

## La Petite Mort

Elaine McReary was doomed from the start.

Her mother had always been a romantic, the result of a mousy little woman who buried herself in too many novels about men sweeping people like her off their feet and taking them away to better places for better lives. She was a lovely woman, to be sure, in the way that all things delicate have a certain allure to them, an appealing fragility that stirs one for a moment, though it never holds one's attention long enough to be anything more than passing glances. That changed the day Elaine's mother met her father, a wealthy business man who decided she was worth a second look. She often told Elaine that one day she would meet a man who would, much like her father had done years ago, take her away from the life she had known. She would gesture, then, elaborately at the many things. Yes, the elder woman assured her, she would meet a man and life as she knew it would end.

Elaine likened herself more to her father than she did her mother. He had always been a serious man, and he had insured that his daughter, his heir, would be equally so. Though he loved his wife, he was much too busy to buy into such novel ideas as love and romance. There were things to be done, he taught his daughter, and so little time to do them all. It was a lesson she had learned well. No, love would have to wait until there were either more hours in the day or, at the very least, pick up its pace to catch up with her schedule. If she did learn anything from her mother, however, it was that there were always exceptions.

He was, easily, the most amazing thing she had ever seen in her twenty-seven years of living. He was tall, and seemed to stretch impossibly high above her. He wasn't lanky, like so many other men she had met that reached near his height; no, he was endlessly broad, like he could envelop her at any minute, wrap around her and squeeze the air out of her lungs. His presence was commanding, and it made her feel both small in ways she would never have desired and protected in ways she had not imagined. He was a solid man, built out of steel and concrete and will, and had the air of one who had worked tirelessly for all he had, though Elaine could not recall a time she had actually seen him do anything that resembled real physical labor. Except, certainly, for the day they had first met.

Every day with him had been what her mother had promised her so often for so long. And today, she knew, would be no different.

“Do you want to play a game with me?” he asked her out of the blue while the two of them ate lunch in the hotel suite he rented out for them, his dark eyes staying focused on the plate of meat before him. She watched him as he carefully sunk his knife into his steak, cringing as blood welled up at the tip of the blade. Rare meat, she had learned, was a quirk of his that she would simply have to just become accustomed to.

She wiped the corners of her lips with a white cloth, delicately folding it in her lap when she finished. “I don’t see the harm.” She answered pursing her lips to fight the smile that crept at the edges of her features. She hadn’t been one for games, too much like her father for simple pleasures; but she was her mother’s daughter now, weeks removed from any semblance of that man. For him to elect to play, however, was a treat she had not yet had the pleasure of enjoying, and the excitement bubbled up in her.

The room, like every other room he had brought her to over the course of their time together, was extravagant. He always seemed to find such places wherever they went, and they had certainly been everywhere. Elaine had always thought she’d see the world, when she was older and the time away was deserved. But he’d shown her that deserved it now; it and so much more. He’d given her the world and she, she thought, would gladly give him hers. Pristine white walls surrounded them, the light flooding in from the outside giving everything a nearly haunting glow. The sounds of Paris, miles beneath them, flowed in with the light breeze that made the curtains dance. This was their last stop, he promised, on their world tour. And then he would take her home. The thought made her suddenly conscious of the lightness of her ring finger. Her expectations were high. “Do you love me?” he asked.

“Maybe.” She replied after a moment, reaching her hands across the table, breaking the distance between them to brush the tips of her fingers with the length of his. He was so easy to tease, and it had become a game to make him bristle with agitation. If he was to have his game, she could have hers as well. He huffed in response, something between a laugh and a sigh, turning his hand over to accept hers. “Maybe we should consider the rest of our meal leftovers, and I could show you.”

He had changed her; there was no doubt in that. He opened up something inside her, a floodgate whose waters had been swelling so high for so long that Elaine had never realized she was sinking within them. In the life she had before, she would never be so forward. She would never run her tongue along her upper lip like she did now, never lean forward and press her ample bosom out for display. He had reached into her and awoken something, the woman she once was dead and buried. She couldn’t say she would miss her.

“No, Lainey, baby. No.” he ignored her seduction as he wrapped his hands around hers and squeezed them gently. She loved it when he called her that. She loved his hands, she decided, too. They were warm, she thought, and rough, calloused and masculine. She liked to run her fingers against the thickened skin of his palms, liked to find the places that weren’t as leathered and just stroke her thumb there. “Not...not right now.”

