language.

In an attempt to avoid her scrutiny, I kept my eyes on the bobbing masts of colorful sailboats. “Fine,” I replied, a little too quickly.

It was an egregious lie and we both knew it. Honesty had become a rare commodity between us the last couple of months. Withholding the entire truth was the only way to be in each other's company without arguing.

My savings account was dwindling rapidly. I was reminded of it every time I looked in the mirror and saw the sharp angles of my cheekbones protruding, the dark depressions beneath my eyes. I couldn't afford to pay the rent on the tiny room off the Rue du Berne much longer. Just for a little while, in the span of time it takes to eat a crappy sandwich, I wanted to forget my problems and lose myself in the breathtaking beauty surrounding me.

"Is there any way you can go back to the pub?" Her question caught me by surprise. Salt on an open wound. The burning sensation lingered as the memory of what had happened that evening came back to me in a rush...

It was our turn to close the bar that night and Pascal always seemed to forget something. The last time we worked the late shift together he had forgotten to lock the back door and the manager had threatened to fire us both. "Did you lock the cash register yet?" I asked—for the third time.

His dark eyes roamed over my rear end in approval. "Oui."

Pascal was considered attractive—he certainly never lacked female company—but if you asked me he looked like the villain in a bad romance novel. His mouth had a perpetually smug tilt to it, and his black, deep-set eyes were framed by slanted brows that winged up at the ends.

It was past one. Eager to close up and go home, I sat at the bar and divided the tip money while Pascal finished cleaning. It vaguely registered that he had been wiping the same spot on the copper top bar for ten minutes in mindless circles. My gaze nervously drifted from his powerful bicep, stretching the black t-shirt he wore, down to his meaty hand and calloused knuckles; the sight of which never failed to turn my stomach.

"Let's have a drink," he said, his French accent coarse.

I paused from counting my share of the money and glanced up. Before I had a chance to respond, he had already poured himself a shot of tequila and knocked it back. I was too tired to feign an excuse.

“Let’s not,” I snapped.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and raked me head to toe with a blank stare. A flicker of something indefinable made me pause. All my senses coalesced, focused strictly on him. He moved behind me, to collect his keys from behind the bar, and I felt him purposely brush up against my rear end, his erection jabbing me in the small of my back.

Pascal had been making sexual advances for months and had done so with all the girls. It never occurred to me that I was in any real danger. A wave of confusion rolled over me. I stood there frozen in place while my mind questioned what my instincts were trying to tell me.

When I finally gathered the courage to glance over my shoulder, I found him hovering disturbingly close, a predatory smile plastered on his face he did nothing to conceal. The delicate hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight. An unwelcomed realization trickled in, collected in my gut, and transformed into a feeling of dread.

“You know, my cousin works at the department of immigration.”

“Yes, I know, Pascal,” I replied, interrupting, unease getting the better of my self-control.

“For a well educated woman, you’re very stupid,” he spat out.

There were a million things I wanted to say to him and none were particularly ‘educated’. Self-preservation won this time. I grabbed my keys from beneath the cash register and stuffed them into the back pocket of my jeans. Not daring to turn my back on him, I slowly backed away.

“I appreciate the offer...but I can take care of it myself.”

His eyes narrowed into aggressive creases and the air surrounding us instantly transformed, grew heavy with dark energy. Pretending not to notice his threatening glare, I untied the black apron wrapped around my shrunken waist and threw it over my shoulder.

“See you Tuesday,” I added with false cheer.

Escape was only an arm’s length away, the door within reach, when he spoke again. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

*Dear God.* My winter jacket was in the back office. I couldn't afford to leave it. I debated going to get it for a hot second, but the look on his face made my mind up for me.

"It's not that cold. I'll get it tomorrow." It wasn't even a small lie. There was still snow on the ground. I gripped the doorknob and heard him moving. My hypersensitive ears registered footsteps over the heavy hammering of my heart...and then reality seemed to fragment.

I watched it play out frame by slow frame, as if I had stepped out of the scene, observing from some distant perspective. His thick, calloused fingers were suddenly splayed in front of me, holding the door shut. I could feel his hot, tequila-laced breath on the nape of my neck. His erection pushed against my rear end. My hipbones pressed painfully into the wood of the door. I couldn't hear myself scream; sounds seemed dull, wrapped in goose down. I struggled wildly but it was impossible to budge him; he outweighed me times ten. I realized my mistake much too late; had calculated badly; hadn't anticipated his determination. I had grossly misjudged him and the cost was unthinkable.

In vain I struggled to pry off the sweaty hand clamped over my mouth and nose. The pungent odor of his personal musk mixed with cleaning detergent and beer crowded my lungs. Launched into a state of terror that was indescribable, any sanity I had a fragile hold on instantly fled.

"Shhh, you little putain. I'll make it good for you," he growled in my ear. Then, all of a sudden, as loud as a crack of thunder, a bang disrupted the violence.

A group of young men stood outside the large picture window of the pub pounding on the glass. They were obviously drunk and seemed in no hurry to move on. Pascal rocked back on his heels and relaxed his weight on the door just long enough for me to react and jerk it open. I stumbled out into the icy night air, greeted by a round of shouts and cheers. The young men rushed the door just in time to block Pascal from grabbing me again.

"Va te faire enculer!" he shouted and the men replied with a few choice obscenities of their own.

I pushed through the crowd clutching the tiny gold cross around my neck for reassurance. Rubbing the warm metal between my fingers, I sent up a silent prayer of gratitude to whatever angel had delivered them.

Pascal stood eerily still while he gripped the doorframe tight enough to turn his fat knuckles white. I was too petrified to blink. I couldn't tell if it was the frigid air or naked fear, but a violent tremor shook my entire frame as I backed away, into the dense black of the moonless night.

And then I ran.

I ran like the devil was at my heels. Until the pain in my lungs felt like a sharp knife skewering me. Until I reached the safety of my little room, where a small, immigrant woman with nobody in the world to protect her goes to hide. I never went back for that jacket.

“There's a greater chance of me becoming the queen of England than going back there.”

“Shit! That bad?!”

I picked nervously at the frayed hole on the knee of my jeans, tried to tuck the loose fibers back into the open weave but only made it worse.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

A pair of elderly men walked past us at a snail's pace, arms locked behind their backs, bickering about the cost of living. I forced the corners of my mouth into an imitation of a smile when one of them tipped his hat at me.

