

SMILODON PRIDE

~ BOOK ONE ~

SOFTPAW



30-page
reading
sample!

BERYLL & OSIRIS BRACKHAUS

Beryll & Osiris Brackhaus

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~ BOOK ONE ~
SOFTPAW

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Disclaimer: This is a work of fiction. It contains explicit erotic content and is intended for mature readers. Also, do not take the events in this story as proof of plausibility, legality or safety of actions described.

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ISBN-13: 978-1522882978

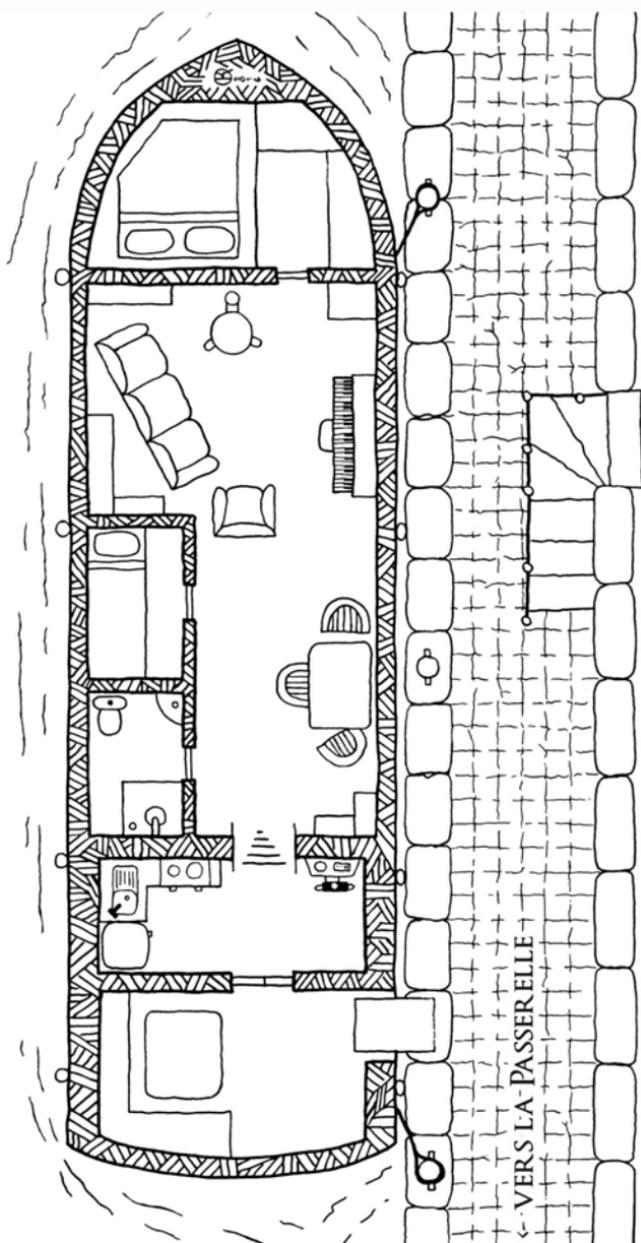
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For diligent and passionate support in making this novel its best possible version, our heartfelt thanks go out to Uhu, Mayetra, Talomor and Rose.

THE CULLINAN

BASSIN DE L'ARSENAL



VERS LE BOULEVARD DE LA BASTILLE

VERS LA PASSERELLE

AUTHOR'S NOTES

One of my early childhood memories is of my mother dragging me across a busy Paris avenue, my eyes wide with wonder, marvelling at the beautiful buildings, the people, looking everywhere but at the traffic. Having been a slightly weird kid even then, it seemed to me like a trip to the most classy, exciting, wondrous theme park ever.

My family has strong ties to France, and Paris in particular. I have spent more of my childhood vacations there than probably anywhere else. It is a city I love, and I mean this both for the actual city as well as the literary image of Paris that has been shaped over the centuries, from 'The Musketees' to 'Midnight in Paris' and '*Engrenages*'.

As you can imagine, writing '*Softpaw*' has been a particular pleasure of mine. Revisiting places I have personally been to, mixing them with places I would have loved to go. The Paris in this book is a mix of both the real place and the imaginary one. Every street, every place has a real world counterpart. People and shops, on the other hand, while entirely probable for the location, are purely fictional. Which is a shame, really. I would love to spend a few late nights at the Chez Chantal myself.

So if you find yourself in Paris and look at things in the right light and squint a little, you could use this book as a tour guide. But please be aware that most of the details won't match. Otherwise, I hope you will have as much fun reading this book as my wife and I had writing this.

Osiris Brackhaus

Blurb:

Connor's life could have been the dream of any cultured werecat: He is spending his days in Paris' gay quarter with comfortably little real work, playing the piano, surrounded by art, fine food and good friends. It could have been, if not for a feral vampire preying on the prostitutes of 'his' quarter, killing the boys of the Marais one by one.

When Connor invites a newly arrived hooker to stay on his houseboat, the last thing he expects is Michel to be a member of the Brigade Criminelle - a troubled, hunky rookie cop sent undercover to explore Connor's connection to the murders, picked mostly because he had been a boy of the Marais himself, not so long ago.

Hiding their true nature is a problem for both of them when initial attraction becomes much more than they ever thought would be possible. One of them has to take the first leap, not only to bring down the serial killer, but to give their budding relationship a real chance...

PROLOGUE

"So this is him?" Judge d'Angers asked, pulling down her half-round glasses just far enough to peep over them. "He sure does look like a tart."

The judge's face was a study in professional detachment, but her eyes sparkled. Maybe she was amused. With her bony frame in a severe grey pant suit and her hair done up in an impeccable chignon, she was looking so stern it was hard to tell.