“You have such wonderful hands, darling.” She told him, ruby lips breaking into another grin. His tone should have given her pause, his voice so thick with something she wouldn’t be able to place were she not currently lost in him. She *was* lost in him, though, and she was not certain she ever wanted to be found. “Have I ever told you that? Because you do. Wonderful.” She drew his hands close, kissing each knuckle and losing her words somewhere against his skin. He sighed, twisting his hand from her grasp and cupping her chin and running his thumb along the smooth skin of her cheek. She leaned into his touch slightly, her eyelids falling heavy with content.

“I need you to focus, dearest. This is important.” He admonished and Elaine, lazily and with concentrated effort, opened her eyes to meet his.

“Oh, I’m sure it is.” But her voice was filled with mirth, playful and light and decidedly not what he wanted from her. He clicked his tongue, pulling his hand away from her. “You have my full attention.”

He sat there for a moment, arms crossing on his chest as he withdrew within himself for a moment, his face contorted with deliberation. Elaine let herself grin wider as she watched him, ever fascinated with the lines that creased his furrowed brow whenever he lost himself in thought. He had been doing that more often, she realized, but she couldn’t find it in herself to mind usually. He was a charming man, even when he would suddenly become distant; now, however, seemed different. It worried her how far gone he quickly became, as if he had not just been there moments before. Had she done something wrong? She made to reach for him again, but his eyes caught the motion and it made her still and draw back. The world seemed to take notice of the man’s disposition, falling as silent as he did.

“Do you remember the day we met?” his voice startled her, and she gasped as the silence was broken around them. “Do you?”

“Well, of course I do, you ridiculous man.” Elaine brightened, letting her anxiety melt slightly as the memories came clearly to her. “What kind of woman would I be if I forgot?”

“Humor me. Play my game, for once. I’m always playing yours.” There was something in his voice that made a chill run up her spine. It was an unpleasant sensation. He had never caused that in her before, had never once made her feel anything but perfect and beautiful and deserving. It made her tense. “Tell me everything.”

“Well,” she began. They were pleasant memories, like something from out of a fairytale, and the thought of them did wonders for the dark cloud that had settled in the room. She didn’t mind remembering. “You saved my life. But you know that already, my shining white knight.” He shook his head at her attempt at levity.

“Everything, Lainey. Everything.” With a sigh, she relented.

“It was back home, as you already know. I was so busy back then-always going here and there. Hm. I never took the time to enjoy anything back then, did I? What a small life that must seem like to you.” She watched him as she spoke, but he never returned the gaze. “But that was so long ago. I’m a very different woman now, aren’t I?” she tried and, still, nothing. “Anyway, I was driving to a meeting, and I was talking to Maureen on my cell-you have to meet Maureen when we finally go back, you’d like her, I’m sure. She’s such a lovely assistant. Always very prompt, even if she did make the *worst* coffee. I was driving and I wasn’t paying attention, and there was such a *dreadful* accident.” She smiled at him then, even though he wouldn’t see it. “And you pulled me out-of the fire and wreckage, of the dull little life I lived. Took me away. Showed me so many things. Loved me.”

“And you love me, too?” He asked again, finally letting his eyes meet hers.

“Well, I certainly don’t *hate* you. You serious fool.” She released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding, thankful for the sound of his voice, though her nerves stayed on edge.

“Always a game with you, isn’t it?” She shrugged in response.

She wanted to touch him.

Silence filled the room again. It made Elaine antsy, made her limbs itch with the need for movement. If this was indeed the lead up to a proposal, they would need to have a long conversation about his etiquette.

Still, she wanted to touch him.

“We’ve been together a long time now.”

“That we have.” She gave in to her urges, reaching out to touch him once more. He didn’t respond the contact.

“Isn’t it odd that you haven’t heard from- what was her name again? Maureen? Don’t you think you would’ve heard from her since then?” the question stirred something in Elaine, made her grip a little tighter where she touched him. He seemed to ignore where her nails dug into him.

“I suppose I haven’t given it much thought.” She said, and after some thought. “I’m not even sure I have my phone anymore. You whisked me away so suddenly, dear. I must’ve left it back in the wreckage.”

“I did take you away quickly, didn’t I?” he leaned forward, touching her hand. “Isn’t that strange too? Don’t you think someone would’ve come looking for you? It was a *dreadful* accident, afterall. Like you said.”

“I don’t appreciate you mocking me...” Elaine snatched her hand back and turned away from him. He was trying to make her look stupid. She did not like to be made a fool of. She didn’t like the sudden needles she felt pricking at her underneath her skin. “Your games aren’t very fun. I don’t think I want to play anymore.”

