

# ~ Waiting In The Wings ~

by Ali Vali

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If the thought of two women being romantically involved is not for you, then this story is one you won't want to read. But seriously if you are underage and live someplace where that is not allowed move on, literally.

Sit back and enjoy the story and if you have any comments you would like to share please write to me at [terrali20@yahoo.com](mailto:terrali20@yahoo.com).

I want to thank my betas for correcting this for me. Sue R, my pal who shall remain nameless, Ken, Jaden and Becky, you are all godsend. I bow to your grammatical knowledge and for the infinite patience you show me and my fumbling fingers. Your kindness is a true gift.

To the woman who shares my life and is my Valentine everyday, this story is for you. Words sometimes aren't enough to tell you how much I love you, but I keep trying and I give thanks daily that you keep listening. Happy Valentine's sweetie, this one, like all the others, is for you.

This one is also dedicated to every person who knows the meaning of love and appreciates the day set aside to honor the wonderful feeling that it is. Thank you all for reading and thank you for all the wonderful notes you have sent. I appreciate them all.

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The black coat swirled around her like a cloak, billowing open every so often just to remind its owner how cold it was that morning. Groups of people heading off to work sped passed her walking with a quicker gait, anxious to get to the metro stop at the end of the block. Every so often the blue eyes would look up to take note of something in one of the shop windows along the way, wondering what some of the French advertisements meant when the product wasn't easily recognizable.

*If you're that interested, G.W., maybe a vacation in an English speaking country would be in order the next time you go author hunting.* G.W. Steinblack pushed her shoulder length hair out of her face and smiled to the elderly man in the storefront who had greeted her as she walked down the street. She had been in Paris for three weeks, enjoying the sites, and chasing the elusive Gwendolyn Flora to sign to Steinblack Publications. But so far the Mona Lisa had been easier to get a look at than getting the writer to return her phone calls. *Today's a new day, G.W., maybe Ms. Flora will grace us with an audience. If not there's always Le Louvre.*

As the tall woman entered the café in the Latin Quarter for her morning coffee and plain

breakfast, a petite blonde across the restaurant watched as the white cashmere scarf and black coat were stripped off and thrown onto an empty chair. The woman still standing was not what she would describe as pretty, but more handsome in a rugged sort of way, like she would have been at home in one of those cigarette advertisements. It was a surprise to find a cable knit sweater, jeans and Nikes under the elegant looking coat. *Definitely an American*, thought the admirer.

"Bon jour, G.W." The waiter who had taken her order for the past sixteen days came to the table with a cup of coffee fixed to her liking. The order never changed but he came with his pad at the ready in case this was the day his customer was ready to be more adventurous than a croissant.

"Good morning, Philippe. The usual please."

"You're going to get, how they say, rickets from such a limited diet, G.W."

"You and Ismarelda Steinblack would get along swimmingly." Before she could continue their daily conversation about her lack of adventure when it came to her breakfast selections, her coat pocket started ringing.

"Steinblack," she barked into the phone as soon as she flipped it open, barely being heard in the busy café.

The laugh coming through the line was immediately recognized causing G.W. to laugh as well. "G.W., you sound like a bulldog answering the phone."

"It's my way of paying homage to the bitch who bore me."

"One of these days, G.W., I'm going to rewrite the will and you'll be out on the street."

"Izzy, you love me too much to disown me." G.W. smiled at Philippe as he put her order down, shook his head and walked away. The laugh that had greeted her when she answered back was making G.W.'s smile bigger.

"True, my love, true. When are you coming home? The paper's in crisis again and your brother's at a loss as to what to do."

"Soon, mother. I've got a week of vacation left, not enough time for Joshua to kill the family's golden goose. With the addition of Ms. Flora to the publishing house I should have a good summer lineup of releases to fix his screw ups when he wanted to play publisher." G.W. heard her mother sigh at the other end because she could not find an argument to contradict what her daughter was saying.

"What does she write again?"

"Gay erotica. Think of Nin in modern times with a rainbow sticker on her mini car. Anything else of interest?"

"All in good time, dear. Tell me when we're going to sign Rio Rivers to our house?" Ismarelda waved off one of her assistants holding up papers for her to sign wanting not to be distracted from her call. G.W.'s absence was starting to make her days longer since she had no one to verbally spar with that was as fun as her daughter.

"Mother, we've had this conversation before and it always ends the same. Rio will stay where she is for all the reasons I've given you in the past."

"It sells, G.W., and it should be selling for us."

"It all ends up in the same river, mother, thus the name. Tell me what has you still at the office so late in the afternoon? Don't tell me you're becoming a workaholic while I'm wasting away in Paris brushing up on my art appreciation?"

"Bite your tongue, love, that's what I have you for. My own personal working stiff who keeps me in caviar and ripple as my father used to say. I want your promise that you'll be home before the end of the month, new writer or no new writer."

"What do you have planned, old girl, or do I have to fly home and beat it out of you? I can hear those devious wheels of yours turning from here."

"Trust me on this one, dear, it's the last thing you would expect. It goes to show you, if you live long enough, even the most predictable things or people manage to do the unpredictable and shock the hell out of you." G.W. was about to ask more concerning what Ismarelda had alluded to when she heard the muffled voice of someone else on her mother's end. "I'm sorry, dear, but duty calls. Hurry with your writer and come home, I miss you terribly." The contract Fredrick was holding up now couldn't be ignored, so the family matriarch pulled out her pen and looked at her calendar again. If only wishing would make the end of the month come that much sooner.

G.W. snapped her phone closed and finished her breakfast as she perused the copy of the two-day-old New Orleans Tribune. It took every bit of willpower she had not to start circling mistakes with a red pen and send it back to her older brother who was listed as the publisher. What in the hell had the man done with the rest of the editing staff? Heaving a big sigh before draining the last of her coffee, G.W. got up and walked along the river for a while enjoying the robust traffic along the Seine.

The Steinblack marriage had produced two heirs, Joshua who had only recently gotten interested in the family business and G.W. who had grown up sitting at her mother's side from the moment she was able to hold a pen. Unlike most marital unions their father had let his children take the Steinblack name knowing Sol Steinblack would never let a Rogers run his publishing empire. It was up to Ismarelda now to hold together her father's empire until his handpicked successor was ready to take over the family business. Though most knew who Sol had trusted his legacy to when he put the red pen in G.W.'s hands when the child was only nine. The kid could spot a mistake in the sea of black ink like an arrow to the bull's eye every time.

Joshua's dabbling with the business was to encourage him to do something else besides playing the role of the family playboy. His mother was long past the time she expected great things out of him. She didn't love him any less than G.W., but a woman's heart could only be broken by disappointment so many times before permanent damage occurred. Ismarelda loved him now for who he was, and it was the defeat in her voice that finally got him to try. The shame of it came when even gaining his mother's admiration lost out to boredom only too quickly.

G.W. didn't really care who ran the business as long as she was one of the deciding voices of where it headed to in the future. Her mother would be around for years to come she was certain, but planning for the future was always smart business sense. Izzy herself had taught her that, as well as her grandfather Sol. If there was one passion she and her mother shared, it was a love for the written word and trying their best to get it out to as many people as possible.

The woman in the café who had been staring at G.W. stayed behind tracking the lean body as it crossed the street to the wide sidewalk along the river. Watching G.W. had been her guilty pleasure for the past eight days. Everyday she tried to work up the courage to talk to her, but the tall brunette looked so engrossed in whatever she was reading, the blonde just left her alone. The truth was she was in no position to be looking at anyone, but G.W.'s face and full-bodied laugh had drawn the blonde in. She called her waiter over and paid her bill not wanting to lose sight of her fellow countryman if she crossed one of the bridges and headed into another part of the city.

An hour and one metro ride later, G.W. was sitting in the large park behind the Louvre museum with her laptop balanced on her legs. The fast typing fingers stopped abruptly when she felt someone staring at her. A photographic memory pegged the blonde from the café standing a few hundred yards from her looking like she had lost a good friend. Being a Tuesday in the middle of winter, the popular Paris site was deserted except for the five other hardy souls who had decided to brave the cold. In more suitable temperatures the park was filled with children sailing small boats in the large fountain at its center.

The laptop clicked closed when the blonde started moving closer heading right for her. G.W. could only make out the shape of the woman's face since the body was hidden under a large coat, and sunglasses obscured her eyes. As often happened, G.W. started a manuscript in her head as to what this woman's story might be.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" G.W. looked up at her and wondered why with at least five hundred empty chairs to pick from, the woman wanted to occupy the one next to hers?

"Sure. I'm not French, but I'm fairly certain it's a free country," teased G.W.

"I don't want to bother you but I heard you talking to the waiter this morning and thought it would be nice to talk with another American."

"Sure I'm always up for some stimulating conversation, what would you like to talk about?"

"That really doesn't matter. I've been here for a couple of weeks and I just miss talking to someone. Paris, I've found, is a city better enjoyed when you visit with someone else." The

blonde sounded so despondent that G.W. set the computer aside and turned a little to look at her profile.

"You sound like a woman who's lost a great love."

"No, just a woman who's enjoying a little escape before I return to real life and everything that entails." The blonde's smile was so melancholy it made G.W. want to know what color her eyes were.

"I don't know you, but you seem like good company. Maybe you should realize that and stop wishing for someone else to complete what should be a wonderful experience."

The woman looked at the face that had drawn her attention for so many mornings and laughed. "Are you telling me, you're your own best friend?"

G.W. laughed with her before answering, still having a mental debate as to the eye color. "Of anyone else I know, I find myself the most agreeable on all subjects I find interesting. Not to mention I'm incredibly funny, well versed in a multitude of subjects and somewhat charming, or so my mother tells me."

"That sounds just a tad bit conceited." She put her thumb and index finger close together and smiled to show she was kidding.

"No, just honest. Alone is something I've never feared."

"That sounds lonely."

"Miss..."

"My name is Piper."

"Piper, a pleasure to meet you. I'm G.W., and there's a difference between alone and lonely."

"What?"

"One's a choice you make for yourself. The other's the power you give to someone else to make for you."

"That sounded very profound."

"I've been known to dabble in a little bit of philosophy after breakfast every so often, given the right inspiration." G.W. started to pack her things away, and acting out of character, went with a whim. "How about a crepe?"

"I'd love one. If I'm here for much longer I'm afraid I'm going to gain sixty pounds because of the little kiosks on every corner."

They stood close together as the slim man wearing a beret swirled the batter onto the hot plate with a wooden implement fashioned to spread it thinly over the surface. When he flipped it to the other side he coated the cooked side with butter and sugar before rolling it and wrapping it in a napkin. G.W. pulled out enough francs for the treat and a tip before Piper could move to reach for her wallet out. Armed with the warm pastry, they continued their walk.

"So what's your story?" asked Piper.

"I don't know if I have one actually. Not one anyone would write a novel about anyway. I'm just here on business with a liberal dose of pleasure mixed in. And you, what realities are you running away from?" G.W. threw the wrapper away after she bit into the last piece; enjoying the diversion Piper was giving her.

"Would it sound more romantic if I said I was running away from something or someone?" A large cloud obscuring the sun got Piper to remove her sunglasses revealing soft green eyes to her walking companion.

"That depends on if you want to tell me a story."

"Would you like for me to tell you a story?"

"Piper, you'd be surprised how many people ask me that in a day. But no work for me today." They stopped at the side of the large famous museum; the larger glass pyramid that had caused so much controversy when it first went up was to their right letting just a little light into the room below.

"Want to look at some art?" Piper was feeling light for the first time since her plane landed and didn't want to relinquish her new acquaintance just yet.

G.W. readjusted the strap of her laptop and nodded her head. "That'd be nice and it'll get us out of this weather. I'm thinking French weathermen are about as accurate as American ones. It was supposed to be sunny and more bearable today." The two new friends checked their coats and bags before heading towards the treasures the museum held.