“Have you heard anything from the hospitals?”

“Nothing...yet.” My voice sounded weirdly high, my feeble attempt at optimism falling flat.

I had applied for a residency position at half a dozen local hospitals months ago and hadn't received a single response. My three month grace period had expired. Originally signed in 1985, the Schengen Agreement allows EU residence to travel freely across borders without having to stop at checkpoints and show a passport. In 2008 Switzerland became the twenty-fifth country to join. More importantly, the law allows EU residents to obtain a temporary visa lasting ninety days within a six month period.

Unfortunately, that day had come and gone for me. And since Switzerland is notoriously strict about enforcing the limit—lawbreakers are routinely rounded up and deported after being subjected to enormous fines—I was constantly looking over my shoulder.

Thanks to the global economic meltdown, a blanket of hopelessness had settled over Europe. Not only was it suffocating growth and opportunity, but it was also fueling an alarming anti-immigration movement. Previously fringe, far-right political parties were gaining momentum in Italy, Greece, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Austerity policies had given birth to a destructive mentality of scarcity, a perfect breeding ground for hate and intolerance. Cracking down on immigration suddenly seemed to be the solution to every evil. No one wanted to acknowledge how closely it had begun to resemble a cycle of unpleasant history in Europe.

Italy had taken a big hit. The economy unraveled with each descending tick of the Italian stock market. By the time I graduated from the University of Milan medical school, funding for state-run hospitals had been reduced to the bare minimum. And since Switzerland's recognition of medical degrees from Italy is automatic, the decision to leave the relative safety of Milan—a city I had grown to love—was an easy one. I jumped on a bus headed north and three hours later found myself in a new country, with a renewed sense of hope.

Geneva is a grande dame, an elegant lady, hosting a dinner party for friends from all around the globe. Arabic men dressed in traditional thobes are as common as young mothers pushing designer baby strollers in their workout spandex. Add to that bankers, students, and foreign dignitaries and what you get is a city filled with an eclectic mix of people who fit together as neatly as a colorful puzzle. I fell in love with her instantly. My shining city upon a hill. But as beautiful as she is, routinely ranking as one of the best cities in the world to live in, she also ranks as one of the most expensive. Financially, I was barely surviving, one paycheck away from total ruin.

“How are things with Yuri?” I asked out of habit. She brushed my concern away with a wave of her hand.

“Yuri isn't that bad. I can handle him.”

I turned to look at her, an expression of disbelief plain on my face. She avoided my glare. “You can handle him? Emi, he's involved with the Russian mafia. It's no

secret. I'm very worried for you. And what about your modeling career? Have you given up on that?" Something about Emilia triggered fiercely protective instincts in me. It had always been that way between us, since the day we met in grade school.

The pale skin between Emilia's arched, black brows puckered. "No—" She stopped chewing her food and stared at the sandwich in her hand. "But I'm tired of starving myself, of getting up at four in the morning, of begging for jobs." She threw the rest of her sandwich away and crossed her arms. "Yuri takes care of me. Did I tell you he wants to buy me a brand new BMW? It's red—my favorite color."

What could I say? I was exhausted, buried under a mountain of my own problems. I didn't have the energy to debate all the dangers she faced with this man. "Please promise me you'll be careful. No partying...no drugs."

Chastened, she studied her fingernails. Her pale jade eyes wouldn't meet mine. Beautiful Emilia. The fine boned features and long legs did nothing for her self-esteem. And there was a new brittleness to her that I hadn't sensed last time I saw her. I suspected she realized it couldn't last with Yuri but was stubbornly trying to convince herself otherwise.

"What will you do now?" Her voice was less sharp, a note of concern evident in her tone.

My eyes fell on the half-eaten sandwich she had discarded into the paper bag by her feet and thought about saving it for later. "I don't know where else to look. The restaurants and the hotels won't take me without a visa." Emilia took one hundred francs out of her purse and handed it to me. I pushed it away and shook my head, my inconvenient pride protesting the indignation. "Emi, I can't."

She ignored me, shoved the money into my hands, and gripped them closed. A sympathetic smile softened her angular features. "When you become a famous doctor, you can pay me back...until then, don't."

Torn between shame and survival, I stared at the money and swallowed the bitter taste in my mouth. "You can count on it."

"I just remembered something." I looked up and found Emilia's expression pinched in concentration. "One of the waitresses at the club said there was a position available at the Horn estate, outside the city, but they wouldn't take her because she

doesn't speak proper English. It pays well and housing is included." She stood up and brushed the crumbs off her skinny black jeans.

"Kitchen or housekeeping?" I asked. Not that it mattered—I was ready to dig ditches in a graveyard if it meant being paid.

"Housekeeping, I think. But maybe when you get there you can show them how well you cook."

I stood and wrapped my arms around her tiny waist, the height difference between us considerable. "I'll do anything they need me to. Thanks, Em, you know I love you."

"You're my oldest friend, Vera...my only real friend. I'd do anything for you."

The thinly veiled bruises on her soul were evident in her expression. I recognized those bruises, saw them in myself when I looked in the mirror. Liberty had taken its pound of flesh but we had survived.

"Horn. Why does that sound familiar?" I thought, out loud. Emilia turned around and pointed to the majestic turn-of-the-century building. As the metallic letters glimmered in the sunlight, I recognized the name. Horn Banque.

## *Two*

I wasn't surprised to discover that the only housing I could afford in Geneva was a small room in the red light district. The windows of Pâquis embarrassed me. I always stared ahead when I walked past the barely dressed women in the store windows. As if in mutual agreement, they began filing their nails or checking their phones when they saw me and resumed dancing suggestively as I walked past them. I pretended they didn't exist even though the only thing that separated me from them was the thin glass between us, and my education.

After my lunch with Emilia, I went to inform the landlady she needn't worry about fixing the small refrigerator. The sarcasm escaped her completely. It had been broken for months and no amount of begging had convinced the woman to replace it. The condition of the building was deplorable but who was complaining? Not the tenants. Not a bunch of immigrants huddled together for some semblance of familiarity and safety, too scared to raise an eyebrow.

That apartment was a constant reminder of how low I had sunk in life. It was dark, cold, and the walls practically transparent. I knew exactly what time my neighbors left for work, who was having marital problems, when the prostitute down the hall was entertaining. In a hurry to leave it far behind, I purchased a tattered valise in a secondhand shop and threw my belongings in without taking the time to fold anything. The valise had no wheels but I had learned to travel light. I had to be ready to pick up and move at a moment's notice. And I certainly didn't need another blouse; I was living the life of a Jesuit monk. I had been on one date in six years—not that I was in any position to complain.

