

I could feel his eyes on me from clear across the smoky, little café. Even with the distractions from the captive audience spread out in front of me, the spotlight that blinded me intermittently, and the musical accompaniment from the house band, his presence loomed over me. The patrons came to watch a show. James came to watch me.

Night after night I performed, dazzling the mixed crowds of locals, businessmen, gangsters, kept women, officers, and soldiers. Outside, the world was at war. But that little café near the Seine was a safe haven. It was a bubble of neutrality where the only things that mattered were the 3 D's; drinking, dancing, and debauchery. And I was the shapely siren whose songs were meant to distract and delight.

I was draped in a fabulous red, satin gown with cap sleeves. The corset styled bodice was covered in sequins that sparkled in the light. As I sang about 'the man I loved', I worked my way from the small stage to the floor where the grand piano was placed.

"He'll build a little home that's meant for two," I crooned, my fingertips grazing Jessie, my piano man's, shoulder. He smiled up at me, his fingers dancing lightly over the ivory keys. "From which I'll never roam; who would? Would you?"

I paused for dramatic effect, spun around and perched right next to him on the bench. I crossed my legs; simultaneously showing off the dangerous slit in my gown, and exposing a great deal of my right thigh. "And so all else above, I'm waiting for the man...I...love."

The applause was thunderous as I mounted the microphone on Jessie's stand so he could continue his set. I made my way through the tables, graciously smiling whilst receiving accolades on my rendition of the beloved song.

It was then that my gaze zeroed in on the perfect specimen of soldier. His hair was a sandy blonde, and just a little too long in the front. His lips were just thick enough for biting and his jawline sharp enough to cut glass. And even from a distance, his broad shoulders looked as if he could carry the weight of the world.

His companion was every bit the epitome of a blonde bombshell; pins curls and rouge, perfect porcelain skin, and a modest blue, pleated shirt dress that matched her eyes. That didn't deter me in the least as I sauntered over to the table. I knew immediately that he was the one I had been waiting for.

"Hiya, soldier. Aren't you a sight for sore eyes?" I didn't break the intense stare of the man in uniform, as his blue eyes drank me in slowly.

"Umm, you were really wonderful up there," the meek, mild-tempered voice at my side spoke up. I tossed a coy smile at the young woman, realizing she was out of her depth.

"Thanks, dollface. Why don't you skedaddle and let me show my appreciation to this patriot? Your tab is on me."

"Oh, gee...I suppose--"

"Here, why don't you grab yourself a cab? I'd hate for you to have to walk home *alone*." I stressed the last word as I fished a few francs, tucked safely in my brassiere, out and handed them to the young lady. "Be careful; it's getting awful late."

She rose, cheeks burning, and bid us a shaky adieu. I didn't have time to worry about her injured feelings. I nodded at Hans, one of the security goons the establishment employed, indicating he was to escort the young lady safely into a taxi. He caught the gesture and followed suite. From the corner of my eye, I could see James take position near the bar.

Remaining on my feet, I extended my neatly manicured hand to the seated soldier.

"Fancy a dance?"

"I reckon you're the best dancer this place has ever seen, and I've been cursed with two left feet." There was a boyish quality to his smile that I found irresistibly charming.

"A well lubricated man moves a lot smoother with less intent," I replied saucily as he rose, towering over me with all 6'2 of his manly frame. "Let's get you a drink, first."

He offered his arm and I took it, walking towards the bar. "How'd you know I was underwhelmed by my date?"

"Were you? I hadn't noticed. All I saw were your ocean eyes."

"I couldn't take them off you," he shot back smoothly.

"Doesn't bother you that I'm a stronger cup of coffee than you may be used to, sugar?"

"Only color I noticed was your red dress. And now, up close, your beautiful, green eyes."

"*Good answer,*" I thought to myself. It was a progressive man, indeed, who could look past my brown skin in this day and age. Even if we were in France and the entire world was on fire.

"So, first date?"

"We met at a USO mixer. I mentioned I liked jazz, she recommended this place...and subsequently invited herself."

"A girl who goes after what she wants. I like her."

"Not enough to refrain from sending her packing."

"Touché. Did I stand in the way of true love?"

The strong man slipped his right arm around my waist and pulled me closer, his hand resting on the small of my back. "She was a nice girl. I prefer grown women."

I knew we were being watched, but I barely even noticed when the bartender brought over two glasses full of a rich, red liquid.

"Your favorite red, toots. Mr. B insists you and your soldier have one on the house."

My eyes lit up immediately. "This is one of the richest merlots I've ever had the pleasure of tasting," I told my companion. "And that's heavy handed, considering we are in France."