"Yes, *Madame le juge*, this is him. May I introduce Michel Dupont, *Juge Ghislaine d'Angers*." Captain Thierry Plouescat smiled as politely as he could. "Dupont just graduated from the *École Nationale de Police* down in Nîmes. Top of his class, if I may add, *Madame le juge*."

"Would it pertain in any way to our case if he hadn't?" She raised an immaculately curved grey eyebrow. "I don't think so."

"*Madame le juge*." Michel took the initiative and shook her hand, just before she could needle his old friend Plouescat into a nervous fit. "It is an honour to meet you."

"Well, if you can help us solve this case, the honour will be all mine." She smiled, entirely unmoved.

Michel returned her smile as charmingly as he possibly could. But his charm seemed wasted on her. How unusual. "I hope so."

"I hope so, too. Please, have a seat."

She pointed at the chairs in front of her desk. The two men sat down, the plush upholstery of the antique chairs giving way under them with a barely audible sigh. For a long moment, the room fell silent, except for the sonorous ticking of the old-fashioned clock on the mantelpiece and the occasional, hushed steps of someone on the hallway. Even the ever-present buzz of the Paris traffic was muted here, in one of the offices of the hallowed *Palais de la Justice*.

Pointedly, the judge started cleaning her glasses, and both men instinctively knew better than to interrupt her.

"*Capitaine Plouescat*," Judge d'Angers opened, "when you called me yesterday, you suggested you had a solution for our problem. A rather unconventional solution, as I take it, which is doubly remarkable, coming from you."

Michel cast a glance over to his friend to see his reaction, but apparently Plouescat had missed the needle-fine insult in the judge's voice.

"I think we have a chance to significantly speed up our investigations, *Madame le juge*." Plouescat gained his footing only a few words in. "As you know, we are severely hindered by the reluctance of potential witnesses to talk to us, and we have no viable middleman available."

The judge nodded to him to continue.

"The serial killer picks his victims exclusively from the male prostitutes working on the streets of the Marais. That is why the press has dubbed him '*Jacqueline, the Ripper*', in a not particularly funny play on the historic murders in London. Considering the number of people walking the Marais at any time of the day, there just have to be some witnesses with crucial information for us. Unfortunately, working together with the police is not very high on the agenda of the local scene."

"And understandably so," the judge added, with another brief nod.

"In particular, one man, a bar pianist, well connected in the scene and friends with all victims so far, is proving hard to get to." Plouescat opened the file he had brought with him, and pointed out a photograph of a young man with coffee-coloured skin and dark hair in fine dreadlocks. "Connor Acothley, a US citizen on an unlimited student's visa. We have questioned him, of course, and put him under light surveillance, but we can't do more than that without immediately raising suspicions and allegations of racial profiling."

"Which, of course, is not what we are doing, is it, *Capitaine*?"

"Absolutely not, *Madame le juge*. We are pursuing several angles right now, and so far, he simply is our prime suspect."

Plouescat seemed genuinely riled by the suggestion. "However, we are dealing with a group of people traditionally very wary of the police. We need someone with access to the local scene, someone they would trust, with no obvious connections to the police, and the experience to pull it off, if we want to see any progress. And incidentally, Officer Dupont fits that description to a 't'."

For another long moment, Judge d'Angers looked at the two men in front of her, thinking. Then, without even so much as batting an eyelid, she asked: "So you honestly expect me to condone an undercover operation in a serial killer investigation with one of our men posing as a street prostitute?"

Capitaine Plouescat visibly chewed on the answer. "Yes, *Madame le juge*."

She leaned back, steepling her fingers in front of her chin. "Even I can barely imagine the fallout if any of this became public. This is tabloid catnip if I've ever seen any." She sighed. "Are we that desperate?"

Again, the answer seemed to pain Plouescat. "Yes, *Madame le juge*."

The answer seemed to touch her more than she would have liked. For a moment, her aristocratic face softened, and her cool professionalism was replaced with something very close to genuine friendship.

"Well then, let no one say we weren't willing to do what had to be done." She gave Plouescat a tiny smile and a nod before she turned her attention to Michel, her considerable intellect focusing exclusively on him.

He felt caught in her gaze, unexpectedly so. It was rare that someone could look at him without their eyes slipping to ogle his arms or his crotch, and he felt a sting of disappointment.

Don't, he reminded himself. Don't seek the admiration of others just because you feel worthless. The voice of his therapist and his own mixing into one. Don't. You are here because you are good at your job, because you can help save people. Not just because you're one hot piece of ass.

"I take from your CV that you grew up here in Paris, Officer Dupont," she finally said. "And on the rough side of things."

"That is the polite way of saying it, *Madame le juge*."

"You have just finished your training. You were supposed to start a nice, calm job somewhere in the south by the end of next month."

"Yes, Madame."

"So please tell me, Officer Dupont – why on earth would you want to go back into exactly the same cesspit that you have just pulled yourself out of?"

Her question was delivered with the same, even professionalism as everything else, so the words took a moment to fully impact on Michel's mind. And she had asked a very good question; one Michel didn't immediately have an answer for.

He was very proud of what he had managed over the last years. Getting a grip on his life, getting clean, getting help, getting a job with the police, of all things. So why indeed?

"To be honest, *Madame le juge*, going back onto the streets scares me," Michel admitted. "I've got rid of a lot of baggage over the past few years, and the last thing I want is to pick up more." Casting a glance at Plouescat by his side, he added: "But it is as the *Capitaine* said – I am a perfect fit for the job. I don't think anyone on the streets will know where I have been for the last years, and I could just pick up where I left off. I know how to act the part because I was a hooker. So yes, I can be your perfect eyes and ears on the curb. And besides, I don't have any problems with taking the occasional customer, so -"

When Plouescat next to him groaned audibly, Michel knew he had overreached. But the judge was still looking calm and bright-eyed, so he opted for the good, old naughty-boy-routine and smiled sheepishly.