In hindsight, I never fully appreciated how charmed my life had been up until that fateful day, six years ago. I was raised by a single parent who smothered me in love and support, indulged me in everything. My father taught me that I could do or be anything I

wished. I had grand ambitions and carefully laid out plans for my future—until my entire life was destroyed by circumstances outside my control.

There was no time to mourn. I learned to adapt quickly. My survival depended on it. With only the clothes on my back and the little money I could get from pawning the few valuables I had, I fled, became a ghost, hiding in shadows and rejecting friendships and attachments of any kind. Nothing would stop them from coming after me—the only thing in my life I was certain of anymore—because I was an accomplice to a crime, an expendable supporting character in a paperback thriller. I wasn't even the clever villain everyone hates to love.

I flew down the stairwell weaving around the children playing hide-and-go-seek along the dark, musty corridor. Their circumstances didn't diminish their joy in the game. They ran around me squealing and giggling, blissfully unaware of the dreariness of the place. Halfway down, a loud shout and the thump of heavy boots drifted up from the ground floor, drowning out the melody of the children's laughter. I glanced over the railing and watched as a single file of police officers jogged up the metal stairs with purpose, weapons drawn. Panic stricken, I shrank back, pressed my spine against the wall.

I had no intention of sticking around to find out whether it was a drug and prostitution raid, or a search for immigrants with expired visas. Doubling back through the door of my floor, I raced to the back of the building with my valise with no wheels banging against the side of my leg hard enough to leave a bruise.

People poured out of their apartments, the hallways crowded as they attempted to flee, the slow and weak being trampled in the process. A smothering wall of bodies blocked my escape, the reek of body odor and fear making it hard to breathe. With strength fueled by adrenaline, I bullied my way through to the emergency stairwell, and ran out the service entrance.

The street was mostly empty. Only one young officer, smoking a cigarette, loitered on the corner. I wiped the nervous sweat off my brow before I walked past him, and rubbed the tiny cross around my neck in gratitude when he barely spared me a glance. As I walked to the bus stop, one of the children called my name, but I never

turned around. I kept walking, away from the children, past the girls in the windows...putting as much distance between them and me as possible.

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The small town was just outside the city limits. I took three buses and spent ten francs I didn't have to spare to get there. It sat comfortably up the side of a hill, overlooking the shores of Lake Geneva; the charm of it fit for postcards and computer screensavers. Leaning my forehead against the cold bus window, I watched life fly by on fast-forward, as smears of intermittent color against the constant blue sky. The landscape was dotted with neatly painted homes in different shades of yellow, white, and beige. The precise, geometric pattern of a vineyard stretched along the banks of the lake. Sidewalks that framed the winding, narrow roads were swept, flowerbeds neatly groomed, and grass looked trimmed with measuring tools. After all these months, I was still dazzled by the natural beauty of Switzerland, the cleanliness, the order. I was homeless and financially hanging on by a thread. I should have been scared witless, but inexplicably the tightness in my chest eased. And for the first time in months, I felt like I could breathe again.

When I stepped down from the bus, the sun made me squint and hide my eyes beneath the roof of my fingers. Across the street, an elderly man swept the front steps of his bakery shop. I asked him for directions to the estate and he kindly obliged while his wife stared at me suspiciously from behind the store window.

I made slow progress down the single lane road. In an orchestrated rhythm, I switched my valise with no wheels from one sweaty hand to the other, dividing the painful task evenly. My medical books made it ridiculously heavy. Actually it must have weighed as much as I did. Between my unusually fast metabolism and not enough food to eat, I was scared to weigh myself. I rarely looked in mirrors. That night, after running from the pub, I contemplated selling them but decided to cut back on food instead. The books were the only things of value I had left.

A small, yellow car sped by, barely avoiding me. Too tired to step aside, I watched the tiny car speed away while the driver waved an angry fist at me and cursed in French. Unbidden, an image of my father drifted in. I could see him shaking his head and

raising an eyebrow at me. His ‘princeshe’. I missed him. My father had been a man of influence in Albania. An intellectual, a visionary, a master of policy and diplomacy. That’s how his friends eulogized him on that frigid day. I used to think he was the center of the universe, the source of all truths. Not anymore. Not for a long time.

I’m the one that found him swinging in his office; an image that wouldn’t tarnish or fade. I could still see him in fine detail from time to time, when I was overly tired. His tall, lean form limp and swinging like a sack of clothes. The tinge of blue on the pale skin of his bare feet. The terrible sadness that would descend upon me shortly afterwards robbed me of breath and sapped all the strength from my limbs.

My sweaty hand had begun to blister. The pain was a welcomed distraction. I pushed thoughts of my father down and away, locked them up with all the other heartbreaking truths I did my best to ignore, and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

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What started as mild fatigue, steadily grew into bone crushing exhaustion. I was dragging my feet by the time I reached the driveway. Dandelions tumbled around me. Fat clusters of white, hairy seeds surfed the wind that kicked up. One landed on my nose. And as I placed my bag down to scratch the itch, the estate finally came into view.

I didn’t recognize the sound of my own voice as a surprised bark of laughter erupted out of me. Somehow I had been transported to a land of make-believe...or a Disney movie. For a bizarre moment, I expected to see Julie Andrews come around the corner singing and dancing while Nazis stood on the front doorstep. I had anticipated something grand but this...this was unreal.

The manor was in the French style, with lawn as tidy as a carpet extending out as far as the eye could see. It had a steep-pitched slate roof, chimneys shaped in pointed peaks, and slender windows capped with stone demi-lunes. A fuzzy vest of ivy clung to the golden limestone façade. And in the background, framing the breathtaking scene, sat Lake Geneva in all her splendor. In short, it looked like the home of a fair-haired prince—except this was no fairytale. Well...not mine, at least.

I barely heard the rumble of a car approaching until it almost ran me over. Apparently nobody in the countryside drives at a reasonable speed. The sports car raced past me without pausing. It looked absurdly expensive. All black and sensually sleek, the dark windows obscured the driver's identity. Gravel fired off under its tires like firecrackers on Bastille Day and kicked up a fog of silt.

