



Steal Me

Author: *Marian Tee*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Steal my heart... or I'll steal your life.

They call me Monsieur Le Dernier—the last face you'll see if you cross me.

But then comes Paris's most talented pickpocket. A nineteen-year-old girl who's as clever as she's fearless. And so foolishly brazen as to defy me...in public.

She should be eliminated.

Instead, I offer her my name, my wealth, my empire.

She thinks marriage to me is her punishment.

Silly girl.

She doesn't know this is only the beginning.

Each test I devise will push her to her limits. Each challenge designed to strip away another layer of resistance.

Pass, and she becomes my queen.

Fail, and she becomes my captive.

Either way, my ring stays on her finger.

Total Pages (Source): 50

Page 1

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Chapter One

WHAT WAS ONE TO DO when the woman he had sworn to protect was a darling little...thief?

And not only that, but the troublesome girl even dared to commit such a crime in a territory that everyone knew to be his.

Sylvain's hooded gaze shifted back to the wall of surveillance monitors, three of which had been programmed to follow her movements.

A young woman with dark hair; her height and looks, nothing out of the ordinary. But because she had made the mistake of entering his lair, her life would soon be the opposite.

"How long has she been here?" he questioned his security chief.

"Exactly thirty-two minutes, monsieur," Noel replied. That his master didn't specify a name was the only clue he needed. La fille was special, her existence as Viktor Biancardi's half-sister best kept secret, for her sake.

"And what has she done during that time?"

"If I were to hazard a guess," Noel said thoughtfully, "la fille has already marked three potential targets."

"Let's see what she'll do then."

Sylvain and Noel left the security room, moving down a cavernous passageway carved from the ancient limestone of Paris's famed catacombs. The corridor opened into the main hall of Le Dernier—Sylvain's underground palace of pleasure and danger.

The club sprawled beneath the streets of Paris like a secret kingdom. Centuries-old stone arches framed the massive space, their rough-hewn surfaces juxtaposed with gleaming chrome fixtures and state-of-the-art lighting. Crystal chandeliers hung alongside industrial steel beams, the marriage of opulence and urban decay creating a disorienting yet seductive atmosphere.

The dance floor pulsed with bodies moving to music that seemed to emerge from the walls themselves. Private alcoves lined the periphery, each one shrouded in velvet curtains the color of dried blood. Patrons sipped from crystal flutes containing liquids worth more than most people earned in a month. Beautiful servers in tailored black uniforms navigated the crowd with practiced precision, their faces carefully blank, eyes forward, trained never to linger on conversations not meant for their ears.

Armed guards stood at strategic points throughout the venue, their presence both warning and promise. Come if you dare. Obey and dance to see another night. Defy and tomorrow shall never come.

A table on the mezzanine reserved for Sylvain's exclusive use awaited him. It overlooked the dance floor behind glass walls, and his staff had everything ready when he arrived.

His favorite drink. His weapon of choice, should the occasion call for it. And his view of the entire club unobstructed, if all he wished to do was observe.

All this, without Sylvain having to say a word, his empire functioning with the precision of a Swiss timepiece.

"Monsieur?" Noel had received a call from the concierge. "The Minister of Finance wishes to speak to you."

"I'll call him tomorrow."

"Compris, monsieur." That his master did not place any importance in speaking to government officials was none of his business. No one questioned Sylvain, not if they wished to remain in his orbit.

Sylvain's attention returned to the fille. To see her in the flesh, at work, was enthralling. The man she was speaking to was one of Paris's wealthiest industrialists, but her manner toward him was a mesmerizing mix of confidence and charm, with not a hint of cunning or greed...even if Sylvain had just witnessed her steal the man's watch in the blink of an eye.

Mauvais coup, ma jolie. Wrong move, my lovely.

He continued to study her in silence even when her actions had already sealed her fate. Her dress was cheap yet well-chosen, highlighting curves that the camera had failed to capture. Her hair fell in dark waves past her shoulders, catching blue highlights from the ambient lighting.

But it was her eyes, however...

Even from this distance, her dark blue eyes enslaved. Sylvain was used to seeing euro signs in most women's eyes. But in Liana's, even when she proved to be the most proficient pickpocket, all he saw was intelligence and cleverness. Strategic without being calculating. Pragmatic without being ruthless. Innocent despite her lawless ways.

C'est intrigant. How intriguing.

Sylvain watched as she moved to another target, this time touching the man's arm, her fingers lingering just long enough to establish connection while her other hand drifted casually near his wrist. Where his watch would be.

His darling little thief was good. Very good. If Sylvain hadn't been looking for it specifically, he might have missed the sleight of hand entirely.

He noticed Noel's alarm at the speed with which a fille was stealing from their clientele, and it almost made him smile.

Almost.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Let her work," Sylvain murmured. "I want to see her technique."

"And if the clients were to notice their possessions missing, monsieur?"

"Assure them that it is being handled, and they will have them back within 24 hours."

"Compris, monsieur." Noel's face remained expressionless despite his growing curiosity. Criminals stupid enough to target any of his master's clientele were usually dealt with swiftly and mercilessly. But clearly, *la fille* was different.

Time passed.

Sylvain kept waiting for himself to lose interest and grow bored. But watching Biancardi's half-sister only achieved the opposite, with *la fille* proving to be more interesting by the minute.

A young and beautiful girl, choosing a life of crime to save a loved one.

In Liana's case, a mother racking up hospital bills as they waited for a miracle that was unlikely to come. No matter what doctors said, donor matches were not for free. Money was still needed to cut through all the red tape, and without it, her mother would inevitably die.

Her story was tragic...but not uncommon. Sylvain had known many other girls like her, and none of them had moved his heart. Frankly, he didn't even believe he still had a heart. And it was why, at the start, he had not meant to get involved.

When he received Biancardi's letter, Sylvain had simply intended to choose his most trusted men to guard her, incognito. They would never interfere in the way she lived. They would eliminate whatever threats arose without her being aware of it.

But after seeing how she was in real life?

Plus maintenant. Not anymore.

The longer he watched her, the deeper he fell under her thrall. He would not be able to keep his distance.

C'était impossible. It was impossible.

And in any case, he was simply honoring the blood debt he owed to her brother. Biancardi wanted her safe, n'est-ce pas? And surely there was no better way to protect la fille than to claim her as his bride?

His gaze settled back on his darling little thief, who continued to work the room with stealth and grace. If she had been anyone else, she would be dead by now. She had to know she was playing with fire, stealing in his territory. To be this brazen, she was either stupid...or desperate.

Sylvain took a sip of his wine as he watched his Liana move to her next mark, an American who was as wealthy as he was clueless. His gaze narrowed as his little pickpocket adopted a different persona: a girl who was quick to smile, her posture trusting, her eyes full of innocence.

He knew the exact moment she could have stolen the man's watch. But chose not to. And when he saw her bite her lip, something dark and possessive twisted inside his chest.

Mauvais coup. Encore. Wrong move. Again.

His darling little thief would soon learn that she was not allowed to feel tender towards any man. Not unless she was fine with having that man's blood on her hands. Her choice, not his.

Sylvain glanced at his security chief, and Noel, having watched the same scene unfold, simply nodded and spoke the necessary instructions into his earpiece. Within thirty seconds, a waiter appeared, whispering something to the American that had him excusing himself hastily from Liana's company.

La fille frowned slightly, glancing around with a wariness that spoke of years spent looking over her shoulder. A moment later, she simply shrugged this off and moved on.

"She's resilient," his security chief observed.

No, Sylvain thought. She was not just resilient. If he had to choose a word, it would be...

Magnifique.

He continued watching as she worked the room, her movements economical yet fluid. She marked her targets with precision—wealthy men traveling alone, preferably those who'd had enough to drink to dull their awareness but not enough to become belligerent.

After an hour, she'd managed to acquire what appeared to be two watches and possibly a wallet. No mark had noticed. No security had intervened. She was a ghost, slipping through his carefully guarded establishment as if the rules that bound others didn't apply to her.

And with every theft, he found himself falling dangerously deeper under her thrall, his desire for her now a dark and feral obsession.

"We have received our first complaint, monsieur."

"You know what to do."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Andla fille?"

"She is not to be disturbed," Sylvain murmured. "I wish to see how many she's able to acquire in one night."

"And after, monsieur?"

"I'll take her." The words almost had Noel doing a double take. Almost. And in turn, seeing his normally unflappable security chief betray himself almost made him smile. Almost. In their world, emotions were but a string of almos, never to see the light of day.

And yet...

La fille made Sylvain feel again, and the realization set him on edge.

He was but a callow youth the first and last time he had felt such possessiveness towards a woman. He had thought he had outgrown such needs. But he was mistaken, clearly, with how merely watching his darling little thief move through his domain had his powerful body already hungry for her flesh.

He had thought Annie's betrayal had killed this part of him. It would have been better for both of them if that were the case, and she was but a passing fancy.

If only.

Sylvain watched her slip in and out of the shadows, her every move exquisitely

deceptive, every stolen valuable the product of criminally good craftsmanship. He watched her trail her fingers over another mark's arms. Such lovely, elegant fingers. He had no trouble imagining her using those fingers as she played the piano. Or struggling as she did her best to wrap those same fingers around the throbbing evidence of his arousal.

"Have the car ready," Sylvain said abruptly. "And inform Judge Grimault he'll be needed at once."

This time, Noel did not even bother trying to hide his surprise. "Monsieur—"

His master raised a brow, and Noel knew better than to continue.

"As you wish, monsieur."

Sylvain leaned back against his seat as he watched his Liana slip a diamond cufflink into her clutch before making her way toward the exit.

"Have the warehouse ready as well," he decided.

"Forla fille?" Noel asked.

"Oui."

By morning, his Liana would be his.

And in return, his darling little thief would give him something Sylvain hadn't realized he was missing until he saw her tonight.

A queen worthy of his empire.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Chapter Two

THE CATACOMBS AREN'T my usual hunting ground. They belong to the dead, and I'm not even talking about skeletons from centuries past. Or ghosts. Anything supernatural would be a lot less scary to deal with, believe me.

Everyone who's ever been on the wrong side of the law knows better than to mess around here. Because these catacombs? They belong to him.

Monsieur Le Dernier.

Mr. Last, in English. As in...he's the last face you'll see, if you're stupid enough to defy his rules.

Like I'm doing now.

Because I have no choice.

Rent's overdue, and Maman's meds won't buy themselves.

There comes a time when one must choose whether to risk death...or have someone else die.

C'est la vie.

But for now, it is time to put such morbid thoughts away and focus. The night is young, and there's much stealing to be done.

Le Dernier is unlike any club I've ever infiltrated. The entrance itself is hidden beneath an unassuming café in the 14th arrondissement, requiring a passcode that changes nightly—a passcode I spent three weeks tracking down. The staircase spirals down twelve meters below street level before opening into a limestone palace of debauchery.

The club honors its macabre setting rather than disguising it. Centuries-old skulls embedded in the walls peer out from behind glass display cases, illuminated by crystal chandeliers. Velvet curtains in deep burgundy frame alcoves where the soulless conduct their business away from prying eyes. The music pulses through the stone itself, vibrating in my chest like a second heartbeat.

Even the bar is a masterpiece of dark elegance—black marble veined with gold, bottles arranged by color rather than type, from bloody red to poisonous purple—while the uniformed staff seem more like well-trained assassins than club employees, gliding here and there, their alert gazes not missing a single thing.

I can't help but wonder if the refined horror of this place mirrors how Monsieur Le Dernier deals with his enemies. Is there a way of making one's enemies disappear...elegantly? I'm just asking, for a friend. Just, um, professional curiosity.

Enfin bref. But anyway.

Enough about the eerie beauty of this place. I've wasted too much time as it is, and I've yet to scan the room for potentials.

So, let's see...

An older businessman with the Patek Philippe who hasn't been able to stop staring at my legs. An industrialist whose Vacheron Constantin can cover Maman's treatments for months. And if necessary, that sweet, harmless tech entrepreneur from Silicon

Valley. But I do hope not. He seems too nice to be targeted, and I'm no thief without honor.

Now, who to target first?

I consider my options carefully. The businessman has had too much to drink already—sloppy marks make sloppy exits. The entrepreneur is surrounded by friends, making a clean approach difficult. The industrialist, however, stands alone at the bar, just tipsy enough to be confident but not enough to be careless. Perfect.

I decide on the industrialist.

Step one: eye contact.

Step two: let him buy you a drink.

Step three: get close enough to admire his timepiece.

Step four: make it disappear.

Rinse, cycle, repeat.