The afternoon melted away for Piper, viewing the masters whose timeless talents graced the wall of the Louvre and listening to G.W. give a brief history on the pieces she stopped to admire. No matter how many Piper picked, G.W. gave her a running commentary. The blonde was sure when the artists painted a bit of their heart onto the canvases, it was for people like G.W.

After three hours Piper followed G.W. to the balcony overlooking the statue 'Winged Victory.' The blonde looked up at G.W. and then at the artwork before them. The tall woman was looking at the piece with such reverence; words seemed inappropriate and would only intrude on her enjoyment. G.W.'s spell was broken when the small hand of her fellow tourist covered her own. It was then she noticed the engagement ring.

"On the correct finger, and it's very nice. When's the date?" The tone held no judgment and no malice since the time they had spent together didn't have anything to do with the promise of anything more.

"In two months. Perhaps you've stumbled on what I'm running away from," said Piper in a teasing voice. She had not removed her hand and G.W. had not moved away from her.

G.W. chuckled making her face look almost child like as she squeezed Piper's fingers gently. "I think, my dear, you're a woman who knows her own heart and has never run from anything." G.W. looked at her intently as if trying to read her mind, getting Piper to smile.

"No, this is more of a last fling before the shackles of matrimony are in place. There's that, and like you, I'm here on a little business."

"My you do have a way of coloring things, Ms. Piper. I'd think marrying someone would be sort of like visiting Paris. So many different parts of the city to appease every mood your in, but infused into every one of them is the undercurrent of romance. You should be happy to be chained by love, not sound like your life is about to take a drastic change for the worse."

"You make it sound so romantic and down right appealing with the iron bars slamming closed behind me every night. I see no shackles on you, you're too big to be afraid of commitment." Piper pulled the other big hand forward, and it too was missing any meaningful jewelry.

"This isn't about me, and I wear big sweaters to cover the feathers, thank you." G.W. thought of all the women she had known in her lifetime and shivered. Most of them were more interested in her bank account and last name than in her interest or her heart. The afternoon with Piper had been refreshing in that aspect. The blonde listened to her talk with no expectations of anything else than just to enjoy her company.

"Don't you believe true love exists?" Even the softest level of Piper's voice carried in the marble stairwell where the beautiful statue they had been studying was located. It wasn't a holy place but with the atmosphere it might as well have been.

"Of course it does, I read about it all the time."

"Good way to avoid the question. Well, if this is my last fling as a single woman, how should I spend it?"

"Depends on how you want to look back on this time, Piper."

The blonde thought about how she had spent the afternoon and was interested in ending their time in the museum with one more lecture so she lifted her free hand and cupped G.W.'s cheek. "Tell me about her?" After she voiced the question, Piper turned to the statue again to listen to whatever G.W. was going to tell her about the piece. With the way she'd been looking at her when they walked up, Piper was guessing it would be the most interesting telling tale the woman would share up to that point.

"Her name is Nike, which means victory in Greek. Thus the name 'Winged Victory of Samothrace.' To me it seems apt since she's now 2200 years old. To persevere for such a long time has been a victory in and of itself. For years she stood overlooking the Aegean on the island of Samothraki, built to commemorate some great naval battle. The sculptor designed her with her wings spread to remind the people victories are always uncertain and can fly away at any moment." Like she had all day, Piper listened to the walking encyclopedia of art knowledge and tried to capture the essence of who G.W. was. One thing she had figured out was that whatever G.W. did for a living, it had to involve writing of some kind. No one was this articulate and knowledgeable without getting lots of practice at putting it all on paper at some point.

"That doesn't tell me why you seem to love her? I could see it when we walked up."

"I love her for many reasons, but mostly because my favorite shoes are named for her." Piper let go of one of her hands and playfully slapped her arm, so G.W. gave her the answer she was looking for. "Look at her and tell me she does not personify what the artist was trying to teach his fellow citizens. Life is a multitude of battles, most of which, and the most fierce I think, we fight with ourselves. Those battles are the hardest fought, and usually the wisps of victory lie in the parts of our mind we at times like to turn away from or face as a last resort, and that's the truth. Nike reminds me to enjoy my sweet but brief victories before she flies away to the next battle to wait for me to find my way back to her. She is, to me, the symbol of the perfect woman."

"But she has no head, G.W." Piper cocked her own and smiled up at her teacher. It was her eyes and the feel of Piper so close that caused G.W.'s heart to open up in that one moment and fall love. There was no reason for it and for someone who was firmly entrenched in order and truth, it made absolutely no sense. The reality of it made G.W. stumble and stutter over her words and she had to look away to compose herself.

"Ah, that just let's me find my own image of what she should look like. I'm sure her sculptor gifted his people with his own image of what she looked like, but now he has gifted me, with not only his beautiful work, but with the added bonus of imagination. I learned all I could about her except for her face."

"Do you fight many battles with yourself?" Piper kept looking at the statue and imagining what it would look like with G.W.'s head on the shoulders.

"I fight hard to always try and do the impossible, and that helps me live with my less than perfect results."

"What's impossible as defined by G.W.?"

"The answer's easy, to live a life without regret. The concept's fairly easy to understand. It's trying to live up to it that makes it near impossible."

Piper retook G.W.'s hand and faced her. "You're right, I want never to look back at any part of



my life and feel defeat because of regret. Can I confess something to you?"

"Sure, if anything I'd like to be your friend, so that's what friends do."

"I'd regret walking away from you now and not getting to know more about you."

"But will it cause you more sadness to look back and feel guilty because you feel that way, because of this?" G.W. held up Piper's ring finger where the diamond sat sparkling despite the dim lighting in the stairwell. Finding it there made G.W. feel her bit of sadness. In one afternoon she had found someone who she could see herself knowing fifty years down the line, only to have fate pull her away leaving only the longing losing Piper would bring.

"I have to be honest and say no. I saw you this morning and I just wanted to know what it would be like to be the center of your attention if only for a short time. Does that make any sense at all or make me a bad person?" Piper left out all the other days she'd spent looking but failing to act so G.W. wouldn't peg her as a stalker.

The sadness G.W. had first noticed was back in the pretty eyes and she could no more condemn the woman than she could turn away from her. "It makes you human. So allow me to be the one who helps you prepare for your future without regret and without defeat."

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After separating at the entrance to the museum so they could both get ready, G.W. found herself a short time later in a cab heading towards Piper's hotel to pick her up for dinner. What had started as a serious conversation had turned into bit of a light bet of sorts on what G.W. could do to help bid the young woman's single life goodbye. The other surprise of the day had been the message waiting for her at the apartment she was renting, from the reclusive writer she had been searching for. Gwendolyn Flora would be waiting for her in the hotel bar where Piper was staying an hour before G.W. had to meet the blonde for dinner. It was a relief to have the writer finally respond and agree to meet with her after so many days of trying.

The bar was off to the left of the entrance with large lead glass windows that overlooked the Champs Elysees. At one of the small tables sat the woman G.W. recognized from her book jackets with a Cosmopolitan keeping her company.

G.W. walked up to her and offered her hand in greeting. "Ms. Flora, I'm G.W. Steinblack."

"Oh my, aren't you a tall drink of water." Soft brown eyes swept over six feet of black Armani and seemed ready to take the trip again. "Why don't you have a seat and quench my thirst?"

"Thank you, ma'am. Why does an Oklahoma girl come to live and work in Paris?" The waiter came over to take G.W.'s order, giving Gwendolyn a chance to study her again.

"You must be a reporter at heart despite your current job title," teased Gwendolyn after G.W. forwent the small talk and launched right into a conversation. "To survive. Unless you find

stories about dusty flat lands riveting, and the 'Grapes of Wrath' has already been written. I had to come some place where muses are easy to find and keep entertained. The main impetus of my work centers around the physical side of love, and sometimes my inspirations come from simply looking out the window of my tree house. Trust me that never happened to me in Oklahoma. Tell me why you've dragged me away from my typewriter, Ms. Steinblack?"

A small brandy snifter of amber liquid was put in front of G.W. before anything else was said. "To try and talk you into having my house publish your next work would be the most appropriate answer I guess, but on a more selfish note, it was so I could tell you in person how wonderful I think you are. We've never met but your writing speaks to me in a way few others ever have, ma'am. My grandfather left me his journals as part of my inheritance, and in those linen pages I found the true depth of the man I only thought I knew. He showed me through words how you can make the human spirit sore. I'm sure Sol would be sitting here telling you this if he were still with us. So even if you turn me down, I feel better for having the opportunity to tell you something I've wanted to from the first line of yours I ever read." G.W. lifted her glass in salute and took a sip of the smooth liquid.

"Does your mother pay you by the sentiment or by the word?"

"Do you know Izzy?"

"I've heard of her, and like you wanted to meet me, I'd like the opportunity to meet the woman who's done so much for female writers over the years. How about you and me have dinner and discuss the possibility of a relationship?" The publisher couldn't believe it. There was the line she'd been waiting to hear for weeks and she couldn't get the look of disappointment out of her mind that would be sure to appear on Piper's face if she called upstairs and cancelled now.

"I'd love to have dinner with you, but I'll have to decline. Please don't hold this against Steinblack Publishing, but I promised a friend to help her over a rough spot and I'd hate to disappoint."

Gwendolyn looked at the suit again and could just about imagine the disappointment if it were she who would be getting the phone call and decided to cut the woman some slack. "How about a nightcap with me once your chivalrous acts for the evening are done?"

"Even the dewy new feet of dawn could not keep me away if it is you who calls me. It would be so even if the call comes from beyond the grave. I would answer with a rush of emotion and a fast beating heart, if it is only to sit by your side and hold your hand to listen to your silence." The author smiled amazed, that G.W. quoted a line from one of her longer stories from one of her first anthologies.

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Piper was standing at the window of her room looking out at the large boulevard that had been at the center of so many movies and stories. On her last night she wished for the first time that her visit to Paris wasn't coming to an end. In one afternoon she had forgotten all the plans she still

needed to finalize and the decisions waiting for her when she stepped off the plane back home.

Her fiancée hadn't really cared about her explanation about the need for time apart and had readily agreed, wanting time alone as well. The fact he had even asked her to marry him at all still made her wonder what about her made him want to take the plunge. She knew all too well why she had accepted. All those fantasies she'd spun as a child about her upcoming wedding were dying one by one. To commit to someone should have been about love not obligation, but sometimes you didn't have a choice. Just as quickly the memory of G.W. telling her she was special came to mind and put the smile back on her face just in time to answer the door.

"Wow, you look incredible in that dress." G.W. stood in the hall and took in the black mini dress Piper was wearing and filling out in the most delectable way.

"Thanks for the compliment, but I've already agreed to have dinner with you. In fact, it was my idea so you don't need to butter me up."

"Lady, any buttering up on my part now won't have anything to do with having dinner with me, but alas you're taken so dinner will have to placate any other thoughts I may have tonight. Shall we?" G.W. helped Piper with her wrap before she offered her arm and waved her other hand toward the elevator.

"We shall."

The cabdriver, per G.W.'s instructions, set out on a leisurely pace for one of Paris's most famous landmarks. Seen as a backdrop in so many pictures of the city of lights, it was an awesome sight to stand at the base of the Eiffel Tower and look up and through its intricate structure made of steel held together by bolts. Such a marvel of modern engineering was forgotten when the two women looked at it as a large piece of beautiful art.

"My lady, your evening awaits." G.W. buttoned her coat and took hold of Piper's hand leading her toward the private entrance that would take them to their first stop of the evening. The elevator opened to the elegant dining room of the Jules Verne Restaurant a hundred and twenty five meters off the ground. Around them the city was coming to life as the sun went down and Piper just marveled at the excellent, almost three hundred sixty degree, view the space offered the diners.