As I coughed at the dust billowing up around me, I noticed a white haze had settled on my clothes. Add that to the list of injustices I needed to discuss with God on Sunday. I tried to brush it off but only succeeded in smearing it deeper into the wool of my navy cardigan.

By the time I stood at the service entrance, I was limp and dusty, and my toe was poking out through a large hole on the top of my canvas sneakers. Basically I looked like a character in a Charles Dickens novel. Hunger and weariness made me impatient. I knocked several times, the blows growing more forceful, until a tall, elderly gentleman opened the door. My eyes snapped up to meet his. He looked north of seventy years, with olive skin and a neatly combed, thick shock of white hair. He stood stiffly, and wore both an expression and a black suit that made him look like an undertaker. I angled one foot over the other in a ridiculous attempt to conceal the hole.

“Yes?” His English had a subtle French lean to it.

“I was told you have a housekeeping position open at the house, sir,” I said, my smile shaky and uncertain.

Looking through his horn-rimmed glasses, he inspected me closer, thinly disguised suspicion in his dark eyes.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine, sir. I'll be thirty in September.”

A heavy pause.

“You have a very cultured British accent,” he stated—although it sounded more like an accusation. Then he arched an eyebrow and dipped his chin, gazed at me from above his glasses, as if a better angle would uncover my ruse.

“I also speak French and Italian, sir,” I said quickly, pressing my case before the door slammed in my face.

“Come in, we'll talk,” he conceded with a sigh.

Spinning. Everything was spinning. I stepped inside and gripped the doorframe for support as a wave of nausea and light-headedness washed over me.

“I’m Olivier Bentifourt. I have been the butler for the Horn family for thirty-five years.”

I don’t remember what happened next. However, I must have fainted, because as I began to wake, I found myself horizontal, with the weight of the world sitting on my eyelids and strange voices surrounding me.

“She’s so thin, the poor, poor girl,” said a woman with a jovial French accent. “Charlotte, quick, get the pastries I made last night. She must have low blood sugar,” there was a rustling sound, “and put some tea on the stove. She looks like that actress, you know the one, the American.”

“Audrey Hepburn?” offered the butler.

“Non, Olivier. That actress,” a snap of fingers, “I think her name is Natalie Porter.”

“Portman,” corrected a woman in a crisp British voice.

“Natalie Portman, oui. Thank you, Charlotte.”

“She can’t work here, Marianne. It doesn’t look like she could lift a pillow.”

The butler’s voice broke through the fog. I could feel the cool stone floor beneath me and a sore spot developing on the back of my head. I forced my eyes open and saw a halo of sparkling lights and fuzzy shapes, blinked repeatedly but couldn’t focus.

“I’m stronger than I look. I can prove it. I can lift at least twenty kilos.” My voice sounded weak—even to my own ears.

“Where’s Bentifourt? Where the fuck is everybody?!”

The deep, raspy male voice reverberated through the kitchen and echoed painfully in my head. Assertive footsteps drew closer, the ancient limestone walls amplifying every sound. I sat up with whip-crack speed and instantly felt dizzy again.

“Olivier, you should go, before he finds us in here,” said the French woman. A minute later I heard the elderly butler’s shuffle grow fainter. “Here, eat these.”

My vision sharpened to discover a short, plump woman bending over me. She had a wide face, a crown of short blonde hair, a gap between her two front teeth, and deep blue eyes as round as gumballs. She must have been in her sixties but didn’t have many

wrinkles on her skin, except for the fine laugh lines fanning out from the sides of her eyes.

I looked down and resting in her chubby palm were three beautiful little pastries. After shoving them indelicately in my mouth, I shut my eyes. *Manna from Heaven*. An explosion of flavors assaulted my taste buds. Rich crème, fresh ripe raspberry, and flaky dough. A balance of sweet and tart married in perfect harmony. It was the most wonderful thing I had tasted in...well, in forever.

Her eyebrows lifted a fraction as she watched me shovel the third one in. “Better?” she asked with a warm smile.

“Much better, thank you.” Mortification began to creep in, and the realization that I may have ruined the one good chance I had at a decent job. I scrambled to my feet. “Madame, I am so sorry, but I have been walking for hours and didn’t notice...” My voice trailed off as she waved her pudgy little hand in front of my face.

“Shhhh, c’est bien. It’s okay. I understand. You are here for the housekeeping position? I see you already came with your things.”

Two sets of eyes fell on my pathetic valise.

“Yes,” I answered meekly.

“Do you have a work permit?”

The moment of truth...I couldn’t answer, just held my breath and prayed for divine intervention. She considered me for a moment.

“Do you know how to clean?”

“I clean very well, madame,” I answered quickly.

“We will try for a week, and if you cannot do the cleaning properly I will have to let you go. Agreed?” Her gentle eyes searched my face.

“I won’t disappoint you. Thank you, so much. Thank you,” I repeated, shaking from relief.

“My name is Marianne Arnaud. I run the housekeeping staff.”

I extended an ever so grateful hand. “Vera Sava, madame. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I followed Mrs. Arnaud up the stairs to the servants' quarters. She opened the door to a small, tidy room that had a twin bed dressed in crisp white sheets and a navy blue blanket, a pretty antique armoire, a picture window, and a small writing desk with a table lamp. It was perfect in every way.

"The toilette is down the hall and your towels are in the armoire, along with fresh linens. I will send up your uniforms," she said as she walked over to the window. Pushing aside the linen drapes, she opened it up. "Très jolie, non? This room has a pretty view."

I walked over to the window and glanced outside. That was a gross understatement. My eyes beheld an explosion of color as if Monet himself held the paintbrush, beauty in its most profound definition. Neat segments of rose cultivars grew in between a boxwood hedge shaped in an intricate pattern; flowerbeds of tulips and irises were artistically arranged by hue; Japanese cherry trees in full bloom framed the south border. And hidden among the lush vegetation, moss covered statues of cherubs and naked nymphs peeked out. I was no gardening expert but this one seemed elegant enough to rival Versailles—or what I'd seen of Versailles in books and the Internet.

"I'll leave you to get settled," Mrs. Arnaud said, closing the door behind her afterward. I couldn't believe my good fortune. I rubbed my tiny cross and made a mental note to call Emilia and thank her again.

"Sebastian!" A velvety female voice floated in from the garden.