Most times, stealing doesn't bother me at all. I've successfully fooled myself into thinking I'm Robin Hood's daughter in my past life, and I'm just continuing our family's legacy. I do my research and steal only from evil men.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

But sometimes...life happens, and that's when it gets tough.

The American entrepreneur catches my eye across the room, offering a genuine smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes.

"First time here?" he asks when I walk past his table. "If you'd like a tour of the place, I'd be honored to show you around. No strings attached—promise."

There are nights like this when there aren't enough evil men in the club I've chosen, and I'm forced to choose. This man is not evil. But he's far from broke either. Will it really be so bad to steal from him?

Oui, my conscience says sadly.

But since it's my mother's life on the line...

Désolé, Monsieur Gentil. I'm sorry, Mr. Nice Guy.

Needs must.

And yet...

Huh?

A waiter suddenly approaches him, saying something under his breath. And then just like that, Mr. Nice Guy leaves, without even a backward glance.

Not good.

Death is on to me, and a chill runs down my spine as I look around. Red flags are everywhere. The bartender keeps glancing up toward the VIP section. Security guards have shifted positions, creating a subtle perimeter around me. The industrialist I've been chatting with is now being engaged by a beautiful hostess who appeared from nowhere. Even the music seems to have changed tempo, becoming more hypnotic, more disorienting.

And the reddest and fairest flag of them all?

Him.

Dark hair. Broad shoulders encased in a tailored suit that probably costs more than my entire apartment. And a presence so ominous that he has me gulping even from where I'm standing.

The king of the catacombs, in the flesh.

And he's watching me.

THE NIGHT WEARS ON.

I feel like a puppet being made to perform, and I hate it.

But that's the thing about being poor.

Choice is a privilege of the rich. Other times, it's worse, and you realize that choice is nothing but an illusion. This world we live in is only for the rich and powerful.

And poor people like you and me simply exist for their consumption.

Like now.

I can feel his gaze following me wherever I go. But I'm past the point of caring. I have one last mark to hit, and then I'll go. If he wanted me killed, I'd have been dead an eternity ago. But since I'm still alive?

He's toying with me, obviously.

And that's fine.

Play to your heart's content, monsieur.

Ever since coming here, something inside of me seems to have changed. I'm less and less afraid of my mortality while death has become more and more...seductive.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Peu importe. Doesn't matter.

I wrap things up in twenty minutes, my purse nearly bulging with tonight's takings. When I finally emerge from the catacombs, the night air feels purifying, cool and clean against my feverish skin. I shiver, though not entirely from the cold. My heart races strangely when I think of him—of those dark eyes watching my every move from the shadows, assessing, calculating. Hunting.

The walk home takes thirty minutes. Another night, another score. Maman's treatment can continue.

I should be rejoicing, but my skin continues to prickle inexplicably.

My third-floor apartment welcomes me with familiar shabbiness. I've been doing my best to convince myself it's cozy, but this is one area in my life that mind conditioning has not worked to my advantage at all. It's ugly and cramped, period.

I slip out of my heels and am reaching for the deadbolts I installed myself when a massive hand covers my mouth from behind.

The arm around my waist feels like it could crack my ribs without effort. I thrash, but it's pointless. Years of street smarts, and I'm as helpless as a child.

A sweet scent fills my nose—chemical, medicinal. My chemistry knowledge identifies it just as consciousness begins to fade.

Diethyl ether.

My last coherent thought is that I didn't even hear them enter behind me.

I WAKE TO THE FAMILIAR Rache of bound wrists.

The warehouse around me echoes with emptiness. Unlike the catacombs with their claustrophobic stone walls, this space sprawls endlessly into shadow. Industrial pipes snake across a ceiling lost in darkness. Rusted machinery squats in corners like mechanical sentinels. The air carries rust, old oil, and something else—the sharp tang of fear.

Mine.

A single spotlight illuminates the chair I'm bound to, making the darkness beyond even more impenetrable. Classic interrogation technique. Make the subject feel exposed, vulnerable, while the interrogator remains hidden.

But he isn't hidden.

A man sits across from me, just at the edge of the light.

It's him, of course.

Black suit tailored to perfection against broad shoulders. Black hair that makes me think of ravens' wings. And eyes that are just as blue as mine, surprisingly.

To describe him as beautiful would be an insult. Because there's so much more to this man than the chiseled perfection of his face or the virile muscularity of his build. There are just so many layers to this man. Power cloaked in mystery. Light and darkness in an endless battle. And in his startlingly blue eyes, I see...something I'm

not quite ready to label.

Not just yet.

The air between us crackles with something I don't understand—electricity, danger, attraction?

Ne sois pas bête, Li. Don't be silly.

"You committed a crime in my property."

The king of the catacombs has finally spoken, and his voice slides through the air like a dagger wrapped in silk. Soft and smooth, but deadly as ever.

But even so...

I blink at him in sham innocence.

There is no way he is going to make me admit to theft, just like that.

"Désolé, monsieur," I whisper. "I don't know what—"

He holds his hand up, and of course I shut up.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"My people found this in your bedroom."

A nod, and one of the men flanking his side reveals one of the watches I've stolen.

Oh well.

Since there is no point playing innocent now—

"I planned to give it back," I say piously, going for broke.

A lazy smile slowly curves over his lips, and my heart actually races.

Oh dear.

"And I'm supposed to believe that, of course."

"Why shouldn't you? Is it too difficult to believe that I've had a change of heart? It's my first time to steal—"

His security team—every one of them actually coughs—but I pretend not to hear this.

Quelle impolitesse. Such rudeness.

"And I'm clearly not good at it."

"Clearly." He nods again, and another one of his guards steps forward, this time revealing the rest of my takings.

Unfortunately for him, I am really good at pretending not to notice what I do not wish to see.

"Please, monsieur. I just want to live a normal life from now on. I just want to...start fresh."

His eyes gleam, and its shade is truly just like mine that I'm starting to worry. What if...this man turns out to be some brother from another father that I never knew of? Stepbrother romances, I have no beef with, but real incest? Hard pass, for sure.

"Funny you should say that," he murmurs, "since it's exactly what I've decided to offer you."

He rises to his feet, unfolding like a dark promise, and he's so much taller than I feared.

"But first..." Blue eyes that are so like mine turn speculative. "You know who I am, oui?"

I don't say a word, but my silence proves futile.

"Your face is an open book, ma petite," he says gently. "So now, let me ask you again, and this time, donne-moi une réponse, s'il te plaît."

I taste fear for the first time.

Because like everyone else, I've heard all the stories about him.

And one thing they have in common?

It is never a good sign when Monsieur Le Dernier says 'please'.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes." I don't even know why I refused to admit this in the first place. Subconscious self-sabotage, perhaps? You can't live a life of crime in Paris and not know of Monsieur Le Dernier. You rarely ever see him, but you know he's everywhere. You don't ever hear his real name mentioned. But you know he's real because of the dead bodies that keep turning up. And the one thing they all have in common?

They thought they could handle him.

They were wrong.

Like me.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

A heavy sense of numbness blankets my body as I watch him walk toward me. Behind him, his men are quiet and expressionless. Witnesses who don't give a whit even if they're about to witness me sacrificed or burned at the stakes. I think I'm already dead to them either way.

And as for their king...

His steps have come to a halt, and my eyes lift to his. I wait for my fear to devolve into terror, but it doesn't.

"You have two choices,ma petite."

He wraps his fingers around my throat as he speaks, but my pulse doesn't even race, and all I notice is how his accent has become more pronounced. More...old-money French than Parisian.

The fingers around my throat start to tighten, and I start thinking about the weirdest things.

Things like how his callused fingertips make me think of violence and elegance. Or how his proximity has finally started sinking in, and my pulse is now racing for all the wrong reasons.

"You pay for your life..."

How is that the same as starting fresh?

"Or—" His fingers tighten just enough to make breathing difficult. "You surrender it to me..."

He loosens his grip to cup my chin, and my breath catches as his thumb traces my bottom lip.

Dear oh dear.

My body is starting to feel weirder than ever, and the way I'm reacting to him is so, so wrong in so many levels. I should be screaming or shaking in fear right now. But instead I feel—

"Through marriage."

—like I should ask what he's just said.

"Make your choice, Liana."

Because surely, I couldn't have heard him right.

Right?

My lips part in confusion.

Which then turns into shock when he actually slips one finger inside of my mouth.

"Suck it."

No! Never! As if!

But instead...I actually find myself obeying him.

I'm sucking his finger like I was born to do this.

And when I look up and see the dark pleasure smoldering in eyes that are as blue as mine—

Oh no.

He slowly pulls his finger out of my mouth, and I actually feel empty.

I think I've lost my mind.

"You've made the right choice,ma petite."

I actually haven't given him an answer, but why bother arguing over semantics? He commanded me to suck his finger, and I obeyed without question. I might as well have told him I'm psyched to be his baby mama—

Page 9

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Maman.

I can't believe I forgot about my mother.

"Monsieur." My voice comes out in a croak. My mother has always been my Achilles' heel and always will be. "My mother—"

"Is being cared for."

He says the words so, so simply.

"Her nurse has been informed that you're spending the night with a friend. By tomorrow, she'll know the truth—that her daughter has married well."

That he clearly doesn't understand what those words mean to me.

Maman...is being cared for.

The ropes around my wrists suddenly loosen. One of his men has moved behind me, freeing me on some silent command from his master.

"The ceremony will take place immediately," Monsieur Le Derniersays.

I know I should be terrified. I'm about to marry the most feared man in Paris. A man who uses the same hand to threaten me with strangulation one moment and touch me with a gentleness that bordered on affection the next.

That's the kind of man my future husband is..but who cares?

Maman...is being cared for.

I always thought I could die happy once I've taken care of Maman. And the reason I have to remind myself every day that I still have a reason to live. And perhaps, that's still true. Only...it's not death that's about to take me away from her. But something just as dark. And inescapable.

But also...something more reliable than the God whom I used to believe in.

Because if You're real, then why do You let bad things happen to good people like Maman?

"Stand."

My legs are unsteady after hours bound to the chair, but my future husband doesn't offer his hand to steady me.

Unsurprising.

One of his men approaches with what appears to be a garment bag.

"Your dress for the wedding," he murmurs.

"Merci."

It's the only thing to say, since I've never been the type to cry over spilled milk.

I took a risk, stealing in one of his clubs, and now I'm paying the price with marriage.

C'est la vie.

Chapter Three

"DO YOU, LIANA, TAKE Monsieur Le Dernier as your lawfully wedded husband?"

Judge Grimault's voice echoes through the empty courthouse, and I look at him with wide-eyed shock.

"You're not going to use his actual name?"

Grimault gulps, and with his bloodshot eyes and rumpled suit, there's nothing dignified about him at all. He looks more like the hostage between the two of us, and it almost makes me feel bad for him.

Almost.

Grimault clears his throat. "Please answer with a 'yes' or 'no'."

But I don't, since here he is, officiating a marriage that can't possibly be legal.

I open my mouth so I can annoy him further. But then my groom gives me a look, and poof.

My desire to stay alive outweighs my puerile tendencies, and I give Grimault an angelic smile. "Oui." It's not much of a rebellion, but small wins are still wins, oui?

And besides...

"It is my honor and privilege—"

Who says I'm already done?

"To take Monsieur Le Dernier as my lawful—"

My groom's security team starts coughing again (they do love to do that, don't they?) while Grimault releases a sound that's somewhere between a horrified wheeze and a whelp of terror.

"Oh, sorry. I meant to say 'lawfully' of course."

I'm not sure what it was exactly, to be honest. All I know is that it's music to my ears.

"It's my honor and privilege to take Monsieur Le Dernier as my lawfully wedded husband." I slowly lift my gaze to his, peering at him from under my lashes like the virgin bride that I am (truly!), and...oh my goodness. Was that an actual twitch of his lips?

Whoever knew a monster like him is capable of smiling?

"Then by the power vested in me..."

Grimault's speaking again, and I lower my gaze to the marble floors, with its ultra-polished surface reflecting the fluorescent lights like a distorted world under my thrift-store-bought Louboutins.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

I'm not sure why, but I just feel like pretending I'm the very mindful, very demure, very cutesy type.

"You may now kiss your bride."

Page 11

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Well, scratch that.

The moment I hear those words, there's no need to pretend.

How could you have forgotten about this part, pauvre imbécile!

I know it's already a miracle that I'm still alive despite breaking the rules in his territory. I know I've been pushing him more and more with every disrespectful word I throw his way.

But...

I've never been kissed, okay?

And so to let this man, this monster of all people—

No, no, no.

I automatically step back. Or try to. But he's faster than my fear, his murderously good hands capturing my waist, his intoxicating scent invading my senses as he pulls me against him.