"Too much?"

"Too much indeed." D'Angers was all but chuckling. "As *Capitaine* Plouescat will surely have told you repeatedly, any sexual conduct during your working hours is entirely out of the question."

Plouescat nodded firmly. He had indeed insisted on Michel keeping his zipper up at all times if this mad plan was to work out. He had been hesitant to ask Michel to come to Paris and help in this investigation in the first place, knowing full well about his past. After all, it had been Plouescat who had arrested Michel several times and finally beat enough sense into him to make him leave town and get some help. It had also been Plouescat who managed to get Michel a place in the police school.

"On the other hand," the judge continued, "I would be hard pressed to tell where your working hours ended and where your free time began. I am sure you will be able to give us a detailed report on any and all eventual encounters as they relate to your working hours if ever the question came up, won't you?"

"You can't possibly be encouraging him?" Plouescat lost his calm, his face red. "I wanted him to *play* the part, not work as a whore!"

The judge blinked twice, calmly, then smiled and took off her reading glasses. "As you surely remember, *Capitaine*, prostitution is legal in this country. And we're here to discuss the legal options we have, not the morally preferable ones. If we had those, we wouldn't be having this conversation, would we? There is a slim chance we can pull this off without breaking any laws, and as you have just told me, we indeed are that desperate." She glanced at Michel before she returned her attention to Plouescat. "Would you please be so kind, *Capitaine*, and give us a minute?"

Startled, Plouescat needed a moment to gather his wits. He nodded, almost sketching a bow. "*Madame le juge*, I will be outside, then, in case you need me."

On his way outside, he shot Michel a last, glaring glance of warning, and then closed the door behind him as silently as he possibly could.

"Well, now that we have this out of the way, let us talk frankly." She looked at her reading glasses in her hands. "Your willingness to help is commendable. And I can even understand why the *Capitaine* thinks this is a necessary evil. But he also might be giving you too much credit."

“How so?” Michel asked, only then realising that he had spoken out of turn. Damn, acting like he had any class was harder than he had thought, even if it was only for this one conversation.

“Because I think you are overestimating your ability to slip back into your old life without losing the new one you have built with such commendable effort. Humans just aren’t built to wear two skins at the same time. I am quite convinced one of them will tear apart completely; not something which I would like to see.” She took a deep breath, clearly pondering how much she could trust Michel not to fuck things up too badly. “There is a curious gap in your file. Right before you joined the force, you disappeared from the face of the earth for almost a year. Care to tell me what happened?”

Damn, she was as good as Plouescat had warned him. The captain had also instructed him not to say anything about this time, to invent something about spending time with his sister in the Provence. Anything but the truth.

“Rehab.” Truth had always worked for him, blunt and painful as it might be. Plouescat himself had taught Michel that. “Rehab and therapy.”

The judge didn’t even blink. “What for?”

“Mostly alcohol and painkillers. Therapy for depression.” Struggling for a moment, he tried to get the complete list together. “Sex addiction and general self-destructive behaviour as secondary symptoms of the depression, as my therapist put it. And a festering PTSD.”

Much to Michel’s surprise, Judge d’Angers didn’t seem appalled. Quite the contrary, her face inched towards a somewhat impressed smile.

“That was quite a deep hole you pulled yourself out of. Though we both know that that is a job never truly finished.”

“Tell me about it.” Michel offered a bittersweet smile. “*Madame le juge.*”

This time, the judge actually returned his smile.

"I like you, Dupont," she said. "And considering what you've already been through, you might actually stand a chance of seeing this through without having the whole thing blow up in my face. So tell Plouescat he'll get my signature if he manages to put this whole mess onto the appropriate forms. He can drop them off with my assistant Liliane, he knows her."

"Thank you, *Madame le juge*." Michel was honestly surprised, but pleasantly so. He really hadn't expected this stern old woman to agree to anything like this. Or to liking him. Liking him personally, not just the fact that he could wear pants three sizes smaller than his shirts. "I will do my very best not to disappoint you."

"I know you will. Let's all hope it'll suffice." Smiling, she rose, and offered her hand in goodbye. "And one last thing, Officer," she said, keeping Michel's hand in her surprisingly firm grip, "when you're not pretending to be a whore – please wear some clothes that actually fit. No person in this building is interested in seeing if you're circumcised or not before they say hello. Nor afterwards, for that matter."

"I... Of course." For the first time in many years, Michel felt the faint heat of a blush creeping up his ears. Plouescat had already given him a stern talking to when he picked him up. Maybe he was a little too eager to slip back into his old life. It was a clear warning he would heed as well as he possibly could. This definitely was a mistake he wouldn't make again. "Thank you, *Madame le juge*."

"You are welcome." She had such a sparkle in her eyes that Michel couldn't shake the feeling that he had just been subjected to her very own brand of humour. "And give my regards to the *Capitaine* and his dear wife."

CHAPTER ONE

Connor noticed Chantal's devastated expression the instant the old man walked towards the stage. He already knew he didn't want to hear what Chantal would tell him. "Another one?" Connor guessed the news when the pub owner arrived next to the piano. "Who?"

Chantal sighed and nodded. For a terrible moment, all his usual flamboyance and exuberance seemed to have been leeches from him. His voice sounded flat. "They haven't given any names yet," he said, leaning against the baby grand piano that Connor had been playing. "But Philippe's been missing for two days."

"*Putain.*" Connor had to focus hard on not letting his boiling anger get the better of him. Yes, he wanted to scream and fight and rip things apart, but definitely not here, not among his friends. "That's how many now, six?"