Head chef, Alain Reix stood with some of his crew to greet the daughter of an old friend. "G.W., 'ello and welcome. I was so glad you called; it's nice to see you again. We 'ave a special table waiting for you, so please sit and let me feed you, no." He led them to the table he spoke of and enjoyed the look of delight that came over Piper's face when she took in the intimate setting away from the eyes of all the other diners.

"Alain, thank you for squeezing us in on such short notice."

"Nonsense, mon amie, you and your lovely lady enjoy my 'ospitality" he said to G.W. before turning to his staff and shooing them back into the kitchen leaving their head waiter to do his job.

The tuxedoed gentleman asked politely if Piper objected to any type of food as he poured their beverage of the evening. When G.W.'s champagne flute was full he disappeared into the kitchen to alert Alain he could start creating whenever the chef was ready, leaving the women alone.

G.W. held her glass up and waited for Piper to focus on her. "Here's to the beginning of your life, Piper, as one phase of it comes to an end. May the man you've chosen know for a lifetime just how lucky he is to share that short span of time with you. I envy you the finding of a love you want to share like that. To you and to your happiness." The crystal sounded almost too loud when the brunette tapped her glass to Piper's and she smiled even though for some reason she had to force it. G.W. thought of all those paintings they had viewed together that afternoon and compared her attraction to Piper in the same way. She had found a treasure who was more than just her outward beauty, but like those paintings, Piper belonged to someone else so looking and admiring were all that were left to her.

"Thank you for tonight and for those lovely thoughts. I predict they'll get me through the rough times. And how do you know it's a man who gave me this ring? I'm here with you after all." Piper tried teasing to get her mind back from where it had wandered off to in its musings about G.W.

"Hopefully there won't be too many rough times, and just a hunch on my part, it's a man all right." G.W. took another sip and thought a long moment before asking the question that had popped into her head. "You haven't settled have you, Piper?"

"In love you mean?"

"In anything. It isn't too late to decide on another path if you're having second thoughts. I'm sorry, please ignore me; this really isn't any of my business. You know yourself better than anyone so I'm sure you're more than sure of your choices."

"Then why'd you ask?"

"Because you seem so sad sometimes when I look at you, and it makes me sad in return. I may not have the luxury of history with you, but I don't want to see you settle."

From the corner opposite where they were sitting a small band started playing making Piper want to change the direction their conversation had taken. "Dance with me?"

The world was blissful for the moment as Piper felt G.W. take her in her arms and start to sway to the soulful sounding song she didn't understand the words to. With the lights of Paris before her and G.W.'s chest under her cheek, the blonde felt torn between sinking into the embrace more deeply and bolting toward the door before she got any more involved.

With his usual flair, Alain served up a wonderful meal to go with the beautiful location in which to enjoy it. Before they left he embraced G.W. and kissed both her cheeks, whispering in her ear to bring back the delightful Ismarelda before the year was out.

"Thank you, G.W., that was truly a wonderful way for me to spend my last night in Paris." Piper sat in the back of the cab and held G.W.'s hand thinking they were headed back to her hotel. The time for fantasies was over.

"One more stop and I promise to get you home before I turn into a rat and the cab into a pumpkin." They stopped in front of a massive building that was mostly dark. The banners flying close to the building alerted the passerby to location of the Musee Rodin. As much as G.W. admired the great painter and sculptor, they were there to see another artist's work, which was on loan from its home in Vienna for a short time. She was only glad their timing was right so she could share it with Piper before she left the city.

"Isn't it closed?" Piper stood next to her date and wondered if breaking and entering was something G.W. usually dabbled in.

"To the mere mortal maybe, but tonight think of yourself as the special woman you are." A guard opened the door for them when they neared the entrance and waved them in. Another took their coats and pointed G.W. in the right direction.

"Please take your time, G.W., Petri insisted."

In a room toward the front of the museum on the second floor hung the masterpiece 'The Kiss' by Gustav Klint. The couple he'd painted were suspended for eternity in the passion of a kiss. The man draped in a cloak of squares, the woman in one of circles seemed lost in their own world not caring who was looking on at the love they shared.

"This is one I won't tell you anything about. I'll let you come up with your own story to why Klint painted it and who they might have been. Your education will come this time not from the telling but from the showing."

"I see you do believe true love exists." Piper's face was almost glowing when she turned to G.W. and grabbed her hands to pull her closer.

"I see you're no longer afraid." The blonde didn't repudiate the statement because she wasn't afraid she was just enlightened. Wise now to the fact she did know true love existed, only the thought would never bring her comfort since she would step on a plane tomorrow and walk away from her discovery. In one glance across a café, she'd found someone who made her feel more than Piper could have ever thought she was capable of. Now though, she would have to lock those feelings away and save them for times the unfairness of life would seem insurmountable.

G.W. turned Piper around and stepped up behind her so she could admire Piper instead of Klint's work. The soft blonde hair that rested on Piper's shoulders made her want to run her fingers through it and see if all those insipid lines in romance novels about spun soft gold were true. There had been women before Piper, G.W. didn't exactly live like a hermit, but why hadn't any of them made her ache inside the way she had when they'd danced earlier. The publisher moved to put her arms around Piper when the blonde tried to discretely wipe away a tear. *What secrets do you hide behind that quiet sad façade, Piper?* The question almost made G.W. tear up as well

but she never opened her mouth to ask it and just enjoyed the last of their time together.

Their night ended where it had begun, at Piper's hotel room door with G.W. standing in the hallway. "Good night, Piper, and good luck."

"Wait, I don't want to see you go just yet. I leave tomorrow but I want to see you again, please tell me you want at least that."

For the first time Piper could see the indecision in G.W.'s features. "I don't know if that's such a good idea. It's time for us to stop before we do something that'll lead us to the regret we talked about this afternoon."

"Something like this?" Piper pulled G.W. down by the lapels of her coat and pressed her lips against the taller woman's. They yielded quicker than they should have and G.W. pulled Piper into her body with a quick intensity, before just as quickly, coming to her senses.

"I'm sorry, Piper, but I won't do this to you or to myself. If you want I'll be here in the morning to drive you to the airport, but I won't stay here tonight."

"I want anything you're willing to give." G.W. left before the green eyes got any sadder and she got any weaker. In one afternoon, Piper had left her wanting and G.W. did not like the feeling at all.

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"Just the person I was waiting for," said Gwendolyn when she opened the front door of her flat to the almost haggard looking publisher. G.W. looked around finding the space surprising considering the writer's success.

It was a large space with one wall of solid glass with the bathroom being the only space that seemed to be completely private. In one corner stood a four-poster bed and near it a beautiful desk covered in a sea of paper with a typewriter looking like an island in the middle. But the one part of the room that drew G.W.'s eye was the little reading nest Gwendolyn had created near the windows.

A large comfortable chair sat facing the view of the Seine with a small table next to it. There was a stack of books piled next to a chipped teacup, and from the look of the space it was also the writer's favorite spot.

"Please come in." Gwendolyn stepped aside and let G.W. into her home, glad for the break from her writing.

"Thank you, this place is great." The heavy coat and scarf were discarded over a kitchen chair as was the suit jacket letting Gwendolyn know G.W. felt comfortable.

"I have a more traditional home outside the city, but this place felt almost like I said earlier, a

tree house the first time I walked in."

G.W. walked to the chair she had been admiring and sat down. To her great amusement the top book in the stack was "Murder in the Mayan Ruins" by Rio Rivers. The bookmark showed Gwendolyn had only about twenty pages left before the end.

"Are you a fan?" G.W. held up the book getting Gwendolyn to look almost bashful when she blushed. Considering some of the passages the woman was able to pen, it was an accomplishment on G.W.'s part.

"Would my allure fade somewhat if I said yes?"

G.W. put the book back on the stack and laughed. "No, Rio's like a Snickers candy bar in a Godiva chocolate store. The way I feel is every so often, in a world that thinks the more expensive something is the better it makes it, that kind of treat's what it takes to hit the spot. Just a bit of fluff so the noodle can take a vacation." G.W. tapped her finger to the side of her head and laughed. "Your allure is safe."

"Thanks, now that my secret's out I can readily admit I'm a big fan. And now that you're here and comfortable, what would you like to talk to me about?"

G.W. gave her the standard Steinblack Publication contract pitch with some extra incentives to get the woman to sway her loyalties. Gwendolyn listened as she sat on the arm of her reading chair realizing she had made up her mind in the bar earlier that night. Her current publisher was eager for any of her new works because they sold well, but here was someone who could give her not only an avenue to bring her writing to the public but could also quote passages from her books. People usually didn't do that unless they read them and enjoyed them enough to remember some of the lines.

"Do you have any questions?" When G.W. stopped talking, Gwendolyn looked at her displaying the guilt of someone who had not been paying attention.

"I'm sure my agent will iron out any problems for me, but if you really want to publish the book I'm working on now, I'm all yours."

The smile was hard to tame on G.W.'s face after hearing the agreement. In the time she had been explaining the contract the traffic on the river had slowed to the occasional boat headed toward its safe harbor for the night and along her shores a few late night lovers strolled hand in hand. From the dark apartment it was easy to see why Paris had dubbed the city of lights as well as the city of romance.

"Thank you, with you at the top of my releases this summer, Steinblack will be back at the top of the charts, and you'll have another best seller to contend with."

Gwendolyn cupped G.W.'s cheek and smiled at her enthusiasm for the process. "For you I'd almost be willing to tour, but enough about work for one evening. Let's celebrate our new

partnership, shall we?" After G.W. nodded, Gwendolyn got up and walked to the small refrigerator in the back corner of the apartment. Inside was a cold bottle of champagne waiting to join their little party. With a walk, which could almost be described as gliding, the writer moved back to G.W. with two crystal flutes and the bottle.

G.W. loosened the cork with a small pop and filled the two glasses. The clink the flutes produced was the perfect pitch achieved with fine crystal, and the only thing better was the taste the rush of bubbles produced on their tongues. Gwendolyn took one more sip before she put her glass down on the table and slid into G.W.'s lap. She liked this woman who had come into her life and there was nothing she wanted more than to spend a night looking at the view that all too often went forgotten when she got engrossed in her work.

The best treasure you can find at times is someone you can talk to about the things that interest you. Better yet, is finding someone you can be silent with and find it a comfort. That night the two lone souls sitting in the darkness found silence was as comfortable as the chair they were sitting in.

Gwendolyn woke the next morning, confused as to how she had gotten to her bed. Next to her was a note with G.W.'s number and a thank you for the lovely company and view. She smiled as she tugged a strand of hair behind her ear for the fact she had perhaps found more than just a publisher.

Across town Piper opened her door to a brightly wrapped box that was hiding the person holding it. When she laughed, G.W. lowered the box and accepted the invitation to step into the room. There was a stack of luggage piled at the foot of the bed, reminders the beautiful woman she had just found really was leaving.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well?" G.W. stood in the center of the room still holding the gift she had brought.

"It took a while. Some good-looking thing wine and dined me, returned an extraordinary kiss, then left. Got me all worked up so sleeping was the last thing on my mind when I first went to bed. How about you?" asked Piper as she stepped closer to G.W. She was trying to keep it light, so the tears that had been threatening all morning, wouldn't come until she was surrounded by strangers on the plane ride home.

"It was sort of a strange situation, but I managed a few hours, thanks. I know we have to leave in a few minutes to get you to the airport on time, but I got you something. Think of it as a memento to show your grandchildren when you tell them about your wild fling in Paris." G.W. handed over the surprisingly heavy box and watched Piper rip the paper and ribbon off. "I hope you like it."

Piper lifted the top and reached inside for the tissue wrapped item eager to see what G.W. had picked out. Her eyes lost the battle and misted when the last of the paper came off and she looked at the small replica of 'Winged Victory.'