This can't be happening. I'm not ready. No, oh please...OH?

A shudder rocks my body as his lips press against my forehead. It's the briefest of contacts, neither possessive nor demanding, but instead infinitely gentle.

Je ne comprends pas. I don't understand.

He steps back, and I actually feel abandoned. There's this one disorienting moment that I almost sway towards him as his hands leave my waist, my body betraying me with foolish and self-destructive yearning.

My mind replays the past. Me, walking into his catacombs, never thinking my life would change in the blink of an eye. One moment I'm but one of the many pickpockets in the City of Lights. The next, I'm in a holding room and changing into a cream-colored Chanel dress that fits me like a glove. I'd like to think this was mere coincidence, but I think not.

And now...this.

I hate the way my hand noticeably trembles as I sign our marriage certificates. My husband, on the other hand, it's just the usual for him. He wields the pen like a sword, ink slashing against parchment paper with swift and deadly elegance.

MLD.

That's all he writes. Incursive, of course. Just three letters, but I know for a fact that it's more than enough to have many a hardened criminal run away like the devil is after them. (To be fair: that's how I would feel, too, if I were to find out that Monsieur Le Dernier is out for my blood.)

"Shall we?"

The words are a command rather than an invitation, and Monsieur Le Dernier is already walking away as I'm forced to hurry after him.

Typical.

It's just a short distance separating us, but I still end up catching my breath by the time I manage to reach his side. My...husband (how am I married just like that?) glances at me, and I feel so unfairly judged.

"What?"

He goes on walking without a single word in reply, and I'm now absolutely convinced I've not just married the king of the catacombs. Monsieur Le Dernier apparently also holds the world title to Rudest Man Alive.

The same limo awaits us by the sidewalk, a bulletproof monster that's transported us from warehouse to courthouse, and now, from courthouse to...hm.

"Where are we going?" I ask as soon as I hear the click of passenger doors locking, and the partition between us and his driver slides into place.

His dark blue eyes (why do they look so much like mine?) meet mine. "Home."

I'm about to ask where that is exactly when my husband, who remains the soul of rudeness, delivers his next blow.

"I am surprised at how remarkably...out of shape you are, considering your profession."

Every word, an insult, but wrapped in a silken drawl with a French-accented-ribbon on the top.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Excuse me?" No, I don't just sound defensive. I am defensive, very much so.

"You must build your strength and stamina," he commands. "Tu comprends?"

I'm nineteen to his... what? Mid-thirties? The insult stings beyond belief, from one professional criminal to another.

"I am sorry that you find me terribly lacking, monsieur."

(Ha!)

I incline my head to the side as I look at him musingly. "May I ask why, though? Does being the dutiful wife of a mob boss involve some heavy lifting? Will I need to help carry dead bodies to their final resting place?" I press my hand to my heart, eyes impossibly wide. "I should warn you, monsieur, I'm afraid I might be too delicate for such tasks. Though I suppose I could hold the rope when you're dangling someone over the Seine?"

"Non, ma petite." His lips curve as he says this, and I hate the way the mere sight of it has every inch of me tingling. "Nothing so pedestrian."

"Then pray tell me—"

My words stumble to a stop when I suddenly find myself right next to him, his hand tangling in my hair while the other slides along my collarbone.

"Non." My husband (will I ever get used to calling him this?) actually purrs the word

out, and my senses start to spiral.

Oh dear.

"I think it is better that I show you instead."

His mouth finds the sensitive spot below my ear as he speaks, and I forget how to breathe. His teeth graze my skin, and my body arches toward him without my permission.

"You have too many clothes on, Liana."

A whimper spills past my lips. I'm equal parts terrified and shamefully excited. His words make me think he's about to undress me, but instead his hands slowly stroke over the silk of my wedding dress, and heat steals over my cheeks as I feel my flesh swell achingly under his touch.

This is the part where I should tell him we will not have this kind of marriage.

But when my lips part, no words of protest come out, and I only end up gasping as my husband's fingers trace the neckline of my dress...just before dipping inside of it. And when his thumb brushes directly across my lace-covered nipple—

Aaaah.

Another whimper escapes me, the sound explicitly coated in desire, even to my ears.

"Tu es si sensible, ma petite." Lazy pleasure unfurls from every word he murmurs. "So responsive."

I don't speak. Can't. Not when he's finally tugged my dress down to my waist, and my

entire body burns under his devouring gaze. My heart thunders against my chest as his fingers find the front clasp of my bra.

Click.

The cups fall to the side, my breasts spilling free, and I can only bite back a cry.

It's my first time to have a man stare at me like this. And the way he makes me feel with just his eyes alone...

Dark blue eyes suddenly glitter down at me.

"Tell me what you're thinking," my husband growls.

W-what? W-why? Where did that come from?

"Dites-moi." "Tell me.

A command this time, and one that has me nervously wetting my lips because those two words come with a threat, a promise of repercussions that even I have no courage to face.

"I was just wondering..."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Oh please, please don't make me say it out loud.

"Wondering what?"

"If it w-were possible..."

It's my first time to hear myself stammer like this.

"For another man to make me feel the way you're—aaah!"

The last thing I see on his handsome face is the fury that flashes in his gaze.

And then I'm crying out, with his mouth closing over my breast while he starts tugging its pouting twin. And oh, the way he torments my flesh...

It's exactly what he's known for. Every flick of his tongue calculated to drive me insane. Every scrape of his teeth, a mix of tender violence and excruciating pleasure. My fingers climb their way into his hair, and I'm ashamed to find myself actually gripping my husband's head as I grind myself against his hungry mouth.

This is not me, this is not me, this is not me.

But the words feel like a lie, with how my world has narrowed to nothing but the pleasure he gives.

This is real. This is now me. The new me.

A creature that Monsieur Le Dernier controls through my helpless desire.

And when his mouth moves to my other breast, and another cycle of tortuous pleasure starts anew—

"P-Please..."

I'm sobbing for something I don't even know.

His head lifts, a temporary reprieve that my body despises and needs at the same time.

Oh, comme c'est fou.

How crazy he makes me feel!

"Already begging, ma petite?" My husband is purring again, and this sound, oh this sound, it will one day kill me for sure. "When we've barely begun?"

"P-Please, m-monsieur..."

"But since you ask so nicely..."

He bends his head, his lips once again closing over a still-sensitive nipple. And then he starts to suckle. So, so hard. While pinching the other pouting tip, and hard enough for pain and pleasure to blur.

Aaaaaah.

It happens all of a sudden, and all I can do is gasp in shock as the first wave of release crashes over me. But even though my body is still shuddering, and my mind is still a

mess—

"We are not yet finished,ma petite."

His hands are on the move once more, a whimper escaping my lips as his fingers slide under my dress. He strokes the sensitive skin of my inner thighs, and I'm both horrified and delighted, terrified and aroused. My first orgasm hasn't even ended, and yet already...

"Regarde-moi,"he commands. "Look at me."

Dark blue eyes take mine captive as his fingers find the slick folds between my legs, and my lips part in a silent moan as his thumb circles my most sensitive point.

"Do you really think..."

Oh no.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Just any other man—"

The sudden savageness of his tone makes me burn and tremble all at the same time.

"Can make you feel like this?"

His fingers slide inside of me as he speaks, and my entire world starts to shatter.

Non.

The answer is absolutely and painstakingly clear in the way my hips start rising on their own, my body helplessly responding to every thrust of his long and elegant fingers.

C'est impossible.

The way I'm now losing myself in the possessive heat of his gaze, and the way my folds have become so wet and swollen as his fingers push deeper and deeper into my core—

It's just plain impossible.

Even though it's only his touch that I have ever experienced, and I know this early on that no other man will even be able to come this close to me—there's no hiding from the truth.

Lui seul. Only him and no one else.

My husband alone can make me feel...

This full.

This helpless.

This...insane.

His thumb presses hard on that nub of flesh I myself have never touched, and my world finally shatters. I'm holding onto his shoulders for dear life, my nails digging into the panes of his back, but this second rush of pleasure is still too, too much for me to bear.

I think I may have screamed. Begged. I'm not quite sure, with darkness overcoming my vision.

Oh dear.

When I regain consciousness, I find myself cradled against my husband's chest, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear. He's still fully dressed, still his usual devastating self...while I'm a mess of tangled hair, exposed breasts, and crumpled silk.

Quelle horreur.

I wish I didn't remember a thing. But instead, I remembereverything.And when I scramble up while trying to cover my nakedness—

My husband gently pulls my wrists down.

Ugh.

He wants his pound of flesh, and because not once has Monsieur Le Dernier pretended to be a gentleman in his victories—

His gaze meets mine, and oh, the way those dark blue eyes of his gleam.

It annoys me to death.

"Well, ma petite?"

How softly he says the words, knowing that this will piss me off even more.

"Yes," I bite out. "I need to build my strength and stamina." I give him all the words he wants. I just want to get this over with.

"And?"

Page 15

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

I look at him crossly. What else does he need me—

"Your other question."

What other—

Oh.

Right.

"You should answer me while I'm giving you a chance to do so," he suggests.

Oh, really now?

"Unless, of course, you wish for another demonstration..."

And just like that, my half-baked and ill-advised attempt to challenge him comes to an end.

"Non, monsieur," I say quickly. "I, er, remember now."

"And?"

And of course he really wants to hear me say it.

"And I g-get it now..." My words end in a stammer when my husband lazily reaches for one breast, and I'm thrown into confusion as he starts kneading my flesh.

"Ce qui est quoi, exactement?" Which is what, exactly?

It's so hard to think, with him squeezing my breast like this.

But...I suppose that's the whole point, too.

"Only you, monsieur," I say reluctantly, resignedly. "Only you can make me feel this way."

My husband's lips slowly curve in a smirk, and the sight of it actually makes me want to squeal and snarl at the same time.

Tellement, tellement folle.

Oh, how crazy this man makes me feel!

"Indeed."

After that is a blur. He helps me dress, and he does so with such breathtaking efficiency that I realize I'm actually jealous. Because expertise comes at a cost, and I need to know the exact numbers. Just how many women has my husband undressed for him to be this good?

I'm determined to know the answer. But I have no chance of asking, with my husband's property now coming into view as the limo turns off the main road, and trees are closing in around us.

Wrought iron gates manned by armed guards swing open as we approach, and we climb up a winding driveway that seems endless. Centuries-old sentinels of wood and leaves watch over us from every side, their branches creating dappled patterns from overhead.

I've stopped trying to figure out how much land my husband owns by the time a sprawling manor finally emerges. Its every stone and arch narrates a story of classic French architecture, its manicured gardens, a landscaped ode to a lifestyle of understated elegance. A royal existence that's earned from sweat and blood, rather than birthright.

It's the most beautiful house I've ever seen. And somehow, that makes this situation even more terrifying.

This isn't the lair of a monster. It's the home of a king, and my confusion only grows in leaps and bounds. Who is this man I'm married...when he's not playing the role of Monsieur Le Dernier?

The car stops, and my husband (oh, how surreal it still feels, to think of him in this manner)...

Well, he's still the king of rudeness, that's for sure, with the way he allows me to step out of the car all on my own.

His staff is already lined up on the front steps, their gazes sharp but not cruel, their faces impassive but not hard.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"My wife, Liana."

I can't help but jerk when my husband suddenly speaks, his every word bearing the full force of his power and authority.

"I will appreciate everyone's support in making her feel at home."

His staff starts clapping. A few even smile. And although I try my hardest to look for any signs of disapproval, distrust, or deceit—

There's nothing.

Rien du tout.

Absolutely nothing.

In each and every one of his servants, I only see loyalty...to him.

If their master says I am his bride, then so be it.

C'est la vie.

And in this sense, we are completely alike, his servants and I.

Chapter Four

"AND THIS IS OUR INFORMAL library." Erin steps back from the doorway so I

can enter if I wish. The room is a bibliophile's fantasy—two stories tall with a spiral staircase connecting the levels, walls lined with leather-bound books in rich jewel tones, and reading nooks tucked into window alcoves that overlook the gardens. If this is informal, I'm clearly not posh enough because I can't even imagine what their version of formal looks like.

We move on to the next stop in her house tour, and I can't help but notice how every hallway we walk through is vast, elegant, and remarkably...impersonal. There are no framed photos, no trophy cabinets, or a shelf of souvenirs on display from previous trips. There's just nothing at all that reveals the character of its owner. It's simply one expensive painting after another, and honestly?

Those paintings are making my fingers itch. What relief it would've given the old me, if I had been able to steal even just one of them for Maman.

(Heh.)