"Six." Chantal's voice choked with helpless anger. "Six too many. What kind of person does that? Killing kids off the street corners? And don't get me started on that ridiculous name. Just because the killer is out for boy whores, he gets a woman's name? So funny! And it's making me sick, how quickly everyone starts using that name. And what about the police, with all their cameras and gene tests and shit – they have *no* clue, have they? Oh for fuck's sake, I am getting too old for this..."

"Don't talk like that." Connor plucked some notes out of the piano. He knew how much Chantal loved music. "This is dark and sad and painful, yes. But they will find the guy who is doing this, and then it'll be over." He added a few more notes, trying to remind Chantal of one of his favourite songs. "And one evening, there'll be another irresistibly pretty and innocent boy, knocking at your door, who you can seduce and show a whole new world of wonders..."

“Oh you terrible person!” Chantal snapped his kerchief at Connor with a trace of his usual zest. “Can’t keep your mind out of the gutter for one minute, you rascal!” With a dramatic sigh, he turned around so he could prop both elbows on the piano and survey the room in front of them.

The Chez Chantal wasn’t a particularly large pub, but respectable for this area of Paris. It was old-fashioned and somewhat cliché, even a little over the top, but then again, so was its owner. Chantal’s name actually was Pierre, but everyone just called him by his stage name – *Chantal, la Magnifique*. In his heyday, he had filled quite the number of venues with his shows, and from the money he made he had fulfilled his dream – a pub of his own, with his name in glowing red letters over the entrance, where he could sing or not sing however he liked. It was a rare treat to see him perform these days, particularly on the few occasions when he went full drag and rocked the house like no one else.

Connor had to smile at the memory. This slight man with the carefully coiffed white hair looked as if he was carrying the woes of the world on his shoulders. But on stage, he could probably hold his own next the greatest of the business. Maybe one day, Connor thought with a smile, who knew what the future might bring. For the time being, Chantal had enough star power to fill his pub every night. Which was quite an achievement with all the gay bars and discos clogging nearly every corner of the Marais.

But the Chez Chantal was a fixture of the *quartier*, and would remain so as long as Chantal was able to unlock its door. Drinks and entertainment were always first class, and no one seemed to care that the food was atrocious. The last part was mostly due to the fact that Chantal picked the kitchen crew for their looks and not their skills. On hot summer days, the kitchen looked like the set of a really expensive and highly diverse gay porn shoot. But the boys did their best, and even though they didn’t have an ounce of cooking skills between all of them, Connor wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

A whole gaggle of customers rushed inside, the tinkle of the doorbell all but drowned out by the sound of rain and wind from the street.

The nice autumn weather of the last days had given way to an endless drizzle. Buffeted through the streets of Paris by harsh gusts of wind, it would last probably all through autumn until late December. '*La grisaille*', the Parisians called it, the greying. It was as much a description for the weather as it was for the mood.

Most of the newcomers peeled themselves out of the coats and scarves, immediately aiming for the bar or the tables, laughing and ordering drinks even before sitting down. Most people felt right at home here.

The last three of them, though, were different.

Two of them were boys, skinny pale teenagers in poofy jackets that had been out-of-fashion for at least three years, both wet as drowned rats. They were standing close together and looking around with that special mix of hope and fear that Connor and Chantal knew only too well.

The last one was a tall man in his late twenties, just as wet, but dressed in a way that left little doubt to his profession: he wore literally skintight jeans in heavy boots and a heavy motorcycle leather jacket with nothing underneath. Wet as the guy was, Connor could see his nipples and the curve of his cock right across the dimly lit room, his rippling six-pack glistening as if oiled.

"New arrivals." Chantal straightened up, his face brightening. "I'll take care of the little ones, you'll show big boy there the ropes, will you, dear?"

Without waiting for Connor's reply, he flounced off, clearly intent on 'rescuing' some barely legal teenagers. Connor couldn't suppress a chuckle. Chantal's dark moods never lasted long. He might be an old pervert in some regards, but he really had a heart of gold. Despite his success and his luck, Chantal had never forgotten how he had started out here.

He had bought the place not only to have a platform for his performances, but also to have a safe haven to offer to all the boys and girls working the pavement here in the Marais. Every hustler who came in was welcome to warm up and find shelter from the weather, even scrounge a coffee or something stronger, if need be. And of course, Chantal always had an open ear for their sorrows and suggestions and help, if they wanted.

Over the last two years, Connor had joined him in his little project. Originally, he had only applied at the Chez Chantal because they had a proper baby grand that he would be able to play in the evenings. But over time, he had become fast friends with Chantal and his crew, and that meant he took over some of the other duties of the place on occasion.

Tonight, those duties included explaining the rules of the place to that prime specimen over there.

Connor carefully closed the keyboard of his piano and put the 'Do not touch!' sign back on. Something about the guy was setting his senses on edge. He looked like any other street hooker who walked in here, only particularly handsome. Still something struck Connor as off. Whatever. He'd figure it out eventually. He always did.

"Hi! I'm Connor." He offered his hand and a smile. "Chantal over there asked me to tell you about the rules of his place. Can I offer you a coffee?"

"Coffee sounds perfect." His voice was firm and deep, and his handshake strong. "I'm Michel."

Connor nodded and walked him over to the bar, where one of Chantal's girls had already poured the newcomer a tall mug of steaming coffee. Personally, he couldn't understand what people found pleasant about coffee – to him, the stuff just smelled vile and tasted even worse. Curse of a fine nose.

"Have you been here before?"

"Only walked past, years ago... The kids said we get free coffee here." Michel pointed at the two boys who by now were sitting at a corner table with Chantal, already chatting animatedly. "That this is a friendly place."

Connor nodded. "It is."

The new guy, Michel, took the mug and warmed his hands, gazing around the room. Connor seized the moment to look a little closer. Strong hands, with tiny scars criss-crossing the knuckles. So he was a brawler, but had no new scars. Genuinely handsome, with a chiselled lantern-jaw face and a six-pack so tight one could probably bounce a Euro coin off. Why on earth was such a man selling his ass on a dinky street corner in the middle of Paris? Probably getting off on it. Or he had other problems.