"It's crystal instead of stone but I hope she will be a symbol that no matter what life throws at you, victory's perched waiting for you. Do you like it?" To answer G.W.'s question, Piper put the gift down on the bed and walked back to the giver. Like the night before she pulled G.W. down by the lapels and kissed her.

"I can never sleep on planes anyway, so I might as well have something to think about," Piper said explaining the kiss. "And I love my present. Thank you so much." She rubbed off all the traces of her lipstick she'd left on G.W.'s face enjoying the feel of her skin under her fingers.

"I'm glad you like it." G.W. put her hand to the side of Piper's face before sliding it into her hair. *Maybe there is something to that spun gold thing after all.* Holding Piper so close made it so clear to her that she had fallen in love with this woman. If a relationship with Piper were possible, maybe she could feel the balance she was missing. G.W. had her job she loved and was passionate about, but there were only so many hours she could spend putting together deals and writing editorials, Piper would have given her a reason to want to go home.

"No, not just for the gift, G.W., but for the reminder that just because I'm getting married doesn't mean I'm going to lose who I am. Because of you I'm not as afraid of fading into oblivion."

The bellhop arrived to take the bags down giving them time to repack Piper's gift. At the airport they got all the paperwork and gate information out of the way first so they would have time for a cup of coffee.

"When are you going home?" asked Piper.

"It shouldn't take me too long now that my business is complete. I should be able to head stateside within a couple of days."

"Where's home when you cross the big pond?" Piper ran a finger around the rim of her coffee cup in an effort to keep from touching G.W.

"New Orleans."

"Really? That's where I'm headed in a few days, so that means I'll get to see you again, right?"

"Piper, I don't think that's such a great idea. You're getting married in two months. Concentrate on that and how great your life's going to be. This guy had better know what a great woman he's getting in the bargain. Be happy and know I'll think of you often."

"But I just found you," said Piper softly.

"You loved him enough to take his ring, give him the chance to show you again why you chose to take it. By tomorrow you won't remember me, I promise." G.W. pulled Piper out of her chair and walked her to the international security gate. She kissed the blonde goodbye when the final boarding call was made and came close to asking Piper to stay a few more days. G.W. headed for the exit without looking back because she knew doing anything else would only make it that

much harder to let go.

Behind G.W., Piper stood watching her go and feeling like her heart was dying a little more with each step the tall woman took. When the doors of the airport opened, G.W. stepped out, her coat swirling around her like it had the day Piper had seen her stepping into the café for breakfast. Not seeing G.W. again was a promise Piper did not intend to keep.

As soon as Piper got back finding her tall friend would be a priority for her. *Granted it would've been easier, Piper, if you had bothered to get her last name instead of staring into her eyes at every given opportunity.* On the other hand maybe G.W. was right and all she needed to do was get back and get into the swing of why she had decided to settle down and get married. If she could only get the wish out of her head that it was G.W.'s ring on her finger instead of someone else's.

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"You seem a million miles away tonight, is it something I said?" Gwendolyn leaned back in her chair and looked at her dinner companion over the rim of her wineglass. The little Italian place around the block from her flat always prepared excellent food so she knew it wasn't why G.W. kept pushing her pasta around her plate like she was trying to kill it.

"Sorry, I'm being a horrible date aren't I?"

"Granted at any other time I'd be content to just sit here and look at you, but I've found you to be such a great conservationist that I feel cheated. You want to tell me about her?"

The Steinblack smile she'd inherited from Sol was back and G.W. dropped her fork and mirrored Gwendolyn's relaxed posture. "So sure of yourself are you that I'm suffering from a broken heart?"

"Honey, I've written enough books about female romance to think I'd recognize all the symptoms. The droopy lip, the slumped shoulders and the heavy sighing are all classics trust me on this. Tell me your story and who knows, you may end up as a chapter in my next work." Gwendolyn reached across the small table and picked up one of the big hands trying to offer quiet encouragement for G.W. to start talking.

The teasing broke through the haze of depression G.W. had been walking around in all day after watching from the curb of the airport as Piper's plane left for the states. "It might just be interesting to see how you might pen me if given enough ammunition, though you might not have enough subject matter to work on with this tale. To be honest, I'm not real sure why I'm so torn up about a woman I've only known for less than forty-eight hours, and who is getting married to someone else. Did I mention she's marrying a man?"

Gwendolyn's face pinched up like she was in pain in sympathy for what G.W. was going through. "Ouch, honey, when you go out there and find someone, you sure like to make it hard on yourself don't you? Don't discount the amount of time when it comes to your heart though.

Some of my best friends have been married for over twenty years and professed undying love for each other after only twenty minutes. But back to you, do you want Dr. Flora's advice?"

The wineglass in G.W.'s hands went up toward Gwendolyn, "Please, I can use all the advice I can get."

"Pay the bill, take me back to my flat and let me hold you tonight on that great bed in the corner. I promise to drive all other thoughts out of your head morose or otherwise, and that's what I'll write about." Gwendolyn leaned forward and pulled G.W.'s hand closer to her. "Only there's a catch."

"What, I ravish you or else hit the road?"

"No, I get to use the name Rio Rivers in the chapter." She pulled the hand further towards her so that G.W.'s fingertips were grazing her nipple.

The stiffening against her fingers was hard to ignore as Gwendolyn leaned further into her. "Why ask me that?"

"Because I've enjoyed the adventures you've taken me on as much as my writing has made your evenings more enjoyable, Rio."

"How'd you guess?"

"Just like you got to know your grandfather through his journals, I've gotten to know you through your words. I happen to be in New Orleans when you started at the Tribune and one of your first editorials ran. It was a piece on the state of politics in a state known for corruption and kickbacks. I read it through twice before calling the paper and asking about you. Imagine my shock when they told me you were only twenty-four. Your prose mixes so well with your sense of humor and sense of honor. That's hard to find in even the most seasoned writer. Then I was on a plane to promote 'Totem' and I picked up my first Rio Rivers adventure on a whim. I was expecting mind numbing and what I found was you, funny and passionate, only instead of a short editorial it was a whole book."

G.W. sat back and looked at Gwendolyn like she didn't know what to say. Besides her mother, the writer was the first to guess the identity of her pen name. "Wow, you're good."

"You'll never find out if you don't get out of that chair. How about it, we have a deal?"

"I'm flattered you'd even do this for me. This might be an entry for my own journals, the night I spent with Gwendolyn Flora."

"How about you come with me and we'll change that sentiment to interesting? I promise only one night is all I'll ask for, which is completely against my nature." When G.W. arched a dark brow Gwendolyn slapped her hand. "I know I write steamy stuff but it doesn't mean I can't be compassionate. I'm just picky about who I show my mother hen side to, and tonight I pick you. I

just want to hold you, G.W., that's all. You shouldn't be alone, it'll just make you feel worse."

True to her word, Gwendolyn made G.W. forget Piper for the night. In the morning her only regret was not returning the publisher's calls sooner. Had she done so maybe it would have been her G.W. would be lamenting about on the flight home today, driving her back to Paris sooner.

"Thank you, for everything." G.W. sat on the edge of the bed and moved a lock of hair out of Gwendolyn's eyes. A cab was waiting downstairs for a trip to her apartment to load up the luggage then on to the airport.

"Thank you for not saying goodbye." When Gwendolyn sat up the sheet covering her fell away and she smiled when blue eyes did a little covert roving. "Unlike my promise last night, I have a feeling this isn't our last chapter, G.W., so you go, but I expect you back."

"That's a promise I'll gladly make." With a soft kiss, G.W. turned and walked out. When Gwendolyn rolled over to watch her go, the white rose on the nightstand made her smile. Whoever the woman was who had walked out on G.W. the day before, she was a fool.

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"Waiting in the airport for me. Did someone die while I was gone?" G.W. looked at the perfectly coiffed woman standing in the terminal and arched a brow. "Thank you, Walter," she said to her mother's driver who relieved her of all her bags.

"Can't you accept the fact I might've missed you while you were gone. A month's a long time for me to not see that beautiful face."

"Izzy, I love you, you know that, but you're full of shit. You called me too much to miss me. What's wrong?"

Ismarelda laughed the same robust laugh G.W. had when she found something highly amusing. The arms that engulfed her felt good, her daughter always had a way of making even the bleakest of moments lighter and more palatable. "I did miss you, G.W., accept it and move on, and yes there's a little problem at the paper and I wanted you to head over there before we go to print. There's a major senate race on and I feel we've missed the boat on most of the story."

"You are so predictable it's almost scary. I do believe you were able to run the paper just fine without me before my birth, what's happened to that brilliant mind so many people love to brag about?"

"Stop being bitchy, G.W., and let's get a move on. How was your trip? The fact you're here leads me to believe you've been successful in your quest. I read a few of Ms. Flora's books since our last conversation about her and let me tell you, I was quite surprised. The fact anyone can make me blush at my age was thrilling to say the least. The woman can turn a phrase when it comes to matters of the flesh." Ismarelda accepted G.W.'s hand to get into the back of the car when they reached the curb. Storm clouds were starting to gather and with the clouds the temperature was

starting to drop.

"Izzy, you're anything but ancient, so stop acting like an uptown matron. As for Ms. Flora's writing, just wait until the next book and the chapter containing Gwendolyn's own adventure with Rio Rivers. It seemed like such a good idea at the time, really."

Her mother's laugh was back and it made G.W. feel better to be in her best friend's company again. Blue eyes, twins to G.W.'s, looked at her and crinkled at the edges messing up Ismarelda's makeup a bit. *Daddy, for as much as you molded her in your image, there's still a lot of her father in her. Women never could resist him either, and he had his own problems along that score.* The older Steinblack thought of the man who had swept her heart away, then proceeded to kill it a little at a time until she had called an end to the carnage. As difficult as the decision to kick Stephen out of the house was, Ismarelda was glad to have her father take over as the main male influence in their lives.

"Darling, would you be terribly disappointed in me if I decide to skip that chapter? I may have to go and say a prayer of atonement at your grandfather's grave to keep him from coming back to haunt me. I never did believe in such things, but in this city nothing's beyond the realm of possibility. Though I would think Sol would come back simply to pat me on the back because you've turned out the way you have. He always was your biggest fan aside from me."

"Izzy, I'd think you'd want to peek into my bedroom every so often if only to see what you're missing by not trying the forbidden fruit of having a woman as a lover."

Ismarelda leaned against G.W. and reached for her hand. "Trust me there are certain things a mother never wants to know, and I'm perfectly happy with my life, thank you. I don't need the complications that come along with having anyone as my lover."

"Well you'll be happy to know that whatever Ms. Flora decides to write will be a fictional encounter. I did spend a clothing optional night with her, but we kept our body fluids to ourselves as it were."

"Losing your touch, dear?" The car pulled to the front entrance of the Tribune and the management staff was waiting outside for them after a call from Walter when they were a couple of blocks away.

"Wow, I should leave the country more often." The welcoming committee was a sign G.W. would be there way past press time, and gave her a perfect excuse to ignore her mother's teasing question. "I haven't seen them this anxious looking since the main fuse box caught fire in the middle of a run."

"I didn't want to tell you over the phone but circulation's been off by twenty percent for the last two weeks. The public loses a little confidence when you misspell the name of the state in the headline."

G.W. shook her head and wished Joshua had spent some time with Sol before their grandfather

died. Anything remotely wrong with the final paper was like an affront to his honor, a misspelled word in the headline of his leading story would have killed him sooner than the heart attack that had finally claimed him on the press room floor. As her final act of respect for the man who had given her the world, G.W. had slipped his beloved red pencil into his shirt pocket before the casket had been closed.

"If you're going to say a prayer of atonement, it had better be for Joshua. Letting something like that run will get you haunted before any exploit of mine."