Another thing catches my eye, and it's the sheer number of security cameras we've walked past. Those small black orbs are everywhere, and not just mounted discreetly in every corner. I see them next to every column and above every entry and exit point. There are even a couple so perfectly concealed, only someone who steals for a living would've noticed them.

What is this place, seriously? Big Brother's House, criminal edition?

"Is there a phone I can use?" I ask Erin impulsively.

"I'm afraid not."

Erin, whose official job title I've forgotten, seems to know everything that goes on around this house. I picture her more like my husband's sergeant-in-arms, someone he trusts to keep his entire household staff in line. Even more interesting? I haven't seen anyone else in our tour, with all of them disappearing into God knows where after their greeting squad act on the front steps.

"Where's everybody?"

"Attending to their respective duties."

Oh, this woman is really good at answering my questions without actually giving me anything.

"I really need to use my phone, though. Would you happen to know where it is?"

"In the master's possession."

"And you don't think that's odd?"

"Not at all."

"What if I tell you I've been abducted?" I ask impulsively.

"It would have broken my heart to hear this," she answers without hesitation.

Oh?

"—if you were one of the others."

"Others?"

Erin's mask slips for the first time, and we both realize she's said something she shouldn't have.

"What do you mean by others?" I insist on asking.

Erin clears her throat. "I believe I'm needed in the kitchen at this time."

"No, you're not."

The other woman only bows, and I realize I'm not the only one who's good at ignoring what we don't want to see or hear.

"Please use the intercom if you need anything, madame. Good day."

My jaw drops when she turns without even waiting for me to say something back, and by the time I recover from my surprise, she's disappeared around the corner, and I...I have no idea how to find her.

Erin - 1, Me - 0.

For now.

But in the meantime...

I think it's time to make a proper assessment of my current...setup.

Main entrance: four security guards, two visible, probably two more I can't see. Metal detectors and cameras.

Not an option.

I wander past a side exit: alarmed, camera above, keypad entry.

Nope.

I head up the grand staircase and consider the second-floor windows. Is it possible to jump from here?

Page 18

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Still a hard no, which makes for three strikes.

I make my way back to my suite, testing doorknobs as I go.

Locked. Locked. Locked. Locked.

The only rooms I can explore are the same rooms that Erin has already shown me, and by late afternoon, I've confirmed what I suspected: I'm in a very comfortable, very spacious, very lovely...prison.

Yay, me.

When I return to my bedroom, I notice something new. Double doors to the balcony stand open, and outside, a table has been set for dinner.

Huh.

Two envelopes rest beside a covered silver tray. The first contains a printed medical report and photos. My mother's surgery—a surgery I didn't even know was scheduled—was successful, and to ensure her full recovery, Maman has been informed that she will be unable to receive visitors in the next 72 hours.

How...convenient.

The second envelope is square-shaped and sealed with wax—black and gold, featuring a skull wearing a crown. I use the silver letter opener to carefully break the seal, trying not to damage the intricate emblem.

Inside is a simple card.

Je suis désolé de ne pas pouvoir vous rejoindre pour le dîner. I'm sorry I won't be able to join you for dinner.

Votre mari. Your husband.

I tell myself this is a relief. And I swear I'm relieved. Truly!

The sun sets over the expansive grounds as I eat, and I'm surprised to find myself with an appetite. Maybe it's because I can't even remember the last time I've eaten. Or maybe the food is just that good. Salmon that's so juicy and tender it just melts in my mouth, and the buttery herbed cream sauce that goes with it?

Parfait. Perfect.

Night falls, but restlessness gnaws tirelessly at my bones, keeping sleep at bay. My gaze keeps returning to the door on the far wall, which I know can only lead to his adjoining suite.

Oh, peu importe.

I jump out of my bed before I can talk myself out of it and pad barefoot to the door. "Monsieur?" I knock three times, wait a few seconds, before giving it a little push, and oh.

It swivels so fast I end up back where I started.

Comme c'est intrigant. How intriguing.

I give it another push, and this time I'm able to carefully step into his room, which

turns out to be everything that mine isn't. Masculine versus soft. Dark versus pastel. Leather versus lace. And a bed that's about twice the size of mine...not that it matters. I just noticed, that's all.

On his nightstand sits another envelope, this one small enough to fit in my palm, attached to a lacquered black box.

Come find me if you dare.

I open the box, and my brows meet in a frown at its contents. Pieces of steel? No, not just steel—some kind of puzzle? My fingers are already moving and sorting through the pieces.

Click, click, click.

I end up with a lock pick, and my heart skips a beat.

Oh.

Is my new husband inviting me to break into someplace?

Well, if there's one thing I know how to do, it's exactly that.

Chapter Five

THE WATER EMBRACED Sylvain like a lover as he completed his first lap. The basement pool, heated to perfection, was one of his few indulgences—a sanctuary where he was able to think, with voices from inner demons effectively silenced by the sound of water breaking against his strokes.

His staff knew better than to disturb him when he was here.

Tonight, however, was an exception.

A subtle click reached his ears, the sound of metal against metal.

Because where his wife was concerned, Sylvain now realized there were no rules he was unwilling to break.

Another click, and it was a sound of a lock that had failed to guard the secrets it was entrusted with.

Impressionnant. Impressive.

Sylvain didn't stop swimming, but slowed his pace, calculating. It had been approximately four hours since he'd left the box in his room. She would have likely found it sometime after her dinner. Then she would have to assemble the pieces, locate the hidden door in her suite, and navigate dimly lit passageways.

All to end up here, a door of metal bars whose lock she had now successfully picked,

and faster than he anticipated.

Magnifique.

His little thief continued to exceed expectations, and Sylvain was certain she would continue surprising him.

As he completed his final lap, he sensed his wife's presence behind one of the stone columns that lined the pool. Heard her catch her breath as he pulled himself from the water, droplets streaming down his naked form.

My sweet little pickpocket.

Such an innocent little thing she was, to have lived in the kind of world she lived, and yet still be so intoxicatingly untainted. Untouched. Almost as if she was waiting to surrender her everything...to him.

Sylvain took his time toweling off, his back to her hiding place. He could feel her wide eyes fixed on him, hear the way her breathing changed when she noticed a certain part of his anatomy.

Comme c'est intéressant.

Who knew his wife would be so into...son derrière?

"Are you intending to stare at me for the rest of the evening?" he asked without turning.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

She gasped, a delicate sound tinged with embarrassment, and Sylvain almost smiled.

How delightful it was to tease her.

He tossed the towel aside and turned to face her directly, enjoying the way her breath caught again, the way her cheeks flushed crimson. The silk nightgown she wore was another one of his purchases, but seeing her in it set his teeth surprisingly on edge.

It did not feel right all of a sudden, to have his wife wear something that he had bought for someone else in mind. Who knew he would be so sentimental?

He saw her bite her lip, and his agitation temporarily faded. His body had priorities, and with her, it was always this.

"You've found me," Sylvain murmured.

To seduce her so thoroughly and completely—

"Now come and get your reward."

That everything else would cease to matter to her—everything but him.

His own body hardened as he watched her young and supple flesh blossom with every step she took toward him. The rosy tint of her cheeks. The faint tremors rocking her body. And ah, those twin peaks pebbling against the scrap of silk covering her body. He was falling under her thrall once more, and when he saw her tongue darting out to wet her lips, his own desire swelled into life, and he had to

clench his fists against the urge to haul her close.

Patience, Sauvage. Patience.

When she was close enough to touch, he issued a single command.

"Kneel."

The word was soft, gentle even. But unmistakably a command.

A thousand emotions flashed over her soft features. Fear. Shock. Embarrassment. But most of all, there was need.

It was the same need that was pulsing through his veins.

The same need that now had his wife slowly sinking to her knees before him, her dark blue eyes never leaving his.

Sylvain's fingers found her hair, silky strands wrapping around his knuckles. So soft. So unlike the hardness of his world. He tightened his grip just enough to tilt her head back, and when her lips parted in a surprised gasp, he guided himself into the moist warmth of her mouth.

Magnifique.

Dazed eyes flew up to meet his, but he offered no mercy in his gaze.

Because her fear, whether she admitted this or not, also fed her desire.

She wanted him because she feared him.

And so it would stay between them, always.

His fingers guided her head, and he felt her tremble at his touch.

"That's it," Sylvain murmured, moving slowly, steadily. "Take all of me."

Each forward motion took him deeper, each retreat gave her time to adjust. She was clumsy at first—of course she was—but a quick learner. Her tongue began to explore on its own, darting and playing against sensitive spots that made him grit his teeth.

With each thrust, he went deeper into her mouth. With each thrust, she learned how to please him, her inexperience giving way to instinct, her tongue circling and teasing the swollen tip of his manhood.

Enfin, ah, enfin.

Her hands, previously frozen at her sides, suddenly reached up to grasp the muscles of his *derrière*, nails digging hard enough to mark. The unexpected aggression made him growl, and his wife seemed to delight in hearing this, with how she began to test the limits of his control. She was sucking in earnest now, and his legendary control was no match for it.

Sylvain's breathing turned harsh, fingers tightening in her hair as he increased the pace. The sight of his darling little thief on her knees, stealing his heart as she pleased him, was a battle he had no hope of winning. Her innocent ways were his undoing, her clumsy attempts to drive him wild only making him hunger for her more and more and more...until his wife's name tore from his throat in a groan.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Liana."

Release claimed him in an explosive instant, Sylvain spilling himself in her mouth, and satisfaction blazing through his veins as his wife worked hard to take it all in, swallowing everything until the very last drop.

When he slowly withdrew, she collapsed onto the tiled floor, breath coming in ragged pants, and her legs pressed together unconsciously, seeking relief from the ache he knew was building there.

"Your turn,ma petite."

Her head jerked up in shock. "N-No—"

Silly girl.

His finger slipped back into her mouth, silencing her protests. The way she automatically sucked it told him everything her words wouldn't admit.

Why was she still lying to herself?

Sylvain swooped her up, laying her down on the lounge chair, soft towel under her back. He sat on the edge, watching her every response as he once again pleased her with his fingers, this time focusing solely on her sweet little nub.

Patient strokes, then furious ones.

And when her eyes pleaded with him, he understood what she was asking.

"Sylvain."

This was not part of the plan.

But...c'est la vie.

The moment he gave her his name, he knew then there was no coming back from this.

His Liana sobbed his name out as she came, body shuddering at the strength of her release, and still his fingers moved, every stroke plunging her deeper and deeper into an abyss of sensual exhaustion.

"Sylvain... arrête... s'il te plaît." Stop...please.

His wife's eyelids were already drifting closed as she spoke, her spent body succumbing to sleep.

Pauvre âme malheureuse. Poor unfortunate soul.

She still had the smallest chance of freedom before this. But the moment he gave her his name, it was over for both of them.

He tasted her on his fingers, and it was as delicious as it was forbidden.

She was his, he was hers.

But what remained to be seen was whether she was meant to be his queen... or his captive.

It all depended on whether she passed or failed the test.

Chapter Six

SO WHERE WAS THAT AGAIN?

Erin had kindly offered to escort me earlier, but I just as kindly said no. I'd like to see how well I've memorized the ins and outs of this place, andmm...right or left?

The hallways stretch before me like carpeted arteries through the heart of the mansion, all of them identical in every way save for the paintings adorning the walls. This hall is all about the impressionists, another hall is dedicated entirely to Kaws, and so forth.

My mind starts to drift while I consider which path will take me to the breakfast room. Because, you know, my husband is so rich, a dining room for all the major meals of the day is—what was that word he used again?

Oh, right.

Pedestrian.

I decide to take a right where the hallway branches, following the scent of fresh bread and coffee as more memories breach the surface of my thoughts. They have a will of their own, and they want to be remembered.

My mind says, forget, forget, forget.

My memories say, recall, recall, recall.

I told you, didn't I?

The man I married is driving me insane.

Waking up alone in my bed this morning was both a blessing and a curse. On the upside? I'm glad my husband wasn't there to hear me let out a blood-curdling shriek...as I realized that he's made me pass out in pleasure for the second time.

I'm younger between us, for goodness' sake.

So why am I the one lacking in stamina?

But on the other hand...

My hand clutches my heart as my steps slow to an uneven stop. The memory of last night floods back: my knees kissing the cold hard tiles, the taste of him on my tongue, and...

Sylvain.

His name is the most precious memory of all, and the fact that I know it just seems to change everything. I only used to see him as my king and captor, but with his name now etched in my soul...

He's become so much more, and it terrifies me to the point that I can't even make myself put it into words.

"Oh, there you are."

Erin comes out from the end of the hallway, her crisp black uniform perfectly pressed, not a silver hair out of place. She actually retrieves an honest-to-goodness

pocket watch from somewhere within her jacket.

"Sixteen minutes and ten seconds."