I picked up the glass closer to me and offered it to him. He let go of me to take it.

"I don't know much about wine," he admitted with a wry smile, swirling the dark beverage around.

"Trust me, handsome," I goaded him, smiling sweetly as he gave in. "It's divine isn't it?"

"Indeed. I think it calls for a toast."

"What shall we toast to?" I raised my left eyebrow, as well as my glass.

"A magical night in Paris, with the most beautiful woman on the Seine, who introduced me to a divine merlot."

A blush warmed my dimpled cheeks as we clinked glasses. "You're far too kind."

We finished off our first glasses, exchanging whispers and laughter as if we'd known each other longer than a night. By our second, we gazed into each other's eyes like predestined lovers. He tried to take his time and maintain his gentlemanly demeanor. I destroyed that

reticence by placing two fingers underneath his glass as he drank, applying pressure upwards so he'd drain the rest of the wine.

"You're something else," he told me placing the empty crystal ware on the bar.

"Darling, you have no idea,"

I smiled demurely at the bartender as he approached. We exchanged looks as the chivalrous soldier tipped him handsomely.

"Come, dance with me," I requested, taking his hand and leading him to the floor.

I felt every pair of eyes on us. Whether it was because we were a mixed couple, or because we were two beautiful people basking in each other, it mattered not. I motioned to Jessie, catching his eye and signaling him to play something with a slower tempo.

"Alright, dolls and gents, we're going to play a little ditty known to the regulars. In honor of our dazzling lady in red, this is La Vie en Rose."

As the band started up and the music swelled, the handsome man spun me around into his embrace deftly. His strong arms wrapped around my waist as I reached up and placed my hands on his broad shoulders.

"Where have you been all my life?" I could feel the vibration of his deep voice through his chest as he asked the question.

"Closer than you think, gorgeous." I slid my hands up to gently let my fingertips graze the nape of his neck.

He stared down at me as if I was the 8th wonder of the world. The tenderness in his eyes literally left me breathless. It was like someone was deflating the oxygen from my lungs

and reinflating them with a hallucinogen. All the color drained from my surroundings and everything was 2 dimensional. Everything... except him. He was the only true form, and his stormy, blue eyes the only brilliant color in the world. I doubted there was a lifeboat equipped to save me from drowning in his eyes, so I tried focusing on his lips. Pink the color perfectly ripened grapefruit flooded my vision, literally making my mouth water. I gently tugged on his neck and he followed the unspoken direction; leaning in until our foreheads were touching and our eyes locked in on each other. And then I began to sing.

"When you speak, angels sing from above. Everyday words seem to turn into love songs. So...give your heart and soul to me, and life will always be-"

"La vie en Rose," he whispered the last words as I finished singing the French lyrics.

We were transfixed in the moment, so much so that we didn't notice when someone approached.

"Last call," a gruff voice interrupted us. "Mr. B's orders."

"Okay, James," I replied to the surly, self-appointed, buzzkill. His impatience was palpable as he ran his fingers through his daek, slicked back hair. His icy glare hadn't lost track of me all night, but this intrusion made my temper flare a bit.

"I need to visit the powder room. Wait for me, sugar?"

"Forever, if necessary," the handsome soldier said it in a way that made me want to believe him. I could feel his eyes on me as I sauntered off towards the back of the club, stage left.

My changing area was desolate, as most of the dancers had left already. Only a handful of people and the band remained. I walked over to my vanity and stared at my reflection. The

elegant style of a French roll and pin curls was intact. My lipstick had faded a bit, so I reached for the golden tube of my favorite shade of red- Sweet Dreams- and reapplied it generously.

Glancing around to make sure of my privacy, I opened up the top drawer to my vanity. My custom silver cigarette case gleamed as I picked it up and opened it. Gently lifting the velour, banded pillow cradling the rolled tubes of tobacco, I laid it aside and pushed the button that hid beneath. The middle section swung out, revealing a folded piece of seemingly clean paper stashed. Sighing with relief, I quickly tucked the paper in my brassiere and closed the secret compartment. Just as I finished reassembling the case and it clicked shut, I felt a presence behind me. I didn't have to look up to know it was James.

"Is it done?" His tone was deep, menacing. Sexy.

I turned around to face his gaze, those steely eyes boring holes through my soul. "Of course. Since when do you doubt me, James?"

"When I see you under the spell of some overgrown boyscout. He's a mark, not your knight in shining armor. You, little Red, are in my forest now."

He advanced towards me, his woody cologne and the sweet stench of bourbon oozing from his pores. The top 3 buttons of his black shirt were undone, showing off a tantalizing view of his pecs. He backed me up against vanity, to the point where I had to perch myself on the edge. His left hand found the bare skin of my right thigh, dragging his fingers upward until he reached my garter.