“Fine,” he sighed, leaning back into his seat easily, like the world wasn’t spinning a bit too fast for him like it was for her. “But one more question? One more question, and my game is done.” Elaine huffed.

“If you have to.” Elaine shut her eyes tight, brought her hands to her temples to massage the pressure that had built up in her temples. “I’m not feeling very well. Please, get on with it. I want to lay down.”

“What’s my name?”

“What kind of ridiculous question is that?” Elaine scoffed, eyes shooting open, offended. “This is a silly game, and I don’t want to play it anymore. I need to lay down.”

“You do know it, don’t you?”

“Of course I know it!” Anger flared in her, bright and hot.

“Then...?” he waited. She thought.

“I...I don’t....” Elaine worried her bottom lip with her teeth, the fire in her dying as quickly as it started, drawing a blank. The world spun a bit faster. “How...how could I not know your name? We’ve been together for so long now. Why don’t I know your name? I have to know your name. I have to.” Her vision blurred for a moment, something in her sinking, but she blinked away the tears. What was happening to her? She felt his hand on her, heard his voice.

“I need you to look at me for once, Lainey. For once. Elaine...see me.” Everything seemed to come to a screeching halt, like the earth hit a wall and stopped turning. It made Elaine lurch forward in her seat, and knocked the air out of her lungs. She felt dizzy, suddenly, her spit thick and the bile rising in her throat. The light from outside died out.

It all came back to her. The smell of copper, her *blood* she now recalled, running down her face and into her eyes, blinding her with red. The feel of metal twisted around her frame and piercing her gut, bones bent and grinding against each other with every shallow, labored breath she could manage between her dry and pained sobs. The throb in her head, deafening at first, dulling as the world darkened around the edges of her vision. Pain lit every nerve in her body as the darkness pulled her away, the fire around her licking at her skin, making it crack and peel. And there he was like he had been before, reaching through the wreckage to touch her, and for the first time she saw him.

For the first time she saw Death.

The beauty seemed to fade away from him, and Elaine could not remember if it had ever been there to begin with. Humanity slipped off of him like robes, and there before her stood rot and bone and gristle.

Elaine screamed, terror breaking through the haze in her head like beacon does through the dark. Her thighs hit the table as she stood with enough force to tip it over, meat and wine staining the floor and walls and cloth with red. She screamed until her throat was raw, frantic in her struggle to get away from the once-man before her. She tripped over herself, collapsed to the ground with a heavy thud, and screamed and screamed and screamed. She could feel the world shatter around her, could feel the world give way beneath her feet as reality realigned itself. She cowered into the corner as realization dawned.

She was dead.

“Why? God, why?” she pleaded, her voice raw a broken, her throat aching. She rubbed the tears furiously away from her eyes before hiding her face behind her hands, forcing herself to sink deeper into the corner. “Why are you doing this? I loved you.” She spat the words out, anger suddenly igniting within her before being extinguished as quickly as it was lit. “You owe me a why. I loved you. I loved you.”

Death paused. He let his stare fall on her, and watched her with his even gaze. He broke the distance between them, his gait slow, and crouched down to meet her. He stayed there for a few moments, seemingly content with just watching her, elbows perched against his knees. Then, quietly, he shifted, reaching out for her. Elaine gasped harshly at his touch, afraid; his fingers, now cold and



infinitely foreign, wrapped around her wrist firmly and tugged. Had she felt any strength left in her, had she felt anything other than her heart tearing in two the second his skin brushed hers, she would have fought his contact, would have done anything to pull her arm free from him. But she didn't, and she simply let him carry her hands away from her face. She shivered as his other icy hand found her cheek, and brushed away the tears it met there, turning her stare to his.

It was there, in the moment where her eyes fixed on his, that she knew she was now damned. Maybe she always had been.

"No lies, dear. No games." The embodiment leaned forward, eyes falling shut as he did so, pressing his lips against hers. He let his fingers slip through her hair, cradling her neck and deepening the kiss. Elaine parted her lips for him, gave in to the sensation of his tongue exploring her mouth. She remembered vaguely that, once, while basking in the afterglow with her naked body still pressed up against his, she had told him that she could live off the taste of his lips and them alone, that she could thrive for a thousand years with just his kiss. The irony of the moment was not lost on her. Death withdrew from her, finally, resting his brow on hers, his thumb stroking a steady line just along her cheekbones.

"Please," Elaine begged, though for what she did not know. Finding her tears dry, she sobbed before continuing, "You win..I still love you. I love you. So, why?"

Death replied "Because I love you too.", and all came to an end.