What an ugly record, and so just like with all things ugly in my life, I let it sail past my head and focus on something else.

"Good morning, Erin."

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Bonjour, madame."

She points me down another corridor, this one lined with completed puzzles in frames, and vanishes as efficiently as she appeared.

Her directions take me to a sunlit room overlooking the gardens, and a lot cozier than I expected despite the casual display of porcelain plates, tableware in 24-karat-gold, and fresh flowers spilling from priceless Ming vases.

"Bonjour."

I hate how my breath catches just by looking at my husband, who looks impossibly handsome in his navy blue riding jacket, tailored shirt, and jeans. But then he rises to his feet and actually pulls a chair out for me—

Oh no.

I rush toward him in concern. "Are you feeling well?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you're acting like a gentleman, and that worries me."

"Ah." Amusement gleams from the dark blue depths of his eyes. "I was wondering how long it would take you to call me out on that."

That's all he has to say, really?

I'd like to roll my eyes, but change my mind when Erin reappears, and the staff starts serving breakfast. It's one thing to provoke him in front of his security (I'm pretty sure they're the see-speak-and-hear-no-evil type), but it's another thing entirely to act like a shrew in front of the rest of his household.

"Shall we sit down?"

His courteous ways make me look at him suspiciously, but what do you know?

Monsieur Le Dernieris just as good as I am at acting like nothing's amiss, and he helps me into my seat like he's won the world's title for Best Husband Ever for consecutive years.

Too bad for him, but I'm not so easily distracted, and I wait until all the other ladies are gone, and it's just the two of us again.

Well, there's also his army of bodyguards, but they don't count.

"So..."

My husband turns to face me, and I'm momentarily distracted by the massive breadth of his shoulders. I'm suddenly reminded of how those same shoulders look naked, with water streaming down them as Sylvain rises from the pool—

"You were saying?" Sylvain prompts.

Oh, stop, you!

I clear my throat. "I'd like to talk to you about something."

"Of course."

"Who are you, and what did you do to my husband?"

His eyes gleam. "So we are back to that again."

"Well, to be fair...I was just curious. I have a feeling you're rude to everyone, any—"

"Ah, but I am not."

What did he just say?

I look at him indignantly, but my husband only shrugs. "I am the epitome of good manners with other women."

I don't even notice planting my hands on my waist as I face him with a glare, our knees bumping into each other under the table.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Now, see here, monsieur..."

He may have the whole of Paris cowering from him as Monsieur Le Dernier, but I don't give a whit. From the moment he married me, he also became my husband, and that's why—

"You are my wife, Liana," Sylvain says quietly. "Other women can afford to look weak and helpless. But I will not allow it from you. My wife must be my equal in strength and courage."

—I'm secretly flattered at how he holds me in such a high regard.

"And you are that, oui?"

"Yes, I am that."

"So what was it that you wanted to say earlier?"

"You already said it."

His security team is coughing again, and it's starting to bother me. Shouldn't Sylvain have them checked for asthma or something?

"I am a woman of strength and courage," I repeat, "and I just wanted to remind you of it."

"Ah."

Sylvain takes my hand across the table, and my heart flutters as he presses his lips to my knuckles.

"Outside this house,ma petite...our reality demands that you present a picture of fierceness. But within these walls, I want to spoil you every moment. Will you let me?"

"Absolutely."

The swiftness of my reply has my husband laughing softly, and my heart sinks.

Oh no.

It's my first time to hear Sylvain's laugh, my first time to see how it transforms his beautiful face, and I am mesmerized.

Pas bon. Not good.

The rest of breakfast is a blur. I think we must've talked of important things. I'm not quite sure. My world is still spinning off-tangent, the foundation of my existence shaken by the possibility that this early on...

No, no, no.

"Liana?"

His tone is sharp, his gaze narrowed, and my cheeks burn at having him catch me thinking of other things.

"What's wrong?"

I'm in love with you?

I love you?

I really honestly love you?

"Are you sure we're not related?" I blurt out instead.

His eyebrows shoot up. "Excuse me?"

"Your eyes, um, and mine."

My mother was right, is all I'm thinking now.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Don't you think they're too much...alike?"

Pride comes before a fall, and I'd rather stick with this ridiculous line of argument than tell him the truth.

"Ah."

His eyes start to glitter, and I'm not sure what to make of it—

"What if we are?"

—until he says that, and I have to remind myself that my husband is Monsieur Le Dernier, who is also notorious for playing with his prey before making them disappear.

And so I force myself to laugh. "Oh, please—"

"That's not the answer to my question."

"Because it's so silly—"

"Is it, *ma petite*? You know who I am. Do you really think incest is beyond me?"

"Stop it," I censure. "This isn't funny."

"Who says I'm joking?"

I think I'm going to be sick.

Sylvain leans back against his seat, and my stomach starts to churn.

"Liana?"

I slowly raise my eyes to his, and that's when I see the smirk curving over his lips.

Argh!

I fly toward him, the chair scraping across marble as I push away from the table. My fists connect with his chest, solid muscle beneath fine fabric, but Sylvain only laughs, the sound vibrating against my knuckles.

C'est agaçant! How annoying!

I want to hit him again, not hard enough to hurt (I am no idiot to truly attack a man like him), but just enough so he'll know I am absolutely vexed. My fingers curl into a fist, but—

"No more," Sylvain says.

One yank, and I tumble into his lap, my skirt tangling around my legs, my breasts pressed against the muscular wall of his chest. And just like that, my mood swings from a fire-breathing dragon to a breathless little hussy.

"Do you not think it's time?" my husband purrs.

I look at him warily even as the heat and hardness of him overwhelms my senses.
"Time for what?"

Sylvain covers my mouth in answer, and my toes curl hard. His lips are firm and warm, gentle and possessive, and I am utterly helpless against it.

Our first kiss as husband and wife, and it completely blows me away.

When Sylvain raises his head, there is so much to see in the dark blue depths of his eyes, a storm of emotions that I can't even begin to comprehend.

"I can never let you go now, tu comprends?"

I nod slowly, because I feel the same way, too.

For better or for worse.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

La mariée du monstre.

I am the monster's bride.

Chapter Seven

ANOTHER WAREHOUSE, really?

Sylvain was rather cryptic when he told me after breakfast that we had somewhere to go.

And now this.

I stare through the tinted windows of my husband's bulletproof limo as we pull up to a massive structure of corrugated metal and concrete. Seriously, what is it with mob bosses and warehouses? Is there some secret handbook that says all criminal activities must take place in such big ugly death traps?

The car rolls to a stop, tires crunching on gravel. My husband exits first, his movements fluid and controlled like always. He turns, extending his hand to help me out.

Surely this isn't a trick?

I reach for him, my fingers just grazing his—when he steps back suddenly, leaving me to stumble forward, barely catching myself before I fall flat on my face.

Knew it.

I straighten up, brushing invisible dust from my dress, dignity intact if slightly bruised. Behind me, I hear his security team coughing, but when I glance at them over my shoulder...

Huh.

I feel like we've suddenly played a game of Red Light, Green Light without meaning to, and I'm that awful robot in pigtails trying to blast any of Sylvain's bodyguards I catch laughing.

Oh, whatever.

Sylvain glances at me with a raised eyebrow when I catch up to him. "Everything alright?"

"Oui."

But my husband, though...

"Are you alright?" I ask uncertainly.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Because the shadows in his eyes aren't the usual ones. This isn't the predatory darkness I've grown accustomed to. This...is something else. Something strained and haunted. Something...tormented.

"Do you trust me, Liana?"

Oh no.

It's never good when Sylvain answers my question with another question. That's like Rule Number One in the "Your Husband Might Be Planning Something Terrible" handbook.

"Tell me what's happening. Why are we here? What is this—"

"Answer me." A quiet command, underscored by something I can't quite put my finger on. Urgency? Desperation? Both seem impossible for a man like him.

What are you not telling me, mon roi?

"Do you trust me?"

Agitation now colors Sylvain's voice, and underneath it, a pain that calls out to me.

Because I'm in love with him.

There's no hiding from this now.

Even though it doesn't make sense...

I love him, and so his pain is my pain, and that's why...

"I trust you with my life."

His jaw clenches as I say this, and I have an awful feeling that he wants to believe me...but doesn't.

"I hope you mean it."

Si seulement...

If only I could find the courage to give him the words.

Oh, if only I could.

We enter the warehouse, the massive door groaning on its tracks as Sylvain slides it open just enough for us to slip through.

It's completely dark save for the slice of sunlight coming from outside, and then that's gone, too, with the door automatically sliding shut behind us.

"Sylvain?"

I can't even see my hand in front of my face.

A second later, light flares into life, but what my husband holds in his hand is a lighter, not a cellphone.

Classic.

The small flame illuminates Sylvain's face from below, casting dramatic shadows that make him look like a man with the face of an angel...but the heart of a sinner.

"Something's wrong," he says tautly.

What does he mean—

No. No. No.

I smell it before I see it.

Page 28

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Gas hissing from somewhere in the darkness, its scent familiar because once upon a time, his men used the same thing on me, too.

This can't be. No. Not again.

Darkness rushes up to claim me, and the last thing I see is Sylvain trying to reach me in time.

But he's too, too late.

Chapter Eight

SYLVAIN CHECKED HIS watch as he leaned against the marble pillar, the cold stone seeping through his jacket while he waited for Liana to change into the dress he had provided. The courthouse was nearly empty at this hour: a few cleaning staff, the night guard dozing at his post, and Judge Grimault waiting nervously in his chambers.

A part of him was still questioning his sanity. Was this truly what he wanted? A hastily-arranged wedding ceremony, expedited by the use of favors and bribes, and an empty government building for a venue, with its hallways perfumed by stale coffee and floor polish.

But when he thought of the other alternative, which was to simply let her walk out of his life...

Non.

And so he decided to make a call. If this marriage was for better or worse, then so be it.

One. Two. Three...

It was on the fifth ring that his call finally connected.

"This had better be important." The voice that answered was low and cultured, but edged with something dangerous. The voice of a man who made a living from killing both kings and traitors.

"Dauphin. I need a favor."

A pause, calculated rather than surprised. Calixte Romano—known in darker circles as Dauphin Tueur, the Prince of Killers—wasn't a man who received unexpected calls at four in the morning.

"It's late notice, Sylvain." The words were neutral, but the subtle emphasis on his name was a reminder that Calixte knew exactly who he was dealing with.

"For which I apologize." Sylvain kept his voice even. "But I need you to come up with a series of tests."

There was a soft sound in the background, the soft click of keys as Calixte started working on his laptop. Typical. The Prince of Killers was not one to waste time, even in conversation.

"What's the objective?"

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"To determine my wife's loyalty. And if she's suitable...considering my line of work."

Another pause, longer this time. "One of Viktor Biancardi's secret half-sisters."

Sylvain wasn't surprised that Calixte knew of his blood debt to Biancardi. They had access to the same resources, and often crossed paths when working undercover, despite answering to different government authorities.

"Will that be a problem?" Even with his attention focused on their conversation, Sylvain noticed one of the janitors doing his best not to look his way, his mop passing over the same spot repeatedly. Sylvain made a mental note to have him checked. It was likely nothing, but one could never be too certain. It was why he had survived this long.

"Non, ce n'est pas le problème." There was a nuance in Calixte's voice that hadn't been there before. "Though marrying Biancardi's sister... an interesting choice."

"I don't need your approval, dauphin."

"You've never needed anyone's approval, Sylvain. That's what makes this call... intriguing."

Sylvain disliked the way Calixte's words were proving to be a puzzle to him. Marriage to Eden had clearly changed Calixte. The Prince of Killers had never been an open book, but now, he was just plain...unpredictable, dangerously so.

"Tell me," Calixte continued, the sound of a pen scratching against paper audible in

the background, "what sort of tests are you envisioning?"

"Something comprehensive. Loyalty, intelligence, resilience under pressure."

"And what happens if she fails?"

"She will remain in my possession." On this part at least, Sylvain had no doubts. He only had to imagine Liana leaving him or being taken away by someone else, and he was ready to burn the entire world just to have her back.

"As what?"

"None of your business."

Silence stretched between them. A silence filled with unspoken judgment that Sylvain had not expected to find discomfiting.

"Comprendo." A shift to Italian, Calixte's way of signaling a change in his approach. "I'll have something for you by morning. But Sylvain..."

Sylvain had a feeling he would not like his friend's next words.

"Are you sure this is about her, and not about Annie?"

And he was right.

"Can I count on you with those tests, dauphin?"

Another pause.

"It will be as you will," Calixte said finally. "And I hope, for both of your sakes, it

will work the way you expect."