The car had barely stopped rolling when G.W. opened the door and stepped out. One of her assistants took her coat and her shirtsleeves were rolled up by the time she got into the bull room. The reporters were culling through their stories trying to decide placement in the run which would begin printing at two o'clock. G.W. took the seat at the head of the table and started pasting together the day's news. Once she took over, all of the staff breathed a sigh of relief to have her back if only for a short time.

"Madelyn, get me one of the candidates on the phone and see if you can setup an interview." G.W. dropped into her office chair and picked up the phone. Even though she had taken over at Steinblack publishing, which was located in one of the posh office buildings downtown, the paper kept her office and support staff on standby.

"Which one, boss?"

"Call Landrieu first and see if she's in the city, then get me some of the issues that have been big press while I was gone. I read the paper in Paris, and this thing has turned into a mud fest of major proportions. We'll get the incumbent's take first then go after the puppet the other's sides has put up."

"I thought the news was supposed to turn a blind eye?" Madelyn, G.W.'s longtime secretary, asked in a teasing voice trying to get a rise out of her boss, getting instead a long index finger pointed at her in warning.

"Blind doesn't translate into stupid and misinformed, my dear. Get moving and tell Ralph to save some space on the editorial page. Depending on what I get today this might turn into a weeklong series on the state of politics in today's world." Numbers were rapidly punched into the phone after referring to the thick Rolodex on the desk getting the first of her political analyst friends to give his take.

At one, the first draft of the paper was starting to take shape. From the glass wall framing one side of G.W.'s office on the third floor, Ismarelda looked on as her daughter started to put together the type of product the Tribune was known for. The three local television stations had already called and asked G.W. to appear to give her views on the state of the election and what the outcome would be. If jetlag had been a problem for the publisher, it wasn't showing as she picked up items and moved them around like she was playing a game of chess.

When G.W. got to the section that ran pretty much like it was laid out, it was the first time in the

long day she'd thought of Piper. Pictures of young brides to be were listed with a bevy of information on them and their betrothed, including the particulars of the planned nuptials. *I hope you're doing ok and in two month's time you'll be thrilled with your decision.* It had only been one afternoon and one dinner, but the blonde had gotten into G.W.'s head and refused to leave. *I should be thinking about Gwendolyn and when I'll see her again. Why must you make everything difficult, G.W., wishing for things that'll never be?* She asked herself the question as she moved to the sports pages.

In a way, G.W. was convinced that wishing for things that she couldn't have, was for her, a self-preservation thing to keep her from committing to any one woman. The romantic notions of having feelings for someone who belonged to someone else was a great excuse to say 'I'd have given it a shot but I was too late.'

Ismarelda put her hand on the glass and wondered what had put the look of sadness on G.W.'s face when she looked at the pictures in the bridal section. Perhaps it had been a picture of a missed opportunity, her mother would never know nor would she ask. The state of her children's love life was a subject she tried to stay out of after the one relationship she'd given her all to had fallen apart. Advice on matters of the heart was not in Ismarelda's repertoire.

"Has the prodigal son returned from her adventures?" Joshua walked into the room and took a seat behind his sister's desk. The fact G.W. was on the floor putting together the afternoon edition was testament to his mother's assessment on how he'd done.

The hand pressed to the glass never came down and Ismarelda never turned around. Her son had grown increasingly bitter through the years as her father turned over more and more responsibility to the one grandchild who was interested in the family business. Sol had not tried to hold the fact Joshua looked so much like his father against him except for the dark hair and blue eyes. But when the boy showed more aptitude for spending money and having a good time than working to add to what the old man had already built, his affections and trust went to G.W.

Almost as if feeling her mother's anguish, G.W. looked up from the floor and smiled when blue eyes made contact with hers from the office perch. When the dark head bent back to concentrate on the final section, Ismarelda turned and faced her oldest child. "I got a call from Charles today."

"And what did old Charlie have to say, mother?"

"That you were asking how to break the basic stipulations of your trust. If it's money you need, you could've just asked me first. I don't appreciate hearing about things like this from the hired help." His mother's face was enough to make him stand up and move away from G.W.'s desk. Before he did, he noticed his sister hadn't bothered to sand out the burn marks on the left corner where Sol would sometimes forget his cigar.

"Why in the world would I want to discuss that with you? The answer would have been no, just like I'm sure you told Charles to pass along to me. Unless you're the golden child in this family no one gives a shit about you. And speaking of which, what's she doing back down there?"

The slight shoulders caved a little when Ismarelda sighed. "Her hair is as black as yours, Joshua so don't sound like such a jealous lout when it comes to your sister. As for the other matter, I told him to give you whatever you wanted. Your grandfather left you the money, and you're right, it's yours to do with as you please. After today you're a free man, son, so enjoy. You're also a wealthy man, but just remember the business and who'll inherit that, is still sealed until G.W.'s thirtieth birthday. I thought it only fair to give you what you wanted earlier, since we both know who father entrusted his empire to. G.W. will get control so I'm no longer going to bind you to an existence or a job you don't want."

"Is this some sort of trick? I tried to make you and Sol happy but it was never good enough. Is it my fault G.W. was born with some sort of freakish gift for the written word? I gave it my all, both here and at the publishing house, but the odds were always stacked against me. Since I'm not Geordie, I'll never measure up, so why even try to make a good impression. It was never going to happen when Sol was alive and kicking, and it sure as hell isn't going to happen now." Ismarelda looked at her son and wondered where the sweet little boy who used to color her pictures for her office had gone. When he smiled a certain way he looked so much like G.W., but the eyes and the hair obviously were not the keepers of your soul.

"I'm not even going to bother to rehash this with you again, and don't think for a minute you're doing a great job of building sympathy for yourself. Take the money, Joshua, and stop your whining. Trust me, everyone else is tired of hearing it. Your grandfather gave you every opportunity, but you threw it all back in his face, and you kept at it until you broke his heart. If you didn't make a good impression on him when he was alive and it counted, you've failed miserably after his death. What you don't get is, I could make G.W. start here as a delivery person and before she was of age to take over the business, she would already have done it on merit. We all chose our path in life, son, and you started walking yours long before now."

"You never...", Joshua closed in on his mother and raised his voice.

"You're right, I never should've let you get away with half the shit you tried to pull, but what's done is done. So sit down, shut up and try to act civil. You're my son and I love you, but I'll be damned if I'm going to spend my life trying to push you to do things you don't want to do. Nor am I going to let you use my father's dream as a playground any longer. Your trust fund will be more than adequate for you and your new family if you should decide to start one. If it isn't enough then you'll just have to wait until I decide to drop dead to inherit the rest of what you have coming to you. Once that's done and it still isn't enough, your last hope will be if your father wins the lottery."

"You and Sol never gave him a chance. My father...", started Joshua only to be overridden by Ismarelda again.

"Since today seems to be a day to bear our souls and tell each other the truth, it's your turn to listen to what I've got on my mind. I've held my tongue on this subject long enough, and I'm tired of forever being the bad guy when it comes to your father. When I got married it wasn't about the money or his lack of it that was important. What was important was I had fallen in love. I can't



speaking for your father and tell you why he married me and decided to start a family, but all I can tell you is after a few years it became abundantly clear what his motives were."

Ismarelda stopped for a moment and took a deep breath, but the rest of it was going to come out no matter how much it hurt the already flagging relationship she had with Joshua. "I respect the fact that he's your father and I know you love him, but let's not try to color the truth. Your father wanted to live off the Steinblack money while still enjoying the life he had before he married into the Steinblack money and Sol wasn't about to put up with it any more than I was. If you want to help him be my guest, it's your money to do with as you please." She hadn't meant to do it, but Ismarelda's hands were clenched by her sides by the time she was finished. The boy's incessant griping about how unfair his life was had worn her patience for almost thirty years and it was time to put a stop to it before it continued for another three decades.

"Is there a problem?" G.W. stopped in the doorway when she heard the screaming down the hallway. It wasn't like her mother to lose her cool, but Joshua could drive anyone to the brink.

"Nothing to worry about, Geordie, I believe dear old mom was just giving me my walking papers. It seems like I'm now a man of leisure, and just in time too." He walked over to his sister and hugged her before pulling her into the room. "Welcome back, and please don't hate me now that you're back in charge here as well as the publishing house. It seems I don't have what it takes to live up to the Steinblack name, but not to worry, I'm not the least bit interested in learning."

G.W. looked at her mother with a raised brow before hugging her brother again. "Thanks for the welcome home, and I'm sorry to see you go. If there's something I can do to help you find something to make you happy then let me know."

"Geordie, always the appeaser, huh? I have plenty to be happy about and you know me, I'll always find the happening place to spend my time and considerable newfound fortune. Sol may have never liked me as much as he liked you, but he didn't skimp when it came to the inheritance. Ladies, if you'll excuse me I have stuff to do." Joshua walked out without another word for his mother. He had an early dinner date with his father and couldn't wait to tell him about the early gift his mother had given him. With Ismarelda giving in so easily, maybe he wouldn't have to go through with what he had planned for the future.

"Care to tell me what just happened?" G.W. sat behind her desk and opened her email file. Instantly the inbox started filling up with what were marked urgent messages.

"Your brother and I aren't in agreement when it comes to your father, dear, and for once he prodded me a little too long on the subject and I lost control. I'm not proud, but I have to keep reminding myself I'm only human."

G.W. got up and went to sit next to her mother. She had never turned down an opportunity to spend time with Stephen when she was younger, wanting to form her own opinion of the man her grandfather disliked so much. It had taken only a few years for G.W. to figure out why her mother looked so sad whenever his name was mentioned. Stephen talked a good game, but he did very little to back up his claims of devotion, but to Joshua it had never mattered. He soaked

up the praise their father doled out and let his mind be warped by the vicious comments Stephen had an endless supply of when it came to their mother and grandfather. Father and son had formed an easy alliance, which helped Stephen stay that much closer to Sol's money. Lack of any kind of work ethic was something father and son both had in common. Another was trying to get by with putting out as little effort for anything as possible, both professionally and emotionally.

"Izzy, don't be so hard on yourself. You know dear old dad didn't hold back like you did when we were growing up. Joshua should've figured out who he was dealing with just from the way he talks about you, but he chose to build Stephen up to something he never could be. Come with me down to the station for these interviews I have lined up and then I'll take you to dinner."

"G.W., have I told you recently just how much I thank God everyday He graced me with you?"

"Thank you, mama, but don't worry Joshua will find his way."

One of the runners chased them down before the car pulled away and handed G.W. the first paper off the belt. The two women looked through it as they made their way to the first stop for the evening. They spent the rest of the night talking about G.W.'s trip and enjoying each other's company. The estate was quiet and dark by the time they got home and G.W. dropped off into a dreamless sleep.

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Even though she was tired, G.W. was up just as the sun was starting to rise. It had been her habit from a young age to go down and read the competitor's paper with an early breakfast. Before her were the expansive gardens Sol had spent his last days in, admiring the landscape it had taken him a lifetime to complete. It always amazed G.W. that Sol was able to amass such a vast amount of beautiful, pristine acreage so close to the center of the city. The hot coffee tasted good going down since there was a chill in the air bringing with it the wispy vapors of fog. Hidden behind Mother Nature's veil were the winter flowers the gardeners had planted, and something else.

G.W. looked up from the article she was reading and thought she was hallucinating. Walking out of the fog as if in answer to a wish was Piper, wrapped in a shawl, lost in thought. Before she could control herself, G.W. was out of her chair and down the steps headed for the center of her daydreams for the last couple of days. It didn't really matter what Piper was doing in her mother's garden, what mattered was she was there at all.

The click of heels on the marble steps got Piper to look toward the house to see who was coming to join her. She staggered and leaned against a large urn when she saw G.W. closing in on her. The large palm planted in the urn hid the two from any prying eyes in the house when without a word it was G.W. who pulled Piper to her and kissed her with such intensity the smaller woman's feet came off the ground.

"Oh my God," Piper slipped her hands into G.W.'s hair and pulled her mouth closer again.