I glanced from behind the linen curtain and noticed a tall woman, her greyhound thin body encased in tight britches and riding boots, walking purposefully towards a very tall man. Leaning on a cane, he stood under a magnificent pergola covered by white trumpet shaped flowers that formed an otherworldly halo around him. He was too far away for me to make out his features, but the inherent grace in his posture, the refined casual clothes he wore, spoke volumes about him. Wealthy and entitled—he was sure about his place in this world.

*Heir to the throne.*

The woman was clearly on a mission. She swung her hips provocatively and tossed her long blond hair over her shoulder like she was selling sex and shampoo. When she reached him, she placed her hands possessively on his face, angled her head, and kissed him. The kiss evoked no response from him. He stood completely still while she

devoured his mouth. *Weird*, I thought. The lack of affection was noticeable from a distance. Regardless, they made a pretty pair.

The curtain ballooned up on a gust of wind and, at that exact moment, he lifted his face and looked straight at me. Startled, I stepped aside, my heart beating erratically as prickling heat crawled up my neck. The last thing I needed was to make a bad impression on my first day and my new employer had just caught me spying. I was about to flagellate myself when I was interrupted by a soft knock at the door.

“Come in,” I called out.

The door swung open and a tall, curvy woman stepped inside. I judged her to be younger than me, probably in her mid-twenties. She had huge brown eyes and a full head of bright blond, curly hair pulled tightly in a bun. She raised her long, slim fingers to her hairline, where some wayward curls had escaped, and unsuccessfully tried to tame them back into place.

“Hello, I’m Charlotte Beckwith. I thought I’d introduce myself.” She spoke with a very clipped British accent that I recognized from the kitchen.

“Vera, it’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry for the disturbance I caused downstairs.”

“No worries, we need a little drama around here. I’m warning you, it’s dreadfully dull most of the time.” There was a devilish look in her eyes that made me instantly like her. “As a matter of fact, you’d be doing everyone a favor if you could take up fainting on a regular basis, just to break up the monotony of the day.” One dimple punctuated her smooth cheek when she smiled. “There are thirty housekeepers, and I’m one of only two under the half-century mark...until you came along,” she continued, talking quickly.

“Thirty housekeepers?” I whispered. An army.

“That doesn’t even include the groundskeepers. And tragically, not one attractive, eligible man in the five kilometer radius.” A crease formed between her golden brows. “Aside from the beast, of course, but he doesn’t count.”

My eyes widened. “The beast?”

“Oh, you haven’t met him yet, right. Mr. Horn...Sebastian. Not that anybody would ever be that familiar with him.”

Charlotte clearly had a predilection for drama. She came further into the room, plopped down on my crisply made bed—without invitation—and quickly moved into rapid fire questioning.

Did I like live music?

What were my favorite books?

Did I speak French?

“Do you have a boyfriend? Maybe we could go out some time? There’s not much to do, but there’s a terrific café in town that has live music on Friday nights. Oh, they have this *wonderful*...” she drawled, holding on to the word as if it belonged to her, “singer from Cape Verde with a gut wrenching voice.” She didn’t pause for a reply so I pulled out the only chair in the room, sat down, and listened patiently as she chattered on. I noticed that she didn’t offer any personal information, which was fine since I wasn’t ready to share any of mine.

“Charlotte, why do you call Mr. Horn ‘the beast’?” I had to interrupt or she would have continued indefinitely.

“Because it’s more polite than calling him an asshole,” she picked invisible lint off my blanket, “even though he is. Didn’t you hear him when we were in the kitchen? Right, you were having a kip on the floor.” I couldn’t help but giggle. “He’s awful. He never speaks, hardly ever, and when he does he’s usually screaming. I don’t care what happened to him, he’s not a nice man.”

“Is he dangerous?” My skin began to itch. I had become hypersensitive to even a hint of danger.

“No. Not dangerous...cold, not in a malicious sense, rather like...” Her voice dropped to a whisper, “there’s something missing...dead.” As I contemplated her words, she continued, “Mrs. Arnaud says he wasn’t always this way. He used to be funny and sweet. I find that a bit delusional but she swears that before his wife—” She stopped abruptly, a sheepish look appearing on her face. “Shit, I’m not supposed to gossip. Bentifourt will skin me alive.” Her long legs swung back and forth beneath her, her effervescent energy spilling over her attempt to restrain it.

“Don’t tell me. I don’t want you to do anything that will get you in trouble.”

In no time I had become protective of this girl that was so eager to befriend me, but she needed no encouragement from me to break the rules.

“Okay, I’ll just hit the highlights. Three years ago he was married. They were in a horrible car accident on the way to St. Moritz, and it was a miracle they saved his leg.”

The cane...right.

“And his wife?”

Charlotte paused before adding, “Died—and he was driving.”

A somber silence settled between us. I had nothing but sympathy for this man. It didn’t take a medical degree to realize he was suffering from the loss of his wife. He must have loved her very much.

“He’s the only person that lives here?”

Charlotte nodded. “Alone.” She hopped off the bed and walked to the door. “I have to get back. Mrs. Arnaud thought I was going for a smoke. When you’re settled, I’ll give you a tour of the estate. You start tomorrow.”

The events of the day were starting to catch up with me. It felt like lead weights were strapped to my ankles. “Charlotte.”

She turned to face me. “Yes?”

“Do I need a tour?” I asked, yawning.

A wide, bright smile stretched across her face. “There are eighty two rooms in this manor. I still get lost.” She laughed at the look of shock on my face. “Rest. I’ll swing by when I’m done with work.”

The door closed. I shuffled to the small bed and lay down. Too tired to take off my dusty clothes. Too tired to shut the window. I laced my fingers together on my stomach, watched the linen drape flutter as a chilly wind blew in, and fell fast asleep.

## *Three*

I woke up abruptly, in the middle of the night. Confused and disoriented, it took me a while to adjust my eyes to the surroundings. The desk lamp was turned on and a note sat next to it.

*Vera- Didn't have the heart to wake you when I came by at 6. You slept so soundly I actually had to check your breathing to make sure you weren't dead. Will stop by at 5 am to do the tour. Mrs. Arnaud left supper for you in the kitchen whenever you wake.*

*Charlotte*

I got up and pushed the curtain aside. The moon, hanging high, poked out from behind puffs of smoky clouds. It seemed to be around midnight, which meant I had slept for a straight ten hours. Remarkable. I couldn't recall ever sleeping so soundly. My stomach rumbled, taking the opportunity to remind me that it had been sadly neglected.