THE DEVIL HAD COME to torture him, and Sylvain was in agony, his mind replaying his phone call with the Prince of Killers even as he saw his wife start to sway in slow motion.

The gas filled Sylvain's lungs as he lunged toward Liana, but her body had already started to crumple. His movements felt sluggish, as if he were swimming through tar, each step requiring more effort than the last.

Something was wrong.

This was not supposed to happen.

His heart seized as he watched her fall, her dark hair fanning out around her like a halo of night. The look in her eyes as consciousness slipped away, confusion, shock, fear. But also...trust.

She trusted him.

Even when he didn't deserve it.

Page 30

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Je suis désolé. I'm sorry.

His vision began to dim at the edges, the persistent hiss of gas barely audible over the pounding of blood in his ears.

Three more steps. Just three more, and he could reach her.

But his legs were no longer his to command, his knee folding...before hitting the concrete with bruising force.

No, no, no.

Through the haze, Sylvain saw a figure emerge from the shadows.

Giancarlo Marchetti.

The Prince of Thieves. And the prince among thieves. A man whom people from both sides of the law respected. And under normal circumstances, Sylvain would not have thought it bad to see him.

But not now.

Not when Marchetti had once been Viktor Biancardi's best friend...until Liana's half-brother tried to murder him.

This...this was not right.

Had Calixte betrayed him? Or had Marchetti betrayed Calixte? Could Marchetti have intercepted either or both of them without him and the Prince of Killers knowing? It was unlikely...but possible. The Marchettis were not only New England's most powerful famiglia. They had connections built on decades of blood sacrifices. Connections that no amount of money could buy or betray.

Sylvain fought off unconsciousness as Marchetti knelt gracefully beside his wife's unconscious form. The man was dressed like he had simply stepped out of a ball to take care of business, his perfectly tailored suit without a crease, and the faint gleam of silver at his temples lending him a distinguished air.

One hand brushed Liana's hair from her face with impersonal care, but it still triggered something primal and violent in Sylvain's chest.

No. No. NO.

The Marchettis were supposed to be honorable, not vengeful. They had even supposedly sworn off violence, having found redemption in God. Truthfully, Sylvain had no bloody idea what that meant. And he had never cared to find out.

Until now.

Until he realized...it was possible that he had misjudged the Marchettis, the way he had misjudged the girl he once loved, an entire lifetime ago.

Sylvain tried to speak, to demand, to threaten. But his tongue felt like lead in his mouth, and he could not remember feeling this terrified, this impotent, as he watched the other man lift Liana in his arms as if she weighed nothing.

Ma faute. Mea culpa. All of this...my fault.

Marchetti started to walk away, and the pain that tore through his chest had nothing to do with the gas burning down his lungs and destroying his consciousness.

I'm sorry, Liana. I'm so bloody sorry.

Marchetti suddenly turned to face him, his gaze meeting Sylvain's across the warehouse floor. There was no cruelty there, no triumph. Only a quiet, professional assessment. The look of a man completing a task with the utmost efficiency—exactly the way Sylvain himself would have looked, once upon a time.

Chapter Nine

ANOTHER WAREHOUSE, really?

It's my first thought when the disorientation passes, even though my head still throbs with the remnants of whatever gas they used.

I really need to have a word with these mob bosses soon. It's time they be made aware that warehouses are the definition of passé.

But for now...

Comment s'échapper? How to escape?

The air in this place feels different. Heavier. And more humid. Also, the walls are of weathered brick, with stone faces peering down at me from every corner, wings arched up as if prepared to swoop down and claw me into death at a moment's notice.

Gargouilles. Gargoyles.

How strange and unexpected. But something about it also nags at me, and something I may have to figure out. Later. Until then...

I sit up slowly, checking myself mentally for injuries. Does anything feel broken? No. Do I hurt anywhere? No. It's good enough for me, and the fact that I'm still wearing the same clothes? I'll take it as proof that no one's raped me.

For now, I'll consider myself as...safe.

But...Sylvain?

His name alone triggers an avalanche of memories, and my heart starts hurting more than my head. I remember him lunging toward me, desperation etched on his handsome face. And now...he's gone not here.

Where are you, monsieur?

I take a deep breath.

Focus, Li.

My mind resets, shifting to escape and survival mode, and I start scanning for exits.

First: a metal door without handles. Yeah, good luck with that. Only King Kong could go through it.

Second: windows, two sets, but completely out of reach...unless I'm Supergirl, in which case I can just punch out an exit all on my own. But since I'm neither Kong nor Supergirl...

Ventilation shaft? Too small.

Security cameras? At least none that I can see.

The entire room is Spartan in its simplicity, and the only thing of interest?

A desk.

I check for trip wires and pressure plates. None.

I pull the drawer open...and it's the mistake that's been waiting to happen from the start.

Click.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

A digital counter flickers to life on the wall opposite the desk.

10:00. 09:59. 09:58.

I guess that means I have less than ten minutes to save my butt.

C'est la vie.

Inside the drawer is a blank notepad, a pen, and—surprise, surprise—another letter. Whoever's behind our abduction, it seems they've attended the same school as my husband. Who knows? Maybe it's the same one Gru attended?

The first thing I pull out from the envelope is a typewritten message, requesting for a sketch of a vicinity map and layout of my husband's residence. The threat is implied. Don't draw, don't live.

It also has a postscript, of all things.

In case you feel indebted to Monsieur Le Dernier because of your marriage, we have included additional materials for your consideration.

How...business-like. It's almost like I'm being headhunted from one murderous gang to another.

I give the envelope a little shake, and everything else falls to the desk.

The first photo is black-and-white. Grainy. Obviously taken from a distance, and by

someone who could not afford to be seen by its subjects: a much younger Sylvain (maybe in his twenties?), seated on a window-side table, and opposite him is another man I've never seen. And yet...

Why is my heart aching all of a sudden?

I turn the photo over. Biancardi. The name means nothing to me. So why does it feel like it means everything?

The second item is a document I recognize without trouble. My founding certificate from the orphanage where Maman adopted me. I myself have a copy of it. But this one is different. This is the original copy, with a certified footnote that only contains one name. Biancardi.

And it all makes sense, pieces falling in place, when I reach for the last item with shaking fingers. A DNA analysis report, comparing two subjects.

Viktor Biancardi.

And me.

99.8% probability of half-sibling relationship through paternal line.

My gaze drifts back to the counter.

8:32 remaining.

Je vois clair dans ton jeu, Monsieur le Kidnappeur. I can see right through you, Mr. Kidnapper.

They want me to think that the marriage I treasure...is nothing but a transaction

between Sylvain and my alleged half-brother. They want me to question every second I've spent in my husband's arms. They want me...to betray him.

7:15remaining.

The temperature has begun to rise noticeably.

It would be...reasonable to think that the one behind all of this has something against my husband.Oui?

Or could this be something that had to do with Viktor Biancardi, and they are using me against him?

5:48remaining.

The heat intensifies. Sweat beads on my forehead, trickles between my shoulder blades.

4:23 remaining.

How can they even think there's a choice here? Did they really think I lived this longsansprinciples? Did they really think I would trust a stranger...over the imperfect man I am in love with?

Page 33

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

C'est la vie.

I uncap the pen and begin writing.

Merci, mais non merci.

The room has become a furnace by the time I put my pen down. My vision blurs, salty drops of sweat making my eyes start to sting. My skin feels sticky, like it's about to melt any second. I'm this close to tearing my dress off.

But since I don't want to die naked...

3:09remaining.

A possibility taunts my thoughts. Something that's always lurked at the back of my mind, but one so fearful that I never had the courage to let it come into being...until now.

1:02remaining.

What if it's true? What if I mean nothing at all to Sylvain, and my death actually frees him from whatever transaction, whatever promise he has made to Viktor Biancardi? What if all of this sacrifice is for nothing?

0:45remaining.

Peu importe. Doesn't matter.

Sylvain once said he wanted a woman of strength and courage.

And so that's what he's going to get, even if it kills me.

Chapter Ten

CONSCIOUSNESS RETURNED in fragmented pieces. The cold hard floor beneath his back. The taste of ash in his mouth. And the tightness around his wrists, rope biting into his skin, and slowly cutting off circulation.

Cold floor beneath his back. The taste of ash in his mouth. Rope cutting into his wrists.

Sylvain kept his breathing steady, his eyes closed as he assessed his situation. The air smelled of pine and damp earth. Silence...except for wood crackling in a fireplace nearby.

He risked opening his eyes a fraction. A log cabin, rustic but well-maintained, and through the window, a glimpse of dense forest...and stone gargoyles.

Marchettis.

Page 34

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Where the gargoyles were, New England's most powerful family followed, and so that meant...

Boston.

It was the Marchettis' stronghold, which was also an eight-hour flight from Paris. A lot could happen in eight hours. Not just to him. But...

Focus, Sauvage.

The sooner he was out of here, the sooner he would get to...her.

Une chose à la fois. One thing at a time.

A quick assessment of his bonds revealed amateur work, and he was able to free himself in moments. He got to his feet, intending to search for weapons—

NO.

The sound of explosion, ripping through the quiet forest, followed by birds screeching in panicked flight.

Liana.

He ran. Faster than his body would be able to sustain. Pushing his lungs beyond its capacity. All he could think about was her.

No, no, no.

The warehouse, or what remained of it, appeared through the trees. Half the structure had collapsed, the other half still submerged in infernal heat. And on the ground, shattered pieces of what were once stone gargoyles, fire turning their marred features into twisted smiles of agony.

"Liana!"

Heat singed his skin as he searched through the wreckage. But he felt nothing. Didn't care about anything except her.

S'il te plaît, mon Dieu.

He could not remember praying like this, not even that day he himself had been captured. But right now, he was willing to do anything. Everything. Even if it meant trusting what could not be seen—

S'il te plaît...

And that was when he heard it. A soft coughing sound from beneath a partially collapsed desk, and Sylvain worked like a madman, splinters piercing his flesh as he charged through flame-licked debris that took him closer and closer to Hell.

Not today, Satan.

Because he had finally found her, curled up and covered in dust and soot.

But alive.

Her eyes fluttered open as he crashed on his knees in relief.

"S-Sylvain?"

"Oui." His voice was hoarse, his hands shaking as he cupped her face. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, and he gathered her in his arms, cradling her against his chest.

"I thought I'd die."

"I won't let you."

A shaken laugh, but even with her still pale and shaking, her dazed blue eyes revealed the truth.

What he said, she believed, and in that moment, he also saw the truth in his own heart.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

Je l'aime. I love her.

It no longer mattered whether she would prove loyal or not. Suitable or unsuitable.

He loved her. Unconditionally. And he always would.

BY THE TIME SHE REGAINED consciousness, they were in a cave, and he had a fire burning.

"S-Sylvain..."

He watched her slowly sit up. He had already checked her for injuries, had only found small cuts and grazes. Bruises that would later darken into being. Nothing serious, and that was good...since what he was about to tell her would cause her a different kind of pain.

"I'm sorry, Liana." It took everything in him to keep his distance. "All of this is my fault."

"I don't understand."

"Today was supposed to be a test."

"For what?"

"For you."

"I see."

His chest tightened. Because her eyes showed that she wasn't lying. She did see the truth, and that was how he was unable to trust her without proof.

"Everything that happened, however..." Sylvain forced himself to continue because she deserved no less. "The person I asked to conduct the tests was a friend of mine. But someone else interfered."

"Your enemy?"

"Non."

"Then...my brother's."

Sylvain froze. She knew about Biancardi?

A smile wobbled to his wife's lips. "The tests you mentioned..." Her voice was steady, but he could hear the effort it took. "They gave me one, too. Asked me to draw a map and sketch the layout of your place. Or they'd kill me."

The devil was up to its old tricks again, Sylvain found himself thinking.

But this time, he would not let it win.

"It doesn't matter—"

"I think it does."

"Pourquoi?" Why?

"Because they gave me an incentive to betray you."

Ah.

"That's how you found out about your brother."

"Oui."

His mind played back her words.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

They...asked me...or they'd kill me.

And since only an idiot would think that the explosion was designed to save his wife's life—

"Pourquoi?" Why?

He hated how he ended up repeating himself, but shock had him incapable of saying anything more complex.

Why did she not betray him...like Annie had?

"Do you...do you really not know?" His wife...was actually teasing him even as she started to cry. "Or a-are you just playing dumb?"

How could this be true?

"You s-said you wanted a woman who was strong and courageous."

Mon Dieu, non.

"And t-that's why—"

Sylvain could no longer control himself, and a sob escaped her lips as he closed the distance between them, Sylvain falling on his back as he pulled his wife into his arms.