Waiting for a good moment, Connor leant forward and daintily sniffed in Michel's direction. Mostly, living with a cat's nose was a parade of horrors, but sometimes it did have its advantages. Michel smelled of cigarettes and coffee, of course. But also of himself, of leather and sunlight and honey.

Connor blinked in surprise. That guy smelled good! He had expected drugs, maybe an infection, stale sex, something of that kind, but there was nothing. So whatever reason Michel had for working the street corners of the Marais at night, it wasn't any of the usual. Which meant it was probably something particularly nasty. Usually, those guys had something irreparably broken in their heads or their hearts, and usually both.

"You're welcome here at any time." Connor continued his introductory speech. "There will always be warm coffee and a dry corner for you. Just don't bring your work here."

Michel nodded, still calmly surveying the place.

"Don't shoot up in the restrooms, and generally don't make a mess. Chantal can be a real bitch about that, and you don't want to be on his bad side." Connor had to smile at the memory of one of Chantal's recent temper tantrums. "Basically – respect this place, and you'll always be respected here."

Michel cast him a long, unreadable glance and nodded firmly. "I will. Thank you for the coffee." He turned his attention back to the room, not expecting this conversation to last any longer.

Connor hesitated. He should leave him standing there. Michel was just another street whore and the last thing Connor needed was another human to look after. Yes, Michel was fit and healthy and attractive, but probably also came with a whole bunch of problems Connor needed no part of.

But what did they say about cats and curiosity? Exactly.

"So, you're new here," Connor heard himself say. "Where are you from?"

"Huh?" Michel turned back to him, smiling faintly at Connor's attempt to make conversation. "I'm from here. Aulnay-sous-Bois, actually. Spent the last years in the south, though. Marseille, and Nîmes."

"Really? So why come back? Most people wouldn't want to leave the beaches."

Michel sighed and stretched, a gesture that made the wet leather of his jacket squeak over his bare skin and drops of water run down his naked chest. He didn't seem to feel cold at all, in contrary, he was radiating enough heat to make Connor exceptionally aware of the other man's body right next to him.

"It all comes down to people, doesn't it?" Michel did not really look at Connor. "Where our friends are, and where we don't feel welcome any longer."

That was admittedly an answer a lot more thoughtful than Connor had expected. He mumbled a vague consent, but inside, his mind was restless. Some part of him was wary as hell of Michel. A guy as good-looking and not completely dumb as he was really shouldn't be in this line of work. Yet some part of Connor wanted to like Michel. Was he really so starved for a good fuck that he started considering some hustler for his bed? Michel admittedly was his type, athletic and masculine. But Connor really didn't need all that drama in his life. There was enough drama already. Six of the boys were dead, and if Connor didn't do something about it soon, there would be more. He would have to patrol the roofs of the Marais tonight, hoping to catch 'Jacqueline' and put an end to this nightmare. He really had no time for getting cosy with the hunk *du jour*.

"Are you working for someone?"

“Me? No, done enough of that down in Marseille to last me a lifetime.” Michel grimaced in disgust. “Trying to get some freelance work for now.”

“Just make sure you have some friends on the same street looking out for you,” Connor suggested. “With what happened in the last weeks...”

“You mean the Ripper?” Michel chuckled with polite disbelief. “Of course I’ve heard. ‘Jacqueline, the Ripperess’, killing hustlers left and right. Is it really that bad?”

Connor nodded gravely. “It is, actually. They found another body this morning, number six. They haven’t given names yet, but we all know who’s been missing. Two days ago, he was standing right over there at the corner.”

Michel followed Connor’s gesture, his face dark, then nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realise it was personal.”

“It’s fucking personal.” Connor tried to keep his mouth shut, but he just couldn’t. “All the dead worked here in the Marais. All of them were our friends, most of them we knew personally.”

“*Putain.*” Michel looked Connor right in the eyes, and for a heartbeat it looked as if he would hug the pianist. Something Connor wouldn’t have found entirely unwelcome. But then Michel just said: “I am sorry, really. I just figured that there would be a little less competition here on the streets, with all these rumours, you know?”

“They’re not rumours, unfortunately.” And considering that the human police were looking for a human killer basically guaranteed that there would be even more victims. Forcefully pushing his anger back into its box at the back of his mind, Connor squared his shoulders. “Just be careful out there. No lonely side streets, yes?”

Michel seemed surprised, but nodded, looking at Connor curiously. “I will.”

“Good.” You really should let him go now, Connor reminded himself. This was getting obvious. “And in case you ever need a place to crash – there’s always room on my couch.”

“Are you sure?” By now, Michel seemed mildly amused.

"It's an offer that's open to all the boys who come here, so don't get cocky. You can ask around, if you want." Connor busied his hands polishing a glass from the bar, slightly embarrassed by his weak deflection. "But yes, I am sure. It's the black houseboat in the *port de l'Arsenal*, right next to the footbridge. If I am not there, you can stay on the deck."

"A houseboat, really?" Michel seemed fascinated, but then caught himself. "Thanks for the offer, though, that's really nice. But I am good, for now. Staying with a friend."

"Just offering." Connor realised that he was simultaneously relieved and disappointed. "I really should get back to my actual job. After all, Chantal is paying me to play music, not to chat up hot items at the bar."

Michel didn't seem to know if Connor's flirtatious mood was meant seriously, so Connor added a friendly laugh and patted him on the shoulder. It seemed like the right thing to do, and besides, it gave him an opportunity to check out if Michel's broad shoulders were real or just due to the padding of his jacket.

They were entirely real.

"Any song you want?" Connor asked, forcing his mind out of the gutter. "I can play almost anything I've heard before."