"Careful, now. Your mother ever warn you what happens when you get too close to the flames?" I whispered lowly, gazing up at him.. His right hand was traveling up my bare, left

shoulder, crossing over to nape of my neck. Goosebumps arose at my hairline as my lips curled up into a coy smile.

"What's that, dollface?" His voice was husky with desire. I felt his hand reach the comb keeping my hair up and deftly remove it. His left fingers were dancing lightly over the garter pressing into my flesh as my hair tumbled down past my shoulders.

I hooked my left pointer into the front of his slacks, pulling him closer as I softly bit my lip. His handsome face was hovering dangerously close to mine as his body reacted to our proximity. And right before he could decide to close the distance between our lips...I took firm hold of his manhood.

"You get burned," I taunted him as his face turned red and he threw his hands up in surrender. A breathless chuckle escaped him as tears filled his eyes, and I firmly palmed my prize. "I'm not a damsel in need of rescue, James. I'm the dragon in your nightmares. Keep tracking me, little wolf, and I will singe your fur."

I released his balls from my vise grip and shoved him backwards. As he stumbled back and doubled over, I turned to face the mirror again. Deciding I liked the way my hair looked half down, I swept my mane over my right shoulder deftly. After smoothing down my dress, I smiled at my reflection.

"See you out there," I stated flippantly before taking my leave. I went back out to see the handsome soldier waiting patiently for me. I smiled brightly and approached him.

"Wow," he let out a low whistle. "I didn't believe it was possible that you could be any more beautiful."

"Why, Captain, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you liked me."



"You'd be correct in that assumption," he smiled, taking my hands in his. "How'd you know I was a Captain?"

I tapped the silver pin on his lapel with a wistful smile. "I like to think I'm observant. C'mon soldier, let's get you a ride. I have to help close up."

"I can wait," my companion replied hopefully, asking with his eyes for me to leave with him.

"Out of all the bars in all the world," I stroked the side of his face with a soft smile. "Alas, I fear this is one of those moments."

"What moments?"

Interlacing the fingers of my left hand with his right, I led him towards the rear door as I wove a bittersweet tale for him.

"A moment so perfect, it should be memorialized. No names, no expectations. One night in Paris, a singer and a soldier met. They drank wine, they danced, and the entire world fell away for a few precious moments. And though he had to go off and save the world, leaving her behind-"

"They knew that, if only for a night, it was love," he cut me off.

We had made our way to the street, a cab already out front idling. The stars were plentiful and somehow twinkling bigger and brighter than ever before. The man in uniform faced me, taking both my hands in his and placing light kisses on each. My pulse quickened and I could feel my temperature rise.

"Sure, sugar. Love."

"I'm back on leave in another month. Any chance I'll see you again?"

I reached up and cradled his face, the light stubble of his left jaw tickling my palm. "I reckon you'll see me plenty. I plan on invading your dreams, Captain."

"What sweet dreams they will be."

He opened the door to the cab and climbed in, not noticing when I pulled the small, folded piece of paper out the top of my dress. I waited until he closed the door to tap on the window, so he'd know to roll it down.

"I forgot there's only one way to end a perfect love story."

"Happily ever after?" He asked, chuckling softly.

"No."

I tossed the folded paper into his lap, and he picked it up. He noticed the lipstick stain, turned his questioning gaze on me. It was right as I leaned in through the window and grabbed his tie pulling him closer.

"With a kiss." I covered his lips with mine. He barely had time to struggle as he quickly slipped into an unconscious state. I disengaged and leaned his limp body back against the seat.

The cab driver peered at me as I wiped the smudge from below my bottom lip and stepped back. "You know where to take him," I instructed.

I let out a small sigh as the car pulled off. I knew the unwitting soldier would likely be confused upon arrival at his destination. He may be angry, wondering how a lounge singer managed to trick him. But he'd be safe. And with the information he'd been tasked with as my delivery system, he'd be an American hero.

I felt a strong hand wrap around my arm and spin me around. That intense, brooding gaze that had been on me all night now had something extra lingering. Something resembling jealousy.

"You kissed that guy?"

"Get the hell off of me, James" I gave him a hard shove.

"That wasn't part of the plan."

"Since when do you make plans for me?"

"Whatever," he grumbled. "He'll be dead soon, anyway. That cocktail of sodium morphate will put him down. You did well."

"I switched out the wine."

"What the hell are you talking about?" This time James yanked me towards him. "Talk!"

"Unhand me, now," I glared at him.