"I—"

He pulled her head down, his mouth cutting her off with a hard kiss. And when he released her, he made sure not to let her say the words—

"I love you, Liana."

Because he wanted to be the first one to say them.

Her eyes teared.

"Sylvain."

It was just his name she uttered.

But ah, the way she said it.

Sylvain heard a thousand promises embedded in his name, and something inside him broke and healed simultaneously...even as his fingers gripped her hair, and his body throbbed with a savage need to possess the most precious thing this world could ever offer him.

"Je t'aime."

He needed to say the words one more time before taking her mouth in another kiss, this one deeper and hungrier, and one that had her whimpering even as she kissed him back and pressed her body more closely to his.

His hands roamed her body even though he knew it was sheer insanity to touch her with both their lives on the line.

"Sylvain."

His name, this time, was a breathy little gasp, both a plea to stop and not stop as he found the heat between her legs.

"S-Sylvain..."

She started rubbing herself against him, and just as he felt himself swell beneath his pants—

They heard someone curse from a distance, the sound yanking both of them back to reality, their passion cooling in an instant—

À quoi je pensais? What was I thinking?

"You make me act like a boy," Sylvain whispered into her ear, and her body rocked against his in silent, shaken laughter.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

He allowed another moment to pass, just one more moment to savor the feeling of having his wife safe in his arms—and then they moved.

He didn't even have to tell her what to do. It was as if they had always been designed to work in tandem, with his wife knowing instinctively when to help...or when to step back and get out of his way.

They retreated deeper into the cave, away from the entrance and the voices. The passage narrowed, then widened again, revealing what he'd suspected—this was no natural formation. The smooth walls, the even floor...all carved by human hands, and eventually, they found a light at the end of the tunnel, figuratively speaking.

Liana had already pulled a pin out and made short work of the lock. In moments, the metal door swung open, and she stepped back, letting him inspect the bunker for traps.

He nodded. Clear.

They moved from room to room, finding supplies that had been untouched for decades, but still usable. Only one other area in the bunker was inaccessible, its lock more complex than anything he had ever seen.

Something about it made his gut twist, but when his wife asked if he wanted her to open it...

"Only if you want to."

He could not find it in himself to stop her from doing so. It was as if a part of him somehow knew this was meant to happen. That the monsters inside of him had to be exposed, one by one—

'Gotcha,' Sylvain heard his wife whisper as the lock gave way under her skilled fingers.

—if he wanted to deserve a girl like her.

He watched her take a step forward and her face lose color.

And when she turned to him, her eyes once again haunted...

Sylvain's heart was already pounding as he stepped past her.

S'il te plaît, mon Dieu.

And then he saw what she saw.

A wall of photographs. Women's faces staring back at them. Dozens of them. All different ages, backgrounds, circumstances.

All the women he had been with throughout the years.

Chapter Eleven

Page 38

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

I'M NOT SURE HOW MUCH time has passed by the time I'm able to speak...and I'm no longer tempted to throw up every few seconds.

"W-Who are they?"

"People I swore to protect." Sylvain's voice is grim. There isn't a trace of guilt or shame. But should that be reason enough to trust him?

I glance back at the wall. Every face, a story of tragedy and suffering. But even so. I can't stop thinking about it.

Did he marry me...because I looked like one of them?

A girl...who simply needed saving.

"Did you marry all of them, too?"

It's only when Sylvain's gaze snaps at my direction in sharp incredulity that I even realize what I'm asking.

"D-Did you have sex—"

"Non!" His voice is low. Pained. For me. And yet somehow, that only makes me feel unable to breathe. I never knew it was possible to hurt like this. "It is not like that!"

The sight of him is suddenly unbearable. But the moment I turn away, he's already next to me, spinning me right back, and I...

Islaphim.

Hard enough to make his lip bleed.

But my husband doesn't even flinch.

"I want to say I'm sorry," I whisper, "but I'm not."

Because all I can think about now...are the clothes I've been wearing. Clothes that I thought he bought for me. But now I know...

When I see his face whiten, I know it's because I've started to cry.

But it's still not enough to stop my heart from cracking.

"Pardonne-moi, je t'en supplie..." Forgive me, I beg you.

I can see that he means every word. That he's hurting for me more and more.

"I am the one at fault. There are things I wish I would have done differently, but..." Sylvain swallows hard. "I cannot change the past. I can only beg for your forgiveness. And ask that you believe me when I say...you are different." His tone becomes fierce and urgent. "I never touched any of them. Never even thought of it."

It's as if he doesn't care about anything except convincing me of the truth.

"You are the only one I wanted. The only one I loved."

He's saying all the right things, but it's just not enough, and my tears simply won't stop falling.

"I want to believe you," I choke out, "but you've just lied to me so many times."

Because Sylvain...

He lied to me about Viktor. Lied to me about these tests. Lied to me about all of these women. Is there even anything about him—about us—that was ever true?

"Liana—"

He reaches for me, I instinctively rear back, and pain flashes over his features.

"I'm s-sorry." I don't want to hurt him, I truly don't.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

But if he touches me, I also know I'll break.

For good.

"Will you listen to me?"

All I can do is cry harder as I shake my head.

How...how can he not see what this means?

How can he not realize...that a part of me could never understand why he chose me?

How...how does he not know that him pitying me...makes more sense than the idea of Monsieur Le Dernier falling in love with a silly little pickpocket like me?

"Listen to me, please."

Why can't he just stop and let me go?

"These women...are why I wanted, needed you to be strong and brave."

"Please stop," I sob out.

"Their secrets will be your secrets, too."

"S-Stop, please—"

"Because if you stay with me, they'll also be yours to protect—"

"I said, stop!"

And yet...it's as if Sylvain doesn't hear me at all.

"I didn't know it then, but I know it now. I don't need any tests to know that you're the one I've been waiting for—"

"Stop, just stop!"

Why does he keep giving me hope when we both know I'm not the girl for him?

"I don't want this anymore," I cry out. "So just stop!"

But when I try leaving one more time—

"I can't."

It's no use. He has me pinned against the wall in no time, and I'm trapped.

"Let me go," I beg him.

"Never."

His handsome face is hard as steel, his dark blue eyes nearly feral.

"Can't you see it won't work?"

"Can't you see that means nothing to me?" he growls back. "The one thing I never lied about was who I was." Violence underscores his tone, and all I can see in his

eyes is someone who's willing to tear kingdoms apart if that's what it will take to chain me by his side.

"You knew what I was when you married me."

I start pounding his chest, try shoving him away and kicking him, but nothing works.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"Do you really think a monster like me would ever let you go?"

Chapter Twelve

EVERYTHING BECAME CLEAR to Sylvain the moment his wife said she no longer wanted him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

There would come a point in time when it was no longer enough to bare one's soul.

"Let me go!"

And more drastic action was needed—

"Put me down!"

—even if it meant tossing his wife over his shoulder as he carried her out of the room.

Sylvain's photographic memory had him wasting little time. In moments, he was exactly where he needed to be.

His wife cried out in shock as he tossed her unceremoniously on the bed. But even though she was remarkably quick in recovering and once again attempting to escape—

"Not so fast, *ma petite*."

Sylvain had her trapped under his big body in the next second, the military-grade blanket whipped over them for privacy. Since he had no time to search for surveillance cameras, this would have to do in ensuring that nobody saw what was designed for his eyes alone.

Liana was now staring up at him in shock, her dazed blue eyes telling him that she had finally figured out what he had in mind.

"You can't possibly be serious," she whispered.

A humorless smile twisted over his lips. "Then you clearly don't know me well enough."

"But this is in—"

"Enough." He was done talking. Done negotiating. It was time to claim what was his, and make her understand that he was hers, had always been hers, and would always be hers.

"Sylvain—"

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

The rest of her words disappeared into the ruthless possession of his kiss, and this time he gave her no chance to think. His tongue thrust inside of her mouth, demanding her submission. He was relentless and methodical. It was stroke after stroke after stroke until his wife finally sobbed in surrender, and she began kissing him back as her arms wrapped around his neck.

Enfin.

His hands found the hem of her dress, and it was easy to push the bloody thing up and get it out of the way with Liana shakily raising her hips in assistance. They were both naked in moments, her breasts heaving, his length throbbing violently, and when their eyes met under the blanket, Sylvain nearly groaned at the way she was biting her lip.

His wife gasped as he bent his head to capture one rosy tip between his lips, her body arching against his as he began to suck. Tremors shook her delicate frame as his mouth traveled lower and lower and lower...until he was at eye level with the most intimate part of her.

"Don't stare," his wife begged.

But of course he paid no heed to this.

Silly girl.

Had she forgotten that every inch of her was his?

Her dewy flesh beckoned, and he was unable to resist. His Liana moaned as he parted

her thighs, and then she was arching once more at the first flick of his tongue. And when his tongue pushed past her creamy folds, the way she sobbed his name out sent blood rushing straight to his groin.

It was time.

Sylvain's muscles tensed as he moved back up, and he heard her breath hitch as he positioned himself between her legs.

"This will hurt," he warned, voice strained with the effort of holding back. "But only for a moment."

"I'm not afraid."

Foolish little one.

"You should be."

Had she forgotten how he had seen the truth in her eyes?

Sylvain slid into her slowly and steadily, his muscles straining at the effort it took to control the beast that wanted to break free inside him.

Deeper and deeper he went into her...

Until he heard his wife cry out when his massive throbbing length finally broke past the barrier of her innocence.

"S-Sylvain."

She was his, finally.

And now, it was time for the monster in him to break free.

Her eyes flew wide as he started to move without warning.

His every thrust faster, harder, and deeper than the one before.

"P-Please..."

Her nails were scraping his back and into his muscles, her breasts jiggling against his chest, her hips rising clumsily to meet every plunge of his body.

"Sylvain, I..."

He reached between them, knowing what she was begging for without words, and as soon as he found that tiny sensitive spot—

"Let go, ma petite," he rasped out.

She shattered around him with a cry, and as soon as her inner muscles tightened around his, his own fingers dug into the soft curve of her bottom as he started pounding into her, wanting to give her everything...

Everything.

The strength of his own release was powerful enough to have him gritting his teeth, the pleasure so consuming that for one moment, the whole world ceased to exist for him, and all he knew was her.

My Liana.

Time slipped away in the aftermath, and he waited until her breathing gradually eased, and her eyes slowly drifted open...before cutting his heart out one last time.

"Her name...was Annie."

Chapter Thirteen

"WE MET AT A DIPLOMATICfunction."

Sylvain's fingers trace idle patterns on my bare shoulder as he speaks. I don't think he even notices what he's doing, but even this simple touch speaks of his possessiveness, and for better or for worse, this comforts me.

"She was kind. And innocent." Sylvain's voice is clinical and detached, as if he's reading a file rather than recounting his own heartbreak. "I was assigned to protect a visiting minister. She was the daughter of a French attaché."

Jealousy eats at me, and I don't think this will ever change. Maybe, there's a monster inside of me, too.

"I was...too young to know better. But also too old...to simply believe someone as sheltered as her, when she told me I could trust her."

His words make my heart ache. Because I already know what's about to come.

"Three men took her on her way home from university."

The only question is how an innocent girl like Annie was forced to betray the man she loves.

"They sent me a video." His voice doesn't change. But I feel his pain all the same. "She told them everything within the first hour. My safe houses. My contacts. The security protocols for the minister. Everything I had ever shared with her."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"They came for me that night. I was—" He pauses, and for the first time, I hear a crack in his composure. "I was not prepared for the level of their... enthusiasm."

While I...I don't think I'll ever be prepared to hear any story of someone hurting my husband.

He describes his capture and torture with the same clinical detachment he might use to describe the weather. Seventeen hours of being beaten and broken, of knowing that all of it is happening...because you've been betrayed by the girl you love.

Page 43

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

"It was completely by chance that I managed to free myself..."

Was it, really?

Because the more I think about it, the more I'm unable to stop thinking that it can't be.

For him to survive such odds, and the two of us to end up here...

This isn't chance.

But God.

The realization hits me with such force that tears spring to my eyes, and I suddenly remember the night Maman was first admitted to the hospital.

It was the last night I allowed myself to speak to God, and I remember kneeling beside her bed while she slept, feeling like I was about to explode from all the anger and bitterness boiling inside of me.

Why do bad things keep happening to us?

Why can't You punish those who deserve to be punished?

Do You really care about us? Do You even have a plan for us?

I had walked away from that hospital room convinced of God's indifference. And in that belief, I'd made choices.

Stealing. Lying. Everything I could think of to survive...and hurt God at the same time.

Because I thought...He had abandoned me.

And that everything about Him was a lie.

And that He never really cared about ordinary people like me.