"I missed you so much," G.W. admitted when their third kiss ended. "When did you get here?"

"Early this morning."

"How in the world did you find me?" G.W.'s heart was pounding so hard she expected it to show through her shirt and sweater.

"Before I answer that, can I ask what you're doing here?"

"What are you talking about? I live here," G.W. stammered a little as her brain started to shoot a stream of questions through her head. "Maybe I should ask why you're here?"

Piper looked like she was about to be sick and moved out of G.W.'s embrace. "Don't tell me, let me guess, you're Geordie?"

"How did you know that, only my brother calls me that? He started when we were kids to aggravate me then it just sort of stuck. How do you know, Joshua?"

"She's engaged to me, that's how," said the male voice from the top of the stairs. Grace had come upstairs and informed Joshua that despite her late arrival in the wee hours of the morning Piper was awake and taking a walk. "G.W., let me introduce you to Piper Delling. Piper, this rogue's my sister, Geordie. Of course the world knows her as the more than accomplished G.W. Steinblack. Do you two know each other?"

"No, Josh, I was just wondering who the pretty girl wandering around Sol's garden was. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Delling, I'm sure we'll have more than enough time to get to know each other. If you will excuse me, I have to get going. I'm sure you're more than anxious to spend time with your fiancé, Josh, congratulations." G.W. looked at her brother with a smile that didn't move anything else on her face except her mouth before hugging him. G.W. was numb by the time her foot hit the first step. There was no way she could share a house with her brother and his new bride to be. To come home everyday and see them together was more than she could fathom at the moment.

"Grace." The downstairs maid came out of the kitchen when G.W. called, surprised by the bellow. To have her raise her voice to anyone or sound so impatient after only one word was unlike G.W.

"Something wrong?"

"Sorry I yelled, I'm in a hurry." G.W. was already putting on her coat and getting her things together to leave. "Could you tell my mother I'm heading over to the publishing house this morning before heading to the paper? If she needs anything, I'll have my phone."

"I'll be happy to. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, Grace. Maybe my jetlag is finally making an appearance." The long time Steinblack

employee smiled and nodded her head. She was about to head up to Ismarelda's room when she heard one of the back doors open. The young woman who had introduced herself that morning stood there looking as upset as G.W. and just as uncertain. "Thank you, Grace, that'll be all." Grace nodded again and reluctantly started toward the stairs.

"G.W., please, I want to talk to you." The pain in Piper's voice matched the pain in G.W.'s soul.

"There's nothing I can think of that we need to talk about." G.W. put her hand up and took a step back when Piper stepped into the room and closed the door. "Forget about Paris, Piper. It was one night and one dinner, nothing more. I'm sure you'll be happy here with Joshua and his little hobbies, and if there's anything you need let Grace or one of the staff know."

"Please don't do this."

"What, Piper? What am I doing? You're going to marry my brother for God's sake. What in the world would we have to talk about that wouldn't be overshadowed by that ever again?" G.W. might as well have been shouting, her voice sounded so harsh. Piper couldn't stand it and started crying, her shoulders shaking as the tears turned into sobs. "Please, Piper, don't."

"I just want to explain." It took the blonde several deep breaths to get the line out.

G.W. put her briefcase down and moved closer. Not being able to help it, she put her arms around Piper to get her to stop crying. "Come on, sweetheart, don't do this to yourself." The compassion that had seeped into G.W.'s voice only made Piper cry harder. "Why don't you go lie down for a little while and I promise we'll talk later." Piper clung to G.W., afraid she wouldn't get another opportunity to explain.

G.W. didn't give her a chance, walking her back to the guestroom Piper was occupying and then leaving. How could she have been walking the grounds one minute thinking of what she'd lost when she walked away from G.W., then have her world ripped to shreds the next? The morning melted away into afternoon then night with a few people venturing to knock on the bedroom to check on her welfare, leaving when there was no answer. Piper just didn't have the strength or the inclination to get up.

The door opening got her to open her eyes but Piper didn't move otherwise. "Piper, is there someone you'd like for me to call?" Ismarelda had grilled Grace for information after lunch came and went and the young woman still hadn't opened her door. "Your father perhaps?"

Hearing the older Steinblack's voice got Piper to sit up and wiped her face. "No, ma'am, I'll be fine. I'm sorry for being so rude today." Piper's eyes filled up again and she looked at her lap to try and hide the fact.

"Nonsense, this is going to be your home so if you want to spend the day lounging about, that's your right. My father built it big and comfortable just for that reason. I'm not here to make you feel worse; I just wanted to make sure you're all right. I'd like to have Grace bring up a light dinner if that's all right? Or maybe you'd care to join me on the balcony outside my room? It's

cold outside but the girls have done a nice job of warming the space."

"Thank you, Mrs. Steinblack, I'd like that."

"Please, Piper, call me Ismarelda, and I'll see you in a few minutes. I'll leave you to freshen up." With a pat to Piper's shoulder Ismarelda took her leave.

As promised, Grace served a light dinner and Ismarelda offered only her company and no questions. Whatever had set the young woman off was between she and G.W., and only they could fix it. When they were finished, Ismarelda walked Piper back to her room and tucked her into bed.

Moving a lock of blonde hair to the side, the older woman leaned over and kissed Piper's forehead. "Try and get some sleep, and I promise it'll look better in the morning."

*If only that were true and G.W. was willing to listen after the shock wears off,* thought Piper. The house was deathly quiet and with nothing to distract her, it occurred to Piper, for the first time that Joshua hadn't taken the time to come and see her. Their time together so far had been spent going over the contracts he and her father had set in motion a week after Joshua had taken over at the paper.

The acquisition of the struggling paper in Atlanta the Delling's owned controlling interest in would give Piper's father Robert a much-needed infusion of cash, while leaving him in charge. Joshua had given them a small interest of the Tribune to close the deal for Piper's accepting his proposal, having worked it out with Robert so the shares would be returned to the couple after the wedding.

His mother had signed off, thinking Joshua had finally shown some initiative toward business and settling down. There could not have been any way for Ismarelda to know it was her son's way of going around Sol's will. With Piper as his wife and the way the contract was written there was no way G.W. could cut him out even after she garnered Sol's blessing from the grave and took over. He would never control or take over but a slice of the profits couldn't be taken away from him.

The final satisfaction would come when both Ismarelda and G.W. found out the whole thing had been Stephen's brainchild. Sol's ex-son in law had waited years to beat the old man and break open the Steinblack vault, it didn't matter to him that Sol was dead. With his trust Joshua didn't need the income, it would be his gift to his father for all the injustices he thought Stephan had suffered through the years.

How could she have known the Geordie that Joshua always talked about was the woman who had stolen her heart in Paris? G.W. wasn't anything like the tyrant her brother painted with a very hateful brush. When they had first met Joshua had been so attentive and kind it had opened her heart to the possibility of loving him. When he offered a way out for her dad and still let him keep something that meant so much to him, she had said yes to his proposal. Her reasoning had been simple, the love she had wanted really didn't exist and all that she could hope for was a

companion who would provide friendship and comfort. Passion and all that came with it was only for those small flings people talked about and didn't really last. Now her desire to help her father was losing to her desire to be with G.W.

Piper watched the minutes tick away on the clock sitting on the nightstand until it was after two in the morning. The sound of footsteps on the stairs got her out of bed in anticipation of it being G.W. finally coming home. Joshua spotted her just as Piper was about to close the door and go back to bed.

"Is something wrong?" The words were slightly slurred and he leaned against the wall to keep the hall from spinning.

Piper shook her head and didn't look him in the eye to hide the fact she hadn't stopped crying. "I was up and just wanted to see who was out here."

"Did Grace and my mother get you all settled in? You ran off this morning before I got a chance to ask."

"They've been great thanks."

"Look there isn't any reason why we both can't make the best of this. I'm sure Geordie will find a place for you after the wedding since your father told me you liked to write. And tomorrow if you're up to it, I'd like for you to meet my father. Maybe we could go out to dinner or something?"

The blonde was so lost but she nodded her head just so she could retreat back into the room. *Piper, what in the hell are you doing here? This isn't the way to fix your father's bad business decisions,* the voice in her head screamed. It sounded like the memory she had locked in her head of her mother. Piper shut her eyes and tried to find the strength to just run away and regroup so she could go after what she really wanted. Joshua took her defeated posture as an invitation to kiss her. After all there should be some reward in it for him for saving the Delling franchise.

The bitter taste of alcohol overwhelming her shook Piper from her bout of depression to find G.W. at the head of the stairs staring at the romantic scene she had disturbed. Piper's heart shattered again from the pain in the transfixed blue eyes after finding her brother and Piper in such an intimate embrace.

G.W. wanted desperately to just turn around and disappear until Piper and Joshua were married, but she wouldn't do that to her mother or the business. But there was no way she could stand much more of this. In the morning she was planning on talking to her mother about the corporate apartment they kept near the paper. Joshua may have won Piper's hand but she would not sit around and watch it unfold. G.W.'s heart couldn't take it.

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"It would just be more convenient for now, mother, please just try and understand and let it go."

G.W. was having breakfast with her mother out on the balcony trying to keep her voice at a civil level due to the early hour.

Ismarelda didn't buy it and since this wasn't Piper she was allowed to pry. "Where do you know Piper from?"

"Mama, please don't, I'm not in the mood."

"She spent most of the day crying in her room yesterday, G.W., so I'm sorry if you're not in the mood, but we are going to talk about this." G.W. looked out toward the yard and thought of standing in the stairwell of the Louvre holding Piper's hand looking at 'Winged Victory.'

"I find it hard to believe, after watching what's happened in this house for the past couple of days, that your brother and this girl are madly in love. If they are then I'm out of touch and love has changed dramatically over the years. I look at you though and I see a tortured soul much like the one I tried to console yesterday, and I'll venture to guess it's not because of your author you spent the evening with."

A wan smile formed on G.W.'s face and she shook her head. "I appreciate that you love me, Izzy, and you're right, Gwendolyn isn't the object of my tortured soul as you put it. Just give me some time and I'll be good as new."

Ismarelda moved from her chair to stand behind G.W. She did the only thing a mother can do to comfort her child, she put her arms around the strong neck and hugged her. "My darling, sometimes it doesn't matter who you fight your battles against, it's only important to win them. If you don't even try, the regret might drown you."

"And if I do, try that is, I'll drown that much quicker."

The older Steinblack, who knew too well what misery love could bring, heard the sadness in G.W.'s voice. Somehow from the time her daughter had left for Paris and returned she had fallen in love with Piper Delling. But more importantly, Piper Delling had also fallen in love with her.

A week later a thrilled father of the bride, Robert, arrived for the engagement party Ismarelda was hosting for Joshua and Piper. Any fixing on Ismarelda's part was thwarted when true to her word G.W. moved out of the house and threw herself into work. G.W.'s regular editorials were back and in the evenings she moved to her other office downtown to work on editing the first chapters Gwendolyn had sent from her new book.

Work, which had always been enjoyable, was now something G.W. did to exhaust herself and not think about Piper. Her secretary had taken to coming in and telling her the blonde was on the phone again only to have G.W. shake her head in refusal. The night of the party had come though and there was no legitimate excuse she could come up with for not attending.

G.W. sat in her office with her suit jacket draped over a chair and Gwendolyn's words in front of her. The chapter with Rio River's was included in the mix and G.W. laughed at the death of the

pen name's butch image. Gwendolyn had written about the sweet way Rio had held her, not demanding anything and leaving a white rose as the only remembrance she had been there.

Rio had been a whim of G.W.'s back in college. A way of writing the swash buckling adventures in her head and still be taken seriously as a newspaper editorialist. She was still surprised at how popular the books, that centered around a character named Kip, had become. The books were published by another house because G.W. never wanted the literary world to think Steinblack had printed them. Not because they were unworthy, but because of her name. Gwendolyn had been the first person to guess Rio's alter ego.