CHAPTER TWO

In the merciless light of the street lamp, Michel watched another gust of wind push tonight's misty drizzle into several directions at once, up and sideways across the facade of the house he was facing. Another gust pushed the droplets down again before the wind gave the rain a tiny break, only to start the game again.

For the hundredth time tonight, he wondered what the fuck he was doing here. But he knew only too well. He was needed.

The boys of the Marais were a tight bunch, at least when it came to presenting a closed front towards *les flics*. Which was not the smartest thing to do when someone's offing one of your team every other day. Then again, whores weren't necessarily known for their strategic brilliance.

So you fit right in, Michel heard a voice snark inside his head. Please remind me why we're out here on the curb, in the rain, at midnight, wearing nothing but tight jeans and a leather jacket?

We're here to save lives, Michel answered silently. We can do this.

You think?

The voice fell quiet, but the doubts remained. Was he really sure this was not just a perfect excuse to have a little taste of his old life back? The longing glances, the desire, the need? All insulated nicely from real emotional involvement by a padding of cold cash? It hadn't been all bad, back then, had it?

Michel took a deep breath.

It still turned him on. Potential customers sizing him up was thrilling, and the power dynamics of their negotiations were all the foreplay he needed. Yes, teenage hormones and a desperate longing for affection had driven him onto the streets. Success, drugs and some really bad decisions had kept him there.

But that was years in the past. He was better, now, and he could do better.

With a grunt, Michel shook some water out of his hair and jogged down his piece of curb to warm up at least a little. He jumped over some of the fences built to protect the pedestrians during the day, and leant against a parked car to do some push-ups. He liked working his body. Workout was good, it was sane and it cleared his mind. Tomorrow, he'd bring a rope with him, to do some cardio.

And why not? He still liked people staring at him. It reminded him not all was rotten in his life. If nothing else, their stares reminded him that he lucked out in the genetic lottery.

Across the street, he could see the two boys from last night standing, chatting and trying very hard not to stare. Michel knew that by now he was so pumped up his body was steaming in the cold drizzle, and looked quite impressive in the light of the street lamps. He threw them a friendly wave, smiling.

They had talked for a while earlier in the evening; good kids, both of them. Not that they had been much of a help in the case against Jacqueline, but Michel was sure they would keep their eyes and ears open now, and every little help was welcome. After all, that was what Plouescat wanted him to do – activating the local hustlers as lookouts and witnesses, and gathering intel from them.

The two boys had come from somewhere east, Romania or something. The elder one, Tarras, had mentioned running away from a nasty pimp somewhere in Belgium, and now trying to make it on their own here in Paris. At the thought, Michel felt anger clench his guts. Those kids belonged in school, not on the curb. They deserved decent families, and, if not that, then at least someone to take care of them.

A car came up the road, slowly, as if looking for a spot to park. Michel put on a wide, lopsided smile and leant against one of the lamp post, his leather jacket hanging open to reveal his bare chest. The small, red Volkswagen slowed to a crawl, passed and almost went into one of the cars parked on the curb, only preventing a dented fender by a sharp break. Michel's smile widened. He still had it.

Across the street, Tarras and his friend laughed out loud, hooting insults after the poor guy who had almost been lured off the street by Michel's abs. He hadn't been much older himself when he started turning tricks. And he hadn't cared one bit about what other people had thought about him, either.

For a moment, Michel wondered how he could have changed so much in little more than three years. With Thierry, he had at least one friend he could unconditionally rely on, almost like a father he'd never had. He had more or less mended things with his sister. He had finished his *baccalaureat*, had a proper job and something like a grip on his life, and was actually looking forward to the future. He was grateful, he realised.

And he still liked strutting his stuff on the streets. Damn.

The car from earlier came up the road again. Apparently, the driver had circled the block to get a second look at the wares on display. The boys on the other side of the road already started giggling and pointing. Michel craned his neck and placed himself into the light of the street lamp so that the driver would have a prime view of his abs and the bulge in his pants. Which was sizeable, despite the weather. Unless he was drop-dead tired, showing off always made him half-hard.

Michel considered taking a customer. Let Thierry gnash his teeth as much as he wanted. The plainclothes officers patrolling the quarter and keeping an eye out on him would probably have a fit if he left the area. But it would do a hell of a lot of good in supporting his cover. And maybe it would even be fun. Besides, given the weather, there wouldn't be any customers walking out of the bars and discos of the Marais, looking for a quick fuck in a dark alleyway. So a customer with a car sounded like a perfect idea.

Michel grinned at the thought of his backup having to watch him being fucked by some stranger. Yep, that thought turned him on, but also there was a note of embarrassment at the idea. Progress, if in baby steps only.

This time, the Volkswagen slowed down and stopped next to Michel. The window on the passenger side was lowered

and Michel walked over, taking his time to offer the driver a nicely framed view of his crotch before bending down.

The driver was a young man with vaguely Arab features and a rakish little moustache. Slightly on the chubby side, Michel noted, and sitting in a car that smelled of fresh food. Clean, happy, and apparently just looking for the right kind of dessert. He would have been one of the more pleasant customers – if Michel hadn't already seen the man's face in his 'meet the team' session with Plouescat.

His cocky grin wavered. Had he really just waved his crotch at his colleague's face instead of a greeting?

"How much?" Apparently, the other officer insisted on keeping up appearances. And Michel was grateful for it.

"Thirty for a blow job," he replied, "eighty for a fuck."

His colleague gave an insecure laugh that didn't entirely sound fake. "That's not cheap."

"Maybe I'm worth it."

The officer hesitated and smirked, his dark eyes sparkling with amusement. "You only work in cars or can I take you somewhere?"

"Depends. Where you wanna go?"

"My grandmother has a maisonette two streets on," he offered, still grinning. "We could use it."