I'm sorry, God.

But He does.

I know that now.

He had a plan all along. Always had. But I couldn't get past my fear and pain to see this.

And Sylvain...

My husband stiffens beneath me, finally noticing my tears. "What's wrong, Liana?"

I wish I could speak, but I'm crying too hard.

Thank You, God.

Because I see it all now. How all these years, I've been lashing out in my pain and self-pity. Stealing and conning people. Daring God to strike me down without the words. And yet...

Not once did He give up on me. He still made things work together for good. He still

made use of my mistakes, reshaping my path until it led me to the man God's chosen to be my husband.

Sylvain.

"Talk to me, Liana." My husband sits up, pulling me with him. "What's wrong?"

I want to tell him how everything's right, but I'm just so overwhelmed that all I can do is cup my beloved's face and say...

"Love me."

Page 44

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

His eyes widen.

"Please."

"Are you alright?"

I can only laugh at how seriously he asks this.

Oh, if only he knew!

Knowing that God chose him for me, and me for him...

It's liberating, and I'm feeling so, so fearless and dizzy with joy all at once that I just have to...

Sylvain jerks in surprise when I suddenly straddle him. "What do you think—"

"I love you," I declare, "and I really want you inside of me."

But my husband wouldn't have it, his hands gripping my hips to keep me from lowering myself on him.

"I love you, too—"

Is it just me...

"But now is not—"

...or does the room seems to have started shaking?

Sylvain stops speaking, and when we look into each other's eyes—

Oh no.

We spring into action at the same time while the room continues to shudder as if hit by seizures, Sylvain tossing me his shirt while he grabs his pants from the bottom of the bed.

I'm ready to make a run for it as soon as we emerge from the blanket, but I've only managed to jump off the bed when Sylvain suddenly grabs my wrist, asking, "Do you trust me?"

Seriously?

When an earthquake, a bomb, or God knows what is about to kill us—

He really has to ask thatnow?

Chapter Fourteen

THE MOMENT THE ROOM started to shake, and Sylvain realized that his wife was once again in danger—

Think, Sauvage!

All of the inconsistencies he had noticed started flooding his mind.

For one thing, the Marchetti he knew...

If that man had wanted either of them dead, it would have already happened.

And the decisions Sylvain had made since finding himself tied up? He had always been a man of logic, and he didn't think even true love could change this. So why had he chosen to claim his wife's innocence while they still weren't out of the woods, both figuratively and literally? It was as if he had lost his mind...or someone had caused to lose it.

Either way...

There has to be something he's missing...

It took every ounce of his self-control to fight against the urge to grab his wife's hand and look for the nearest escape. Even when the world seemed seconds away from splintering apart, Sylvain had a feeling that whatever it was he was looking for...

It was right under his nose...

Something that was obvious but not quite so.

Something that was always there like...

Gargoyles.

Things started clicking into place the moment Sylvain saw the gargoyle-shaped wall clock. The mythical creature, the Marchettis were known to be inordinately fond of. But one thing the Marchettis would never be accused of? A lack of taste, which was the only thing that could account for the garish eyesore currently hanging on the wall.

Sylvain caught his wife's wrist just in time to keep her from dashing off.

"Do you trust me?"

The way she was staring at him...it almost made Sylvain smile.

Almost.

But first—

"I really need you to trust me,ma petite."

Liana was now looking at him like he had lost his mind."Are you for—"

Sylvain hauled her close, and her words ended in a gasp.

"Yes or no, Liana. Do you trust me or not?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, yes—"

Sylvain didn't wait for her to finish speaking, already reaching out to rip the gargoyle clock off the wall—

There you are.

He switched it off...and darkness swallowed everything up.

Chapter Fifteen

"RÉVEILLE-TOI, MA PETITE." Wake up, little one.

The voice is soft and familiar, its sound gently luring me into consciousness. But it still takes a while before I can manage to open my eyes. And a few more moments before my vision clears, and I see my husband's handsome face staring down at me.

"Ma petite?"

His face is so...clean. No dirt, no cuts or bruises. Nothing that would indicate how we've been abducted, drugged, and chased until we end up...here.

And that's when I realize I have no idea where we are.

"W-Where are we?" I'm lying on a medical bed, and there are all sorts of tubes connecting me to machines that beep and hum in a steady rhythm. This has to be some sort of medical facility. Right? This means we're saved. Right?

When I start to sit up, my husband is swift to assist me.

"Slowly..."

I look at him searchingly. "You still haven't answered my question."

"Because I thought you'd have more fun figuring it out yourself."

"Figure what?"

"Think about it," Sylvain says softly.

My head starts to hurt as I retrace our steps through my memories. Before waking up here, I remembered the darkness swallowing our world whole, seemingly triggered by my husband grabbing that gargoyle-shaped clock...

"You switched it off," I whisper.

"I did."

His gaze bores through me as he says this. It's as if he's willing me to keep pushing the limits of my thoughts, my imagination. It's as if...as if...

My eyes widen.

Surely...it can't be?

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

But when I look at Sylvain, and my husband nods as if he's read my mind.

C'est impossible.

How can all of it not be real?

And I only realize I've blurted the words out when my husband holds up a small USB drive between his fingers.

"AI ran the whole thing," Sylvain murmurs. "And so everything that happened between us...stays between us."

"But your friend..."

A faint grimace crosses my husband's features. "Calixte says I should've figured it out from the start. That I should've known better than to think he'd be inclined to spend millions of dollars just to knock some sense into my head...and make me realize I'm in love with you."

I can only smile. Whoever Calixte is, I think he and I are going to get along great. But then I remember someone else who's involved—or I thought was involved—and my smile fades. "Sylvain? What about—"

"Giancarlo Marchetti?"

I nod.

"He's not our enemy. He never was. And he authorized Calixte to use his image for the test."

"And my...brother?"

My husband's jaw clenches, and I just...know.

"He's gone," I whisper. "Isn't he?"

"Je suis désolé, Liana."

My heart aches at his confirmation. Even though I know next to nothing about Viktor Biancardi...he's still my brother. And I wish I could've met him, even just once.

"I'm sorry I never got to tell you about him," Sylvain says tautly. "I promised him years ago that I'd take care of you. But I chose to stay away. I didn't think—"

I throw my arms around him, and my husband stops speaking.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I whisper. "You came at exactly the right time." And someday soon, I pray I'll be able to tell Sylvain why that is.

But for now?

"I've just realized something," I say in a small voice.

Sylvain stiffens. "What is it?"

I inch up, my lips brushing his ear, and just as my husband jerks at the contact, I tell him one of the best things of all about this.

"I'm still a virgin, monsieur."

Epilogue

BEING THE QUEEN OF the catacombs is a harder role than I ever imagined.

The underground palace pulses around me, bodies swaying to music that vibrates through limestone walls. From my perch on the mezzanine (the same spot where Sylvain fell in love at first sight, fyi, even if the silly man continues to deny this), I survey the kingdom I never wanted but have somehow come to love.

My husband sits beside me, one hand resting possessively on my thigh while he discusses something with Noel. And since all they talk about these days are boring stuff like numbers and more numbers, I simply tune them out and focus on what's happening below.

Ooh, target spotted!

I know that man. Or rather, I know what he's managed to get away with, and how many people he's hurt because of it. That watch on his wrist would be so, so easy to—

Sylvain squeezes my thigh, and when I look up, and my husband arches a brow?

Oops.

I blink at him in sham innocence. "Oui, monsieur?"

But sadly, he's not fooled at all. "Behave, ma petite."

I sigh. Busted again. I really was an idiot to think being a queen would be a lot more fun than being Paris's most successful pickpocket.

The night winds down as the club empties, and we make our way to the waiting limo. The streets of Paris glitter in the midnight hour, and I let my head rest against Sylvain's shoulder as we drive toward the marina where his sailboat is docked.

My phone chirps with a message, and I smile when I see who it's from.

My Dearest Frenemy,

Bonjour! How fares Paris's most cowardly little pickpocket? You had every opportunity to steal that man's watch at the embassy dinner! Shame on you.

All the best,

Sarica

P.S. Say hello to your Maman for me. I still can't believe a lovely woman like her has a daughter like you.

Sylvain shakes his head when he reads this. "It is clear to everyone that both of you like each other."

I let out an offended gasp. "That's such a horrible thing to say." Can't he see how hard Sarica and I are working at being catty? Our plan is doomed to fail if we don't get this right, and I'm still shaking my head at his words even as I type my reply.

Hello to Boston's Pink-Haired Curse!

That man you're talking about is the leader of STRAKH. Only an idiot would steal

from him. Which you obviously are.

Sincerely,

Liana

P.S. I still have a hard time believing Giancarlo Marchetti married someone like you.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

I've just hit Send when my phone rings, and Erin's name flashes on the screen.

"Bianca is having nightmares again," she says without preamble. "Sophie thought you might want to know."

My heart squeezes. Our current houseguest is an eighteen-year-old girl recovering from witnessing her father being gunned down in front of her. Just a year younger than I am in age, but we're a thousand light years apart when it comes to what we've seen and know about the brokenness of our world.

"I'll call her tonight," I decide.

"Compris, madame."

Sylvain takes my hand after the call, and my heart flutters at what I see in his eyes.

"Thank you," he says simply.

"Thankyou." And I mean it, too. I would never have known this was what I was meant to do if not for him.

The limo pulls up to the marina, where Sylvain's sleek sailboat awaits. We board quickly, and my heart lightens up as the scent of saltwater envelops me. This may be wishful thinking, but I just feel in my heart that our first trip to St. Marianne is going to change all of our lives.

About an hour passes before we glide to a stop at the island's private dock, the

engines falling silent as Sylvain secures the final rope and moves to stand beside me.

I look up at him with a smile. "We're here."

"Indeed."

"Aren't you excited to meet your cousin?"

"As excited as someone like me can be." The wind ruffles my husband's dark hair as he speaks. "I'm still not used to thinking I have...family."

"He's had a hard life like you."

"I know. It's what makes me trust him." Sylvain turns to me, his finger tracing my cheek. "And speaking of trust..."

Uh oh.

"What is this I hear from Calixte?"

The Prince of Killers has a big mouth.

"Is it true that you and Sarica have this plan to take down—"

I'm already moving, pretending his words are lost to the wind as I leap from the boat, my feet hitting the wooden dock with a satisfying thud. Spray from the sea sparkles in the air as I spin around, offering my most innocent smile.

"May I help you, sir?" I extend my hand with exaggerated formality, bowing slightly like a servant from another century.

Sylvain regards me with a raised eyebrow. "Is this your way of calling a truce?"

"Absolutely."

He reaches for my hand, the corners of his mouth curving upward—

I spin away, my laughter ringing across the water—followed by a magnificent splash.

(Heh.)

That should teach him.

Tit for tat, Monsieur le Dernier.

Source Creation Date: May 22, 2025, 8:32 am

SYLVAIN BROKE THE SURFACE of the water with a growl, decades of training kicking in as he hauled himself onto the dock in one fluid motion. Water cascaded from his expensive clothes, but his eyes—those dangerous blue eyes—never left her.

His darling little thief, with her fearless reprisal.

She had grown bolder with him, this wife of his.

But boldness had consequences.

Liana was already running toward the stone path leading to the mansion, her laughter carried on the Mediterranean breeze.

Peu importe. Didn't matter.

He pursued her with predatory grace, his pace unhurried, his every move deliberate. It was easy to calculate her trajectory as his wife darted between palm trees, and...there.

She could only gasp his name out as he caught her from behind, and she half-choked, half-sputtered when he tossed her over his shoulder...just like old times.

"Sylvain!"

He turned back to the dock, and his wife shivered, but this, he knew, had nothing to do with how his wet clothes were plastered against her skin.

This was his wife, after all, and he knew her, inside out.

"Please put me down."

Her voice shook with a mixture of fear and desire, the two things always existing together in the way she loved him. There was a part of Liana that would always fear him, and it was that part of her which was also why her body always responded eagerly and helplessly to his every command.

It was how they both wanted it. How they both needed it.

"Um, Syl—"

Sylvain slapped her bottom, the crack of his palm against her flesh echoing between the sea and sky.

"People are sta—"

Another slap, harder this time.

Let La Bête Sauvage wait.

His cousin would understand, having tamed his own temptuous beauty.

"B-But what about the party—"

"We are not French for nothing," Sylvain drawled. "We are expected to be late."

"But I'm actually half—"

SLAP.

Her body trembled against his shoulder, the heat building between them, the promise of what was to come.

"Be a good girl,ma petite," he murmured, lowering her onto the cabin bed, his wet clothes leaving dark patches on the sheets. "And accept your punishment gladly."

The End