"Don't tell me it's so good you're missing the party you're obviously dressed for?"

G.W. looked up and thought for the second time in a week she was hallucinating after seeing the last person she expected somewhere so unlikely. Dressed for a party as well, Gwendolyn leaned on the door jam smiling and holding a wrap over a black cocktail dress. "This is worth missing a party over," said G.W. holding up the part of the manuscript the writer had sent.

"Come over here and kiss me hello then take me to your soirée. If you show me a good time I'll give you a private reading later." She opened her arms to G.W. and tilted her head up for the quick kiss. Gwendolyn was going to wait till later to find out why G.W. looked like hell, and Ismarelda had invited her to New Orleans for a visit.

Some of the writers who called New Orleans home were in attendance and thrilled to meet the petite woman on G.W.'s arm. Almost despondent green eyes watched them make their way to Ismarelda so G.W. could make introductions. Piper had tried everything to talk privately with G.W. but the people around the head of the Tribune did an admirable job of insulating her.

"Welcome aboard, Gwendolyn, and thank you for coming such a long way to be with us tonight," said Ismarelda holding Gwendolyn's hand. They made small talk for a while admiring both their accomplishments, both noticing G.W.'s eyes betray her and search the room for Piper. "Could I bother you for a refill, I'd like a word with my daughter." Ismarelda held her empty glass up to Gwendolyn and pointed to the nearest bar setup.

"Izzy, that was a little rude," admonished G.W.

"No, dear, you're the one who's being rude. I expect you to get over this funk and talk to Piper tonight." Ismarelda's face showed a touch of anger when G.W. went to interrupt her. "You are going to do this and don't make me threaten you to get it done. Your week of brooding is over, so take care of this and come home."

"Not to change the subject, but have you shown Mr. Delling the new contracts?"

"I was going to wait until morning."

"I'd like to be there so give me the time of the meeting before I take Gwendolyn back to her hotel."



Ismarelda nodded before walking off to find Gwendolyn, and keep her company, knowing G.W. would escape given the opportunity. Piper found G.W. sitting on one of the dozens of benches scattered throughout the grounds. The soft lights in the foliage paved the way since the house couldn't be seen from there, but the music could just be heard.

"Why have you been avoiding me?"

G.W. stood and looked at her before pulling Piper in for a long kiss. "Because I can't help doing that every time I see you."

"I missed you so much, please don't let me go."

"Piper, that's my problem. I don't want to let you go but you're marrying my brother. Not that we have much of a relationship, but I think this would drive the final nail into that coffin."

"I'm not marrying Joshua no matter what happens with us. A month ago I left for Paris to come to terms with the way my life was going to turn out, and then I saw you. You reminded me of Joshua, but in you I saw, and I felt in agonizing detail every time you touched me, what was missing. Your mother told me life is too short to throw it away only so my father can keep his business."

G.W. didn't let go of her but moved them to sit down. "Your father's going to keep his business, at least a portion of it, he just won't get a piece of ours in the deal. The new contracts also call for a change in the editor's office. Your dad may be a good deal maker but he's a lousy newspaperman. His daughter though isn't, so the head of Steinblack Publications isn't going to sign unless you decide to take over."

"I just want you to be my friend again."

The smile that came so easily in their time in Paris was back and it felt good to G.W. to do it without effort. "I will always be your friend, Piper, but I want you to do what I told you before you boarded your plane. There must have been something about Joshua that made you take his ring, and made you think you could spend your life with him. He's a little misdirected sometimes but I've always thought for all his faults, he's a good person. Give him the chance to show you that."

Piper squeezed G.W. one last time and pulled away to sit a little apart from her. "What about you?"

"I shall be standing in the field of battle waiting in the wings for victory so that I may lay my sword down and start to love. But alas the winds have shown her more favor elsewhere and I will be left alone. Alone to try in another lifetime to find what I am searching for. Even though, you see, I have found it in this life when I looked into your eyes, but again Nike has shown favor to another, and you belong to him. So I pick up my sword with a heavy heart and hope to live to fight valiantly for another day. I fight on and pray the flapping wings will be heard on the wind

and signal she has come back to me and brought with her all the treasure I will ever need. For your eyes to look to mine and show no other in their depths but me."

"That was beautiful, G.W., who wrote that?"

"Georgia Wilburn Steinblack and it's dedicated to a girl she met in a beautiful city and shared a beautiful time with. Think of it as my wedding gift to you, with a big bow of goodbye wrapped around it. Be happy, Piper, and this may sound selfish on my part, but I love you. Always remember that." G.W. kissed her one more time and headed back to the house alone. Piper just sat and looked at the sky knowing there was no reason to hurry because G.W. would be gone by the time she got back. She had seen the way Gwendolyn clung to G.W.'s arm and her every word to know they would be gone and G.W. wouldn't give her another thought again. Her honor wouldn't allow it.

"Piper can I talk to you for a second?" The voice startled her and when she saw who it was she could only guess what their conversation would be about.

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"Mr. Delling, what I'm saying is we'll still buy controlling interest in the paper and help you gain back some readership. It just has to be done with someone else at the helm. What I'd like is for you to move into the advertising department and let Piper head up the hard news sections."

Robert looked at G.W. and tried to look intimidating. This wasn't Joshua who had just promised the cash, a part of Steinblack, and no changes on his part. "That's unacceptable and not what I worked out with your brother."

"Then we have nothing else to discuss. The only reason I agreed to this meeting was Joshua did find a good deal in your business, the terms just had to be reworked to fit within our structure and philosophy. I can respect the fact that you can't live with the new terms."

"Finally we're making some headway. Just pull out the original contracts and we'll be done. After all, we're going to be family so it'll all come out in the wash."

"Robert, I think what my sister is trying to say is Steinblack isn't for sale in this merger, you are. Sol Steinblack built this company to be run completely by a member of his family, which in this case is my sister alone. I apologize for overstepping my authority and offering you something that didn't belong to me. If you like, I'll be happy to go back to Atlanta with you and help you and Piper get back on track." G.W. looked on in shock as Joshua used the same charm he'd oozed to get Delling this far to get him to back off a little but still take the deal.

"Don't look so shocked, G.W., just because I haven't shown the least bit of interest to run a paper doesn't mean I don't know how to do it. It's sickening I know but it's like a part of our makeup that goes along with the blue eyes."

"Trust me, Mr. Delling, you should take my brother up on his offer. To have a Steinblack in your

newsroom is worth a few more percent points of ownership than we're asking but I'll throw him in as a bonus." Robert picked up the pen and signed his name next to G.W.'s and Ismarelda's. As long as he stayed a part of the paper and Piper had a managing role, he was happy. Everyone else he had negotiated with had wanted to give him a check and have him clean out his desk.

The attorneys present pointed out the places he had to sign and initial keeping Robert busy as they turned page after page of the thick document. G.W. turned to her brother and cocked her head toward the French doors that led out to the large stone patio located outside the study. The fact Joshua had been awake so early for the meeting and had actually participated surprised her.

"Thank you for finding this for us, Josh. I know you and Sol didn't get along all that great and the ownership of the Tribune has to go to one of us, but I'm hoping this will be the way around that and through expansion you'll want to be part of the business. With a new wife, maybe a move like this is will be good for you. I just wanted to tell you I was proud of you and I think Piper's a lovely woman. You're going to be really happy."

"Thanks, G.W. I appreciate you saying that even after you probably figured out what I was trying to do. The old man wouldn't have given me another chance but I never gave you enough credit for always coming to my defense even though it should've been the other way around since you're younger. I'm sorry for being such an ass most of the time."

"Don't go changing on me now, Josh, G.W. sounds a little strange coming out of you so let's go back to Geordie. Take good care of her, brother."

"I'll do that, and, Geordie." She turned back and looked at him, stopping her on her way to the door, thinking they were done. "I love you."

"I love you too, Josh."

With the contracts going back with their legal representatives, G.W. kissed her brother good-bye and headed to the office. He and the Delling's would be leaving that morning to head back to Atlanta and start making the changes G.W. wanted implemented. She had given Joshua and Piper complete control to do what they thought was best for the next six months before she came to evaluate what other changes needed to be done.

Over lunch G.W. looked up at Gwendolyn and smiled when an idea popped into her head. "How about a crepe?"

"I didn't think those were easily found here in the city, or is it their dessert specialty here?"

"I'm sure the chef could whip some up if we asked nicely but what I had in mind was more along the lines of one of those little stands on every corner in Paris. How about I show you my city for a couple of days then I'll fly you home and get you one?"

Gwendolyn laughed at G.W.'s spontaneity. Here across from her she had found the perfect person she could spend her life with and mostly likely fall in love with given the opportunity,

only to have her lamenting over someone else. It was hard for G.W. to hide those feelings all the time and Gwendolyn thought more of herself than to settle for just a little of G.W., she wanted it all or nothing.

"I would love for you to accompany me home. Talk about going to extremes to prove to me how chivalrous you are, if I was a southern delicate flower you might have turned my head by now."

"I read that last short story that's the next chapter in the book entitled 'Long Afternoons in the Park,' wilting flower is so not you. But thanks for saying yes, I think a couple more days in Paris where I'm not concentrating on chasing after you might be just what I need."

Four days later, G.W. and Gwendolyn were sitting side by side in first class on a flight to Charles DeGaulle Airport outside of Paris. The staff at the Tribune was looking forward to having Ismarelda back for a few days running things until G.W. came home.

Before she left, G.W. had spoken to Joshua and he sounded excited about rolling his sleeves up and getting the newly renamed Atlanta Tribune to the same caliber of excellence as her sister publication in New Orleans. Another good thing about his new appreciation for the business he'd turned his back on for so long, was a willingness to get to know his mother better and try and build a relationship. He was making an effort to try, even against Stephen's fear of losing the only child that he felt cared about him, or more importantly, would take care of him. Ismarelda was amazed at the transformation and didn't really care what had brought in on, just that she had the Joshua she remembered back.

She could hear the difference too as he jumped from one subject to the next, there was only one he left out. He hadn't mentioned Piper during the conversation and G.W. didn't ask. It was time to move on and try like hell to be happy for Joshua and forget about her feelings for Piper.

A few days turned into a few weeks in Paris and G.W. was enjoying her time walking the streets while Gwendolyn wrote and finished her book. They had enjoyed dinner together every few nights and talked like old friends about the new things G.W. discovered on her daily outings. What Gwendolyn hoped would turn into romance, evolved more as a comfortable friendship that would, with time she knew, become one of her most enduring and reliable.

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The second week of February started with an arctic blast that brought snow flurries to the Atlanta area making it the top news story as power lines went down and heating bills went up. Piper found working with Joshua something she enjoyed, and together, they were starting to turn the Tribune into something people were willing to pick up for a serious place to get their morning fix of what was happening in the world. What wasn't changing though was her opinion of how she felt for him as a person and she was trying to find a way to let him down easy and give him back his ring.

Time away from home had let Joshua find his way to something he felt as driven to as his sister had been about what she did. He had cut the cord with his past immaturities and was ready to

give back something that didn't belong to him. He walked into the office he was currently sharing with Piper and saw her standing at the wall of glass much like the one in G.W.'s office looking out at the floor of the newsroom. The diamond on her finger would cast a glimmer every so often as it caught the bright overhead lights as if telling him to get on with it.

"Piper, do you have a minute?"

"Hey, I didn't realize you were back." She turned and went to sit at her desk in case there was a need to take notes.

"The governor caved and gave us the interview, or gave Willy the interview. I just went along for the ride and for muscle if he turned him down. The front page above the fold in the special edition this afternoon will break the misappropriations in the revenue and taxation office. The exclusive should boost circulation for the follow ups we've got planned and get some of our guys on the local and national television news programs."