Small sconces of dim light interrupted the darkness in the hallway. Barefoot, I padded quietly down the stairs. My hair hung loose down my back since I couldn't locate my only elastic band, and my clothes were now in a worse state of dishevelment all crumpled by sleep.

I followed my nose to the kitchen and discovered a feast displayed on a long counter. There was an assortment of cheese framed by muscat grapes; a golden roasted baby chicken—the scent of which made my stomach cry in anticipation; fingerling roasted potatoes sprinkled with fresh rosemary; baby purple cauliflower diced into small triangles; and French string beans tossed with crunchy almonds. And lastly, the beautiful pastries that had brought me back to life from a fainting spell earlier accompanied a petit chocolate éclair and a delicate little fruit tart. Robbed of grace and manners by

deprivation, I shoveled everything into my mouth until I was so stuffed I could hardly breathe.

The silence, wrapped around me like a security blanket, was punctuated by the subtle ticking of an antique wall clock. As I sat back to study my surroundings, an ease I hadn't felt in ages came over me. The large kitchen was dark and cozy. The ceiling was vaulted. Gleaming copper pots and pans hung from a suspended wrought iron rack, and a large oak trestle table sat in the middle; its wood grooved from age and use. The smell of mouthwatering food mingled with the aroma of spices that were hung to dry near a window casement. It smelled of safety to me...like home.

I was dying to explore. After a lengthy debate with myself about the inappropriateness of doing that, curiosity still easily won over prudence.

Unaware of where I was headed, I began walking down a seemingly endless corridor. The house was as quiet as a tomb despite how sound reverberated against the massive stone walls and the cathedral ceiling. Along the way I came upon an enormous painting depicting a battle scene. The lights were too dim for me to be certain, but it looked like the work of an old master, in the technique of chiaroscuro.

I had seen an exhibition of paintings similar to this one at the Uffizi. Apparently this man had one hanging in some forgotten part of his house.

The corridor fed into a foyer that was large enough to house a small airplane. There was so much to take in I didn't know where to look first. An Austrian crystal chandelier dangled over me. I tipped my head back and circled around and around in awe at the sheer scale of it while an idiotic smile played on my lips. The dim light twinkling off the icy shards reflected onto the mosaic floor beneath me. I couldn't make out the elaborate image so I knelt down on hands and knees for a closer inspection.

A hunting scene. A terrified hare was trapped against a tree, pinned by a pack of hounds; its vulnerable neck caught between the teeth of one the dogs. I reached out to stroke the silky pieces of polished marble when the air suddenly altered, vibrating with a charge that skimmed the surface of my body. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood at attention, and I instinctively knew that I was no longer alone in the room.

A pair of long, bare feet stepped into my line of sight. Male feet.

Startled, I fell back on my rear end and looked up. A large, dark form took the shape of a half-naked man. I heard a sharp intake of breath that I wasn't certain belonged to me, or him. As we stared at each other, time seemed to expand.

He was handsome. Freakishly handsome. The kind that makes even the most conceited woman fidget. My mind began methodically cataloguing his breathtaking face. Large almond shaped eyes with thick lashes. Check. High, sculpted cheekbones. Check. And a nose that made his face go from cold perfection, to erotically masculine. It was gently sloped, aquiline, a perfect counterpoint to his sensual mouth.

...and tall, he was very tall, around 1 meter 92, 6'3" if you prefer, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. His chest was muscular and smooth, except for the dust of hair that traveled down from his navel and disappeared under the athletic pants that hung on his hips for dear life.

When my gaze descended past his waistline, it seemed he'd had about enough of my inspection. He pushed the wet hair off his face and arched a brow at me. His expression was opaque, cold, and fixed on me with an alarming intensity.

"Are you lost?" His deep voice was raspy, tumbled, with an easy American accent. A vague recollection of that accent crept in. I shook my head. "Then what the fuck are you doing wandering around my house in the middle of the night?"

A quick flame of humiliation colored my face, followed closely by a film of cold sweat covering every inch of my skin. I was never so grateful for the cover of darkness.

"The servants' quarters are in the west wing." He motioned with his long index finger, hostility oozing out of the space between his words. "I suggest you stay there if you want to keep your job...you *do* work here, don't you?"

Rendered mute by embarrassment, all I could do was nod.

With a hitch in his step, he turned away from me and proceeded up the marble staircase. I stood up slowly, turned towards the corridor, and somehow managed to exert super-human control over my instinct to run for my life.

My eyes briefly swept down to the mosaic floor and locked onto the image of the frightened hare. At that moment I knew exactly how that poor hare felt. I never looked back but I didn't need to. I could feel his intense glare burning me, singeing the delicate hairs at my nape.

As soon as I was out of his sight I bolted to my room and jumped into bed. Pulling the covers over my head, I curled up into a ball and tried to catch my breath while my hand trapped my heavily pounding heart inside my chest.

Charlotte had a point. He was foul-mouthed and angry. Radioactive angry. I needed to stay as far away from him as possible. I could do that, make myself small, fade into the background. Because I was absolutely certain of one thing—that man had nothing but contempt for me.

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The estate ran like a well-synchronized Swiss watch. Most of the servants lived in town and all of them arrived promptly for the spectacular breakfast served at daybreak. Maybe Mrs. Arnaud had discovered the secret to punctuality. Displayed on the long counter in the kitchen was a veritable buffet of delights. An assortment of fresh baked goods; steel cut oatmeal sprinkled with fresh cinnamon and golden raisins; eggs cooked in three different styles; and café au lait powdered with a touch of Swiss chocolate.

I sipped my café slowly, savored every rich swallow of thick foamy milk spiked with chocolate—my delight in it almost pornographic. The ever-present heavy suit of anxiety I dragged around had vanished overnight. I was flying so high I had to check to make sure I hadn't sprouted tiny wings on my feet.

After breakfast, Mrs. Arnaud led me to a series of rooms that needed to be cleaned. I was assigned the ones on the top floor of the west wing. The rooms were beautifully decorated with luxurious fabrics in pale colors and priceless antiques. She explained that the manor had been completely renovated four years ago. And although the style was still French traditional, the décor was subtle and restrained, in a way that only truly expensive things can be.