"Okay. We can go there." Michel had to admire the way his colleague kept a straight face. "But if you take longer than an hour, you'll have to pay extra."

"I don't think we'll need that long." His leering grin was top-notch credible. "Hop in."

Michel straightened and waved to Tarras and his friend on the other side of the street, letting them know that he'd be away for a while. They laughed and sent him off with a few assorted rude gestures, suggesting quite a few things he ought to do with his customer. Michel laughed and shook his head. Most probably not.

He sat down on the passenger seat and had barely closed the door when his colleague drove off.

"Good lord, do they really leave you out all night in that weather?" His tone was wry, half amused, half horrified. "Are you as wet as you look?"

"I'll be alright. I'm used to worse."

"I'm not sure that's a good thing." The driver cast him a doubtful glance. "Anyway. How'd you like my entrance as your new regular? *Capitaine* Plouescat says hi, by the way."

Michel nodded, relieved that his colleague didn't dwell on his undercover persona. The subject was complicated enough without others poking him. And after all, he was here doing a job, and he was doing it well.

"Have you learnt anything yet? Do you need anything? Plouescat wants you to run communications mostly through me, for as long as possible, so you won't have to come by the precinct. Can't have a whore walk in and out of the *Quai d'Orfèvres*, can we?"

"There are more whores walking in and out of there than you may believe." Michel grinned. "But they're definitely way more expensive than me."

"You really take your role seriously, don't you? Come one, relax, you're among friends here." His companion laughed amiably. "And by the way, I am Saïd, Saïd Ouaziz."

"I remember, we met two days ago, if only for a moment. Michel Dupont, nice to meet you." He shook the offered hand, quite impressed by the fact that his companion didn't seem to consider this a particularly complicated manoeuvre while driving. Apparently, his earlier swerve had been just for show. What a crafty little bugger. "But I bet you remember that, too."

"Sure. After all, I got to read your file." Now it was Saïd's turn to grin widely. "Also, Plouescat gave me tons of instructions on how to deal with you. You sure he hasn't adopted you?"

"I am rather sure he has... I owe him a lot." Much to his own surprise, Michel found himself smiling at the thought. Plouescat was one of the very few people he didn't mind meddling in his life. At least, not any more.

"In particular, he insisted that you won't be eating properly when you're out on the street." Saïd cast him a mock stern glance, his eyebrows wriggling expressively. "Have you had something already?"

"Huh?" That was a new kind of question. Maybe he did somewhat mind Plouescat meddling, after all. "Sure."

"So that's a no." Apparently, Saïd wasn't easily fooled. "On the back seat, there's a paper bag. I had Rashida make some falafel sandwiches. You're welcome."

"Rashida?" Michel asked while fishing for the sandwiches. They smelled damn good. And they were still crisp and a little warm. Alright. Maybe Plouescat had picked a pretty good partner for him.

"My wife," Saïd replied, with obvious admiration in his voice. "Love of my life and the best cook on this planet, so help me God." Laughing, he wriggled his belly. "The only reason I am not a blob of fat lying on my back is that she's keeping me busy all night. Good rooster never gets fat, she says."

Michel burst out laughing. That line had been delivered with such carefree mirth that it seemed like a breath of fresh air. Saïd was a good reminder that not all people were leading miserable lives. Some were actually happy.

And the sandwiches really were great.

Saïd fell silent until Michel had devoured the first two of them, driving a wide circle around the Marais, from the *Place de la Bastille* past the *Hôtel de Ville* to *Les Halles* and back again.

"So, what have you got so far?"

"Nothing substantial," Michel replied truthfully, still munching on the last bites of his sandwich. "Prices have risen, but not much. Pimps have changed, though mostly in names, not in manners. A lot more foreigners."

For once, Saïd remained serious. "And about the case?"

"Not much, either. Word on the street is that no one has seen Jacqueline. No one who survives." Thoughtfully, Michel wiped his hands with a napkin Rashida had put into the bag as well. "The kids are genuinely scared. I don't think they would be holding back if they knew anything."

“And the suspect?”

“You really think that bar pianist could be a serial killer?”

“He knew all the victims, and they trusted him.” Saïd merely repeated what Plouescat had explained during Michel’s initial briefing, but it still felt off. “He’s young and fit and could theoretically have done it. And he goes on nightly walks for hours on end, easily dropping his surveillance detail.”

“Maybe our guys are just too easily dropped?” Michel suggested, though not entirely serious. “I’ve talked to him. He really strikes me as someone on our side. He’s genuinely hurt by the loss of the boys.”

Saïd shrugged. “Did he have any sort of an alibi? Anything that would allow us to move on? So far, he’s the best we got.”

“It’s still a crap lead.”

“So no alibi?” Despite his jolly moments, Saïd seemed to be as flexible as concrete if he had to be. “Nothing?”

“I had no chance to question him about alibis.” Michel crumpled up the paper his sandwiches had been wrapped in. “Seriously, Saïd. The victims were found on rooftops all over the Marais, drained of all their blood, some of them savagely maimed afterwards. What sane person does something like that?”

“An insane person.” Saïd’s counter was cold as ice. “And the proper term is ‘exsanguinated’.”

Saïd was right. He had talked to Connor for all of, what, five minutes? That didn’t tell him shit. Connor was handsome, nice, talented, and his smile had made Michel forget that he was on an assignment, at least for a moment or two. But none of that prevented Connor from stalking the city at night and killing the very prostitutes he pretended to care for during the day. Alright, during the earlier parts of the night, then.

“I’ll try to spend some more time with the pianist,” Michel finally suggested. “Find out more about where he spends his nights.”

“That’s what you’re being paid for.” Saïd chuckled, shook his head and turned serious again. “Also, you should talk to more of your ‘colleagues’. I don’t buy that no one has seen

anything. None of the victims were found far from their curbs, so someone must have noticed at least something. Maybe ask around, identify some of the regulars we haven't named yet."