"Do you know what Mr. B does to traitors?" For the first time, perhaps ever, I saw panic and worry in his eyes.

"Guess we'll find out."

"You can't be this stupid! Not for that guy. Forget it, where's Hans? He was working the door and flagged down the cab. If you're lucky, I can get him to intercept and finish your little boyfriend off before he can decode your intelligence breach."

I was rapidly getting bored and had moves to make. "It's over, James. Time to move on. Let the Captain go. And let Hans go- I don't think he's in any shape to go anywhere." I nodded towards the dumpsters in the alleyway. There was a large pair of mens' shoes visible from our

vantage, pointed towards the sky. I didn't have to move any closer to know it was Hans who lie supine.

James started in that direction but something made him stop. He nervously ran his fingers through his hair, cursing and muttering under his breath. After several moments of pacing, he faced me.

"We have to get you out of here. If Mr. B finds you ... we can at least get a head start." He clapped loudly and nodded as if his plan was brilliant. He then charged at me, grabbing my left arm to drag me inside. "We've gotta clear out everything we have-"

"Stop, James!" I snapped forcefully. "We don't have to do anything. There is no we! I can take care of myself! And I have a plan. For me."

"So, you're just gonna take off? After everything we've been through? I thought we looked out for each other." The disbelief in his eyes was genuine.

"You were mistaken."

I turned my head so I didn't have to look at his crestfallen expression. I didn't have to be looking at him to anticipate his next move. True to form, he unhandedly my arm. In one, swift movement, his Walther PP was brandished from the waistband of his pants and pointed at my right temple.

"You going to just admire that beautiful piece of machinery or use it?" I asked evenly.

"It didn't have to end like this, doll. You chose your side. I'm choosing mine."

"We're spies, James. We don't have identities. Our loyalties are in a constant state of flux. And this time, it wasn't about choosing a side. It was about choosing me. Being my own knight. Mastering my own fate."

I turned slowly to my right to face him, his gun dragging along my skull until it was right between my eyes. I stared past it, directly into his eyes.

"You chose wrong. I would've found a better way out. For both of us."

"Right. I was supposed to what- run away with you? You would've loved me...right up until I loved you back. Then you would've left. I don't do happily never after."

"No, you didn't believe that you could be enough for me. You were enough." His voice had a slight quiver to it as he dragged the barrel of the pistol down the left side of my face, tracing the path down my neck to my chest. "Any last words?"

"More like a request. Will you please ... kiss me? Just once?"

If he found my request odd, he didn't voice it. Besides, I knew it wouldn't change his mind. He was ready to kill me for my betrayal. I wouldn't have expected anything less. And I couldn't respect him more for his resolve. But love is fickle bitch.

A harsh chuckle escaped him. He jammed the barrel into my rib cage, forcing me up against the closed door of the club. He stared down at me, an agony in his eyes I'd never seen.

"I hate you," the way he growled the statement could only be described as guttural.

"Prove it," I whispered, raising my chin so that my lips just touched his jaw.

The force of his lips descending on mine was pure savagery. I opened my mouth slightly and he seized the opportunity to sweep his tongue inwards, dueling as it were for dominion. As

our lips intertwined in a slanted, passionate dance for control a distinct shiver worked its way up my spine. I caught his bottom lip between my teeth and it elicited a delicious growl from deep within his chest. My fervor increased and he rose to the occasion, as if he endeavored to melt into my body.

As suddenly as it began, the kiss ended. James pulled back, the pressure on my ribs slightly alleviated. He blinked several times and shook his head, as if he were trying to gain his bearings. He stumbled backwards a bit, looking as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. I stared at him coolly, remaining silent and still.

"What did you do to me?" His words came out a bit slurred and his balance began to fail him.

"I have no doubt we will meet again," I spoke slowly, deliberately. "Fierce allies. Formidable foes. Until then...sweet dreams."

The confusion on his face lasted only a moment longer as his body finally gave up, and his body collapsed to the ground. Knowing I didn't have long before the effects of the knock out formula of my lipstick wore off, I moved quickly. I unpinned a tiny pouch from inside my brassiere and took the round white pill inside- the antidote to sodium morphate. I then stooped down to retrieve his gun. My trophy.

I boarded the last train to London that night. The cab driver who drove the American was an ally; he'd given me coordinates to a safe house I could use. Dismantling Mr. B's organization was going to be more difficult now that I wasn't in the circle of trust. And I'd made an enemy of James. I knew he'd spare no expense to track me down. He'd scour the very depths of Hell to get back to me. And when we met again, I may not have fortune's favor. Still, I'd always have my exploits in espionage, as the Siren on the Seine.