Mrs. Arnaud spoke with solemn pride as she recounted the history of the estate. The Horn family had called this fairytale place home since the early 1900 when Egon Horn purchased it from a destitute French industrialist. He was a descendent of something or other royalty, viscount or emperor or whatever—of Baden, I think. I didn't

pay much attention to the title. I grew up in a country ruled by communist ideology for nearly half a century. Ambition was now acceptable, blue bloods never would be.

The affection she had for the current monster-in-residence was reflected in her eyes as she explained that Sebastian Clayton Horn inherited the property from his late father, Heinrich Horn, four years ago, along with the bank that had been in the family for nearly a century. *Who cares*, I thought. *The man has a filthy mouth and worse manners.* But I nodded respectfully and pretended to be impressed at the appropriate moments.

“He’s American?”

“Oui, half American.”

“Is there...a wife, madame?”

The purse of her plump lips suggested the topic was an unpleasant one. “There was,” a pregnant pause, “she passed away three years ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“She was barely thirty. A wonderful girl, very beautiful...there was a car accident.”

Her voice trailed off, her fingers fluttered, unsure where to land. She seemed to want to say more but didn’t so I remained quiet as well. In silence, she led me to a large closet that contained the cleaning supplies and left me to do my job.

I’m an obsessive cleaner. Nothing relaxes me as quickly as giving a bathroom a good scrubbing or organizing a closet. Exercise always seemed pointless to me when I could be cleaning instead, accomplishing a necessary task and discharging the inexhaustible nervous energy I often carry around. This job suited me perfectly. I threw myself into cleaning with vigor, wanting to prove my worth to Mrs. Arnaud who had been nothing but kind to me.

When Charlotte came to fetch me for lunch, I declined and asked her to leave a plate for me in the kitchen.

“I was worried about this. You’re one of those overachiever types. Did you hyperventilate in grade school when you got anything less than an A on a test?”

“No,” I said with a half-smile, “I never got anything less than an A.”

“Figures, I’m warning you, don’t make the rest of us look bad,” she replied with a mischievous smirk, her curly ponytail bouncing as she walked out of the room.

I stripped the beds and dressed them in luxurious Pratesi thousand thread count sheets, making sure that the intricate scroll embroidered at the edges faced up. I aired out the quilted coverlet and fluffed the pillows, smoothed the edges of the shams as sharp as a knife blade. I coaxed a reluctant shine from the antique dressers, washed and waxed wood floors, and dusted every flat surface until a sweat stain ringed the armpit of my uniform. I was on a tall ladder, working on a faint streak on the floor to ceiling window, when I noticed Mrs. Arnaud standing in the doorway.

She looked around with a satisfied smile on her face. “Vera, it’s eight. You have missed déjeuner and diner.”

I wiped away the loose sweaty hair sticking to my neck. “I have a bit more to do, madame.”

“These rooms have not been this clean and tidy since the estate was built in 1872,” she said, a twitch of amusement on her lips. “We want our guests to be comfortable but not enough to extend their stay. Come to the kitchen and eat.”

“No, I can prepare something myself. I don’t mind.”

“Silence, silence...allons-y,” she insisted, waving my reluctance away with her hand. And together we made our way to the kitchen.

I sat at the long counter in front of the La Cornue stove running the length of the wall. Completely engrossed, I watched as she placed the delicate handmade bowtie pasta in a dish, mixed in the broccoli rape, and drizzled it with olive oil. Somehow I managed to curb my impulse to dive head first into it. No small achievement, considering my raging appetite. My stomach had grown fond of having real food again.

We drifted into a comfortable silence while she watched me eat. Her pudgy elbows rested on the counter, her amiable face cradled in her hands.

“Have you had this before?” she asked, twirling her finger at the pasta.

“Oui, madame,” I answered between bites. “In Italy, I worked for a family that owned a restaurant and it’s a popular dish there.”

“But you are not Italienne?”

“No madame, Albanian...but I lived there for six years.”

Her examining glance made me uneasy. I didn't want to lie to this kind woman who had essentially rescued me.

"How did you like Italie?" She sat on the stool across from me, and nudged over the plate with sliced heirloom tomatoes and fresh mozzarella cheese.

"I loved it. The Italians made me feel welcome, and there's a large Albanian community living there. The family gave me housing while I worked in the kitchen."

"Vraiment?" She sat up straighter, an alert look on her face. "Then maybe you can assist me in the kitchen. Mr. Horn refuses to hire another chef."

"But you cook so well."

"Cook, oui, but I am no chef. Delacroix was let go four years ago, when Mr. Horn took possession of the estate."

"Where did Mr. Horn live before?"

The question tumbled out of my mouth inadvertently. My hand abruptly stilled from cutting into the mozzarella when I realized I had spoken out loud. I needed to do a better job controlling my curious nature. I didn't think she would answer me.

"Texas." She emphasized the word in her heavy French accent. "You know, where the cowboys come from." I pressed a brief smile back down. "He came back to Geneva five years ago. He has an apartment in town."

As I got off the stool to wash my empty dishes, she continued, "I should warn you, Vera, Mr. Horn is a bit temperamental. He's not mean or spiteful, but he's endured too much in the last five years. He's still suffering, and I don't want you to think less of him if he behaves a bit...harshly. It's nothing personal."

I didn't bother telling her that I had already taken it personally.

"I understand. Thank you so much Mrs. Arnaud...for everything."

She didn't respond but her face revealed a warm understanding. I don't know where I would be without her mercy.

"Mrs. Arnaud."

"Oui?"

"Where does Mr. Arnaud live?"

"I don't know, chérie. He left for a beer thirty years ago and never returned."

"Oh...I'm...I'm sorry."

“I’m not,” she replied, a strange twinkle in her eye.

“Good night, then.”

“Bon soir.”

## *Four*

I craved tedium, anything that resembled monotony. For the first time in years my days fell into a comfortably predictable routine, absent of worry. In Milan, living and working with the Argentis had been an existence governed by high drama, every day an exercise in patience.

I dreaded going home after my university classes knowing I would be subjected to hours of Mr. Argenti's incessant complaining about the lousy economy. Pending doom—his favorite topic. If you paid attention to anything he said you would think we were in the middle of the great famine of 1315. My ears ached from the complaints, and my knees were scraped from praying for clients to fill tables. Most of the time we managed, but the nights we didn't the complaints escalated to cataclysmic proportions. The whole staff lived on pins and needles, drowning themselves in chamomile tea just to be able to sleep at night.