"I will. Though I doubt it'll lead to much." Michel chewed on the next thought for a moment before he spoke up. "Connor has invited me to stay with him for a few days, if I need to. I could take him up on the offer."

"Umm... You sure that's a good idea?" Saïd seemed convinced it wasn't. "The captain will have a fit, and I am not sure he'd be wrong. Wouldn't that put you too close to the suspect? I mean, emotionally?"

"You really think I'm that bad at separating my job from my emotions?" As quickly as it had been said, Michel regretted the question.

"You just defended him a few moments ago, and that was before you moved in with him." Oddly enough, his remark carried no reproach. Despite his harmless, jolly appearance, he was clearly a professional. "Besides, it's not about what I think. It's about what the prosecution will think, and what they'll use to rip your testimony apart."

Calmly, Saïd steered his car to the side of the road and turned his full attention to Michel.

"Plouescat trusts you. And I trust him." His expression was dead serious. "But honestly, man, this is one hell of a risky move. If any of this gets out, it'll be all over the papers. It'd be the end of his career. And I don't want to have any part in that. Plouescat is the best man I've worked under in the entire *Brigade Criminelle*, and he deserves the best I can do." Seeing Michel's rather neutral expression, he chuckled. "You have no idea how critical this is, have you?"

Politely, he shook his head. It was as high up as any serial killer in the capital of France, wasn't it?

"Both the Mayor of Paris and the President call daily. For whatever reason, this case currently is setting every big shot in the country on edge. If this works out, Plouescat can pick his next job from any office in the country. If not..."

"I had no idea," Michel said truthfully. "That is ... unusual, isn't it?"

Saïd scoffed. "You have no idea. Normally, our department gets that kind of call only when some diplomat is kidnapped or there is a major terrorist attack. Six dead hookers shouldn't make that kind of waves. Now take all that, and then out of the blue, Plouescat pulls you out of the hat. Mister Play-By-the-Book, presenting a rookie cop to go undercover as a street whore. We're all a little nervous."

"No kidding."

"Personally, I think it's the vampire angle." Saïd leaned back, relaxing a little. "If it gets out that some guy is playing Dracula with some hustlers, it'll attract entirely the wrong kind of tourism for decades. Paris lives on romance, not kink."

Michel gave him a doubtful look. "Maybe we two have known very different cities."

Saïd laughed softly. "I wasn't talking about my personal experience here, but you're right, of course." Taking a deep breath, he forced himself back into a lighter mood. "Besides, it's not our place to ponder why the brass do what they do, is it?"

"No, not really."

There was something really odd about this case, Michel had to agree. But then again, it wasn't as if he had much experience with police work apart from his internship in Marseille, was it? Better to change the subject. "So, still want that blow job?"

Saïd laughed out loud. "Oh, absolutely. But definitely not from you." He cast Michel a conspiring glance and started his car again. "I'll take you back to your curb, if that's okay. Have we spent enough time?"

"Should be alright. Will you pick me up again?"

"Yup." For a moment, traffic took all of Saïd's attention, then he added: "I thought I'd come right back again tomorrow night, and then roughly every other night. Is that okay for a totally smitten new regular?"

"It's a bit often, but yes." Smiling faintly, Michel found himself looking forward to their chats. "Please tell Rashida I loved her sandwiches."

"Oh, I'll be sure to." Saïd once again had that deeply-in-love-tone that felt odd to Michel, odd and yet beautiful. "But you should tell her herself one day. I mean, you'll be staying here in Paris, with the *Crim*, will you?"

"I ... I haven't thought about it, actually. Plouescat had me transferred for this one assignment. And as far as I know, I still have a very ordinary job waiting for me in some small town in the south."

Saïd made an indistinct sound. "I think you'd fit right in here. You're a city guy, and Paris suits you. You'd be bored out of your mind in no time in the countryside."

"Probably." Michel chuckled. "After what I've been through, boring countryside doesn't sound too bad. We'll see."

For a moment, they drove in amiable silence. Then, rather abruptly, Saïd asked: "Can I ask you something personal?"

"Sure."

"Did you really work as a whore before you joined the force? Or is it just some shit the guys tell around the water cooler?"

Now that had gone round even faster than Michel had expected. But if he had learnt one thing, it was that blunt honesty worked way better for him than any polite whitewashing.

"I did."

Saïd remained silent for a while. "Wow," he finally said. "That's cool."

"It's not romantic, or anything."

"No, I mean, it's cool that you're here now, you know? You've come a fucking long way." He looked over to Michel to the point of ignoring the traffic they were in. "Musta been tough."

"Not as tough as sucking off strangers for a living."

For a heartbeat, he feared he had outgrossed his colleague, but then Saïd burst into laughter, once again paying so little attention to the traffic that Michel was tempted to grab the steering wheel.

"Oh my god," Saïd wheezed when he had finally calmed down a little. "That was hilarious. I must remember that."

"It wasn't that funny."

“Compared to the crap I get to hear each day around the water cooler, that was comedy gold,” Saïd insisted. “And as you’re not there to get the guys in line when they talk shit about you, I need to know some good ones to do it in your place.”

That was actually one of the nicer things Michel had heard in the recent past. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Saïd barely seemed to think about it, already babbling on. “We still have a few minutes to get to know each other. Let me see... I have a daughter, little Aïsha, the most beautiful little thing in the world, a beauty to rival the stars, and she is barely two years old now!”

It took Michel a long moment to realise that he was supposed to say something about himself now in turn.

“I..,” he began hesitantly. Talking about himself wasn’t his strong side. “I have a sister.”

Saïd cast him a sidelong glance, groaning in mock despair. “Alright,” he said, “this is going to take longer than expected...”

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