I awoke with a surplus of enthusiasm, happiness lingering on its smooth edges. My day only got better when I was assigned the dusting of the library. Even with the unholy temptation of thousands of rare books, I managed to be done by early afternoon. I went to the kitchen, to inform Mrs. Arnaud that I still had time to do another room, and found her fiddling with the blender. She repeatedly jammed different buttons with her chubby fingers, unable to get it to churn the ambiguous contents in the glass pitcher.

“Merde!” she shouted. My muffled giggle drew her attention. “Oh, Vera, can you please see if you can get this blender to work. I’m annoyed beyond annoyed, and Mr. Horn is waiting for his frappe.”

I took the pitcher off the base and discovered the connection to the outlet had come loose.

Exasperated, Mrs. Arnaud threw her hands up in the air. “Mon Dieu!” Once blended, she poured the suspect liquid into a tall, chilled glass. “Hurry to the salle gymnastique and give this to him.”

*Me?! Didn’t Mr. Bentifourt do that sort of thing? Isn’t that what butlers are for?* My knees locked, unable to move. I wasn’t ready to face him again. But it *had* been dark that evening. With any luck, I figured he would either not recognize me or had forgotten altogether.

Determined to not let my emotions get the better of me, I placed the drink on a tray and proceeded to the gym. Having seen it during Charlotte’s grand tour, it could only be described as a faithful imitation of a medieval torture chamber, filled with strange machines and eerie looking straps hanging from the ceiling.

The closer I got, the clearer a woman’s voice, speaking intimately, became.

“Oui, like that...yes...yes...one more minute.”

My footsteps turned reticent. The thought of possibly interrupting his afternoon tryst made me sick to my stomach. When I reached the gym, I found the door wide open and forced myself to step into the doorway.

A woman dressed in skintight shorts and a tank top stood with her back to me. Her raven hair was scraped back in a high ponytail, her skin was bronzed, and her

muscles flexed and hardened every time she moved. Her attention was focused entirely on the large, male figure before her.

Then she stepped aside.

He was suspended in mid-air, hanging from the straps on the ceiling, while I stood paralyzed in the doorway and admired him as openly as I would a piece of fine art in a museum. Or the statue of David I had seen in Florence...only better, bigger, definitely certain parts of him seemed to be.

His face was tight in concentration. Not even the hardness of his expression could diminish the flawlessness of his masculine beauty. With sweat trickling down the suntanned skin of his bare chest, he lowered his body by slow inches, balancing only on his arms. Strained by the effort, those arms were bulging and rigid, trembling slightly.

There wasn't a hint of youth or softness anywhere on him, obviously scraped off by the sharp edges of life. The remains of those experiences were as evident from a distance as a neon sign blinking *danger here—proceed at your own risk*.

As I watched him in a state of hyperawareness, something clicked into place. An insight. The truth of it absolute. This man lived behind an impenetrable fortress. He had locked himself up and thrown away the key. His body was still among the living, but his mind had checked out.

The woman placed her hands on him. One on his corrugated abdomen, the other on his lower back. I couldn't tell if she was steadying or fondling him. Not that I blamed her—that six pack begged to be touched—but she needed to do a better job pretending she wasn't doing it for her sake.

My gaze traveled to the dusting of hair that disappeared under the black pants barely hanging on his hipbones. The end of his tan line was visible, marking the dip between bone and muscle. And then the oddest thing happened. An image flashed before my eyes...my lips...on that bare patch of skin disappearing under his pants. A scalding heat swiftly rose up my neck, followed almost immediately by a mist of sweat collecting above my lips. I wiped it away with the back of my hand and bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste a faint trace of blood.

He suddenly looked up and a spark of recognition entered his eyes. *So much for him not remembering that evening.* His lids dropped to half-mast and his mouth turned sullen. Imprisoned in his intense gaze, my skin began to itch with awareness that something unpleasant was coming.

He let himself down gracefully, careful to land on his good leg. The woman's eyes followed his and revealed a face as striking as the rest of her. Her wide, full mouth turned pouty when she saw me.

"I think that's good enough for today, Yvette." His voice was low and measured, his attention never wavering from me.

"Bien sûr, same time tomorrow?" Her expression managed to look both coy and adoring. I wanted to roll my eyes but wisely refrained.

"No...let's do it next week," he answered while he motioned me forward with a flick of his arrogant index finger.

I took a deep breath, fixed my gaze on a point over his shoulder, and walked over to him. I could feel him examining me as he took the glass from the tray. I turned to leave, but he stopped me again with that finger.

“Stay.”

*Stay?*

He casually stepped closer to me and it took everything I had not to take a giant step back. Every nerve ending in my body was on high alert. The scent of him, expensive soap and clean male sweat, engulfed me, overwhelming my senses. It was getting hard to breathe, and even harder to pretend it wasn't.

The woman's gaze skipped back and forth between us. She was waiting for privacy, wanted the rude creature to herself. And I would have been more than happy to oblige her, but he wouldn't dismiss me. Instead he took small sips of his putrid green drink and waited patiently for her to collect her gym bag. Her shoulders sagged as she walked towards the door.

“See you next week, Yvette.”

I thought I heard amusement in his voice and looked up. His face was completely blank, unnaturally still. Yvette grumbled her goodbye in French. As she walked out, a sudden urge to beg her to stay came over me.

In the periphery of my vision, I could see him staring while he drank his witch's brew and dried the sweat off his chest with a small, white towel. Crawling through a pit of vipers would have been less unnerving. He was toying with me and we both knew it.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” I asked in my most condescending “Miss Albright” accent. *Dear Miss Albright*. I distinctly remember, as a child, wishing a tornado would take her away after seeing the Wizard of Oz for the first time. Now I couldn't be more grateful for all the relentless grammar and diction lessons she drilled into me.

He blinked at first, a subtle hint of surprise in his expression. Then his eyes narrowed a fraction. “No.”

*I should cut off my tongue...* I turned to leave.

“Actually, there is something.” The chill in his voice ran up my spine. I faced him and managed to remain composed, even though a heavy metal band was playing a concert inside my chest. “Are you still crawling around my house in the middle of the night?” His voice was velvet soft, his eyes flinty. “Like a thief.”

He may as well have lit a bonfire under my feet because my entire body instantly went up in flames. It took a minute for me to remember how to make my throat work again. “No, sir.”

“Good,” he replied, then turned his back to me like I ceased to exist.

My nerves were so fried afterwards that my teeth chattered all the way back to the kitchen.