"That's great, Josh, I'll have to tell Willy congratulations on the way home tonight. We've been so busy I forgot to ask how that apartment you found is working out."

"It's not too bad since I don't spend too much time there, but I'm thinking about asking my mother to come up and help me look for a place."

She nodded her head and turned back to look at the floor again and the last minute running around to put out their second edition of the day. "What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Actually I want you to go somewhere with me. Do you have time?"

"Sure." She grabbed her coat and followed him out not really caring where they went. She just needed to get out of the office for a while. The first sign she was paying attention was when he took the exit to the airport and pulled into the short-term parking lot. "Are we meeting someone?"

Joshua turned in his seat and faced her reaching over for her left hand and the ring that adorned it. "No, we're here because you're taking a trip, but first I have to be an ass and ask for something I gave you, back. I know my sister will be disappointed in me but I'm afraid I made a mistake by giving you this before I was ready and sure if it was true love. I don't want you to think it was anything you did, it wasn't. I just want it all, you know. The great job where I can make a difference and a great girl who loves me to share it with. I want you to have that too and I'm afraid I might fall a little short on that score. It's not fair you know, I'm older but she's an inch taller." He laughed and pulled on her finger to get her to say something.

"I'm so sorry, Josh."

"Don't be, I didn't exactly enter into this for the most gentlemanly of reasons. Could you do me a favor though?"

"Anything."

"Could you use this ticket to Paris and explain so she won't think I'm a total jerk. I've got every faith in you to pull it off and if she forgives me, tell her to put her sword down and look into the eyes that belong only to her. No more waiting in the wings for anything, it's time to go for the gusto."

Piper moved to the other side of the car so fast it knocked him against the door when she threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you."

They walked together to the Air France terminal with the small bag Robert had packed for Piper and brought to the office for Joshua's surprise. He handed over her ticket and passport once he couldn't go any further with her and accepted the engagement ring back. "Have fun and don't take no for an answer. G.W.'s smart as a whip but more stubborn than my grandfather ever thought of being. Take care, Piper, and I wish you all the best life has in store for you. I'll miss you at the paper but maybe you and G.W. can talk Ismarelda into coming out and helping me."

"How come you never told me you had overheard her the night you came out to talk me into coming back to Atlanta with you?"

"Because I wanted to know you were good enough for Geordie. I may not have always been there for her but if there's one thing about my sister I just always guessed was, once she picked, it was going to be an all your life kind of thing. That long face you've been sporting let me know you're as stupidly noble as she is for letting what you share go just so you wouldn't hurt other people. Don't tell her I was out there listening. I think that was one of those moments where we both got a rare glimpse into Geordie's soul." He shrugged his shoulders and laughed thinking about the lump on the head she would have given him if she'd seen him hiding behind the urn near the bench. "Her brain's on display all the time on the pages of the Tribune, but her heart she doesn't let out to play very often. She must have really let go in that short time you two had in Paris to snare you so quick."

"She had me after the long laugh into the telephone across a café. I'm sure once the women of Atlanta find out what a great catch her brother is too, you'll know exactly what I mean." He hugged her and whispered some last instructions in her ear before turning her and pushing her gently in the direction of the security gate.

Joshua stood and watched Piper until she disappeared into the long corridor that would lead her to her plane. He lifted his hand and waved even though he knew she wouldn't see him. "Happy birthday, Geordie, I hope you like what I'm sending. Think of it as a birthday and Valentine's Day present all wrapped into one. I love you."

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She stood looking at the statue as if waiting for it to grow a head and start talking. It had been the one place she hadn't visited in all her time in Paris thinking it would forever hold the memory of Piper instead of the peace it used to bring. G.W. reached up and wiped a tear from her eye before

leaning more heavily against the marble railing.

"You never did ask me what I thought about her." The soft voice carried like it had before down to the landing where 'Winged Victory' stood posed for flight. To hear it here again made the tears drop that much faster down G.W.'s face.

"Why don't you tell me now?"

"I think maybe she's like the expression 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.'"

"How so?" G.W. asked still looking at the statue that had become fuzzy from her tears.

"Some look at her and see Nike poised to leave, but maybe this time we should look at her and see her as just having landed. She's here to see our victory and the end of our battle. There's no more searching for what we're looking for, love." G.W. turned around and scooped her up and kissed her like her life depended on Piper knowing just how much in love with her she was, stopping any other explanation Piper had. "I'm so glad you haven't outgrown that kissing me every time you see me thing. Shall we try again without all the emotional baggage this time? I belong to you, G.W., if you still want me."

"I want you all right, but tell me how you got here first?"

"Joshua drove me to the airport, handed me a bag, a ticket and my passport then asked for his ring back in exchange for me telling you he's not an idiot for letting me get away."

"That doesn't sound like Joshua."

"He also mentioned something about your being an idiot if **you** let me get away."

"That's more like it." G.W. laughed as she put Piper down and offered her a hand. "How would you like to have dinner with me?" Piper joined her in laughing and jumped on G.W.'s back and let the tall woman carry her down the stairs to get a closer look at the statue they'd both come to love and then out to the entrance.

The sunset found them sitting at their table at the Jules Verne Restaurant, but on this Valentine's Day, the view was forgotten as Piper looked across the table at the one person she knew she would share a lifetime of nights like this one with. She had insisted on sending flowers with the note G.W. sent to Gwendolyn that afternoon letting the writer know how she planned to spend the rest of her trip. Piper thought it was only fair since Gwendolyn wouldn't be spending any more evenings consoling G.W. about anything.

With a sigh G.W. leaned back in her chair and watched Piper bring her second spoonful of Crème Brûlée to her lips and tried to ignore the naked foot that had been sliding up and down her leg from the introduction of the appetizers. "I think any more moaning over that dessert, to go with what you're doing to my calves and you'll have to carry me out of here."

"I was hoping you didn't have this kind of control but maybe I'm not as alluring as I thought." Piper held her spoon up and licked off the caramelized sugar her last bite had left behind. She owed both Joshua and her father a really expensive bottle of champagne when she got home. Josh for getting her there and her father for packing the dress she had on into the carryon bag she was handed at the airport. It was a good feeling to open the door for their second date and almost having to perform the Heimlich maneuver when G.W. almost swallowed her tongue after seeing what she had on.

The sight of Piper's tongue on the spoon got G.W. to pull out her wallet and throw more than enough money on the table to cover the tab and the tip. On the way back to the hotel Piper was the one having trouble with control as G.W. ran a line of kisses down her throat and had a case of wandering hands.

"Honey?"

G.W. opened her eyes and pulled a little away from Piper to see what she wanted. "You want me to stop?"

"No, don't get all silly on me. I was just wondering, well you know I love art, right?"

"Yeah, so do I." G.W. went back to the little bit of skin she had uncovered when she pulled down a little on Piper's dress.

"It's just, oh God that feels good."

"You were saying."

"What?"

"It's just, what?" asked G.W.

"We aren't headed to any other museums tonight to see anything are we?"

The cab driver laughed when G.W. tossed enough money into the front seat to have covered a fare from Switzerland then carried Piper out of the back and into the hotel. She put her down at the door to her room and opened the door, and like a good date waited to be invited in.

"Go sit down and I'll be right back," ordered Piper. The look on G.W.'s face when she came out of the bathroom wearing an open robe with nothing on underneath would forever be one of her favorite memories and one she would recreate every year for G.W.'s birthday. Having a partner who shared her birthday with St. Valentine was fate's way of telling her she'd married someone who lived to sweep her off her feet as many times as she could think of ways to do it.

"Make a wish." G.W.'s eyes dragged off the gorgeous body on display and to the cupcake with a burning candle in it in Piper's hands. She moved closer to blow out the candle and start on the lifetime of love she had wished for first. The second thing she wished for was to make Piper



moan louder than she had for the dessert she'd insisted on finishing before they could leave the restaurant.

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"As the French would say, ooh la la, what a night to remember." Piper sat back in the carriage and enjoyed the landmarks she was now familiar with.

"Thank you God, the kids fell asleep before Pippy got to the part of you in that robe with nothing else on," said Oliver their oldest son on behalf of his daughter Izzy and his nephew Scott. This was the first time he and his sister Nicole had accompanied their mothers on their yearly trip to Paris for Valentine's Day.

They had both heard the story of how they had met more times than the Tribune had readers, but it was one they enjoyed hearing G.W. tell because of the way she still looked at Piper when she reminisced about their beginnings. It was a family tradition they hoped to be able to pass along to their children when they asked how they had met their own spouses and tell with as much gusto as their beloved Pippy, which was his and Nicky's pet name for G.W.

"Then I'll have to wait till breakfast to tell them your mother still looks as good in a robe as she did back then."

"Pippy." Both her children dragged out the name and pretended to be offended. It was hard with parents who had constantly chased each other throughout the house, though both of them also thought Piper never did run very fast when the occasion called for it.

"Ignore them, love." Piper moved closer into G.W.'s arms and got comfortable. "Do you really think I still look good in a robe?"

"Honey, I'd have to say better." Twenty-eight years hadn't dimmed the blue in G.W.'s eyes and she certainly knew how to stoke a fire when she looked at Piper the way she was looking at her now.

"Then carry me upstairs and I'll give you your birthday present." G.W. tipped the driver and bent to kiss their son and daughter good night and then her grandchildren. She may have been a little older but she was still capable of carrying her girl upstairs and making her moan.

"Happy birthday, Pippy."

"Thanks, guys. You two have a good night and don't forget it's Valentine's Day and you're in the most romantic city in the world."

"That may work out for you tonight, but I'm not romancing Ollie here no matter how great you two think we should get along," said Nicole moving Izzy to a more comfortable spot on her shoulder.

"Tell me this isn't our prize winning investigative reporter?" G.W. teased as she scooped a laughing Piper into her arms. "Who do you think has been trailing us for miles in the other carriage?"

Oliver's wife Claire and Nicole's partner Jenny were helping their traveling baby sitter Ismarelda out of the carriage parked in front of the hotel. The happy reunions went on allowing Piper and G.W. to escape across the street without being noticed. Their hotel was only two blocks from the Louvre but they had been in the city for three days and had yet to visit.

G.W. led Piper to the main entrance and knocked, getting Piper to laugh at her partner thinking anyone would answer. "Bon soir, G.W., welcome back. How are you this evening, Mrs. Steinblack?" The guard asked as he helped Piper off with her coat. "You know the way, G.W., Petri insisted you take all the time you need, so please enjoy."

There was a small table with burning candles and a bottle of wine at the base of their statue. From somewhere someone was playing soft music, and as always, Nike stood in proud vigilance over her domain. G.W. poured her lady a glass of wine and toasted to their anniversary.

Piper leaned back in her arms as they danced and looked up at the face that graced her vision every morning. "Have your thoughts about our dear lady ever changed in all these years?"

"Yes they have. I don't wait for her to bring me victory anymore; I just carry her with me now. All my battles can't help but end in victory when I have you to see me through. I think, had the artist lived long enough to meet St. Valentine, he might have figured out victory's never fleeting if there's love to carry you. I love you, Piper, thank you for giving me all the gifts that come with time. But most of all thank you for giving me the gift of yourself, it's worth more to me than anything else in my life."

"I love you too, sweetheart. Can I ask you one more thing though, before we add one more chapter to that story you love to embarrass the kids with?"

"You can ask me anything, and I'm not embarrassing them, don't you ever see them taking notes when they think we're not looking?" G.W. teased back.

"Who in the hell is Petri, and why do you keep getting these great after hours privileges to roam around these places unattended?"

"Petri's the minister of museums and antiquities for the French government."

"That doesn't answer the part about the tours."

"He's also a huge Rio Rivers fan."

The guard almost came to see what Piper found so funny, but decided to head back to his post by the door when the laughter was replaced by a much more intimate sound. Before they left, the two lovers added one more story to tell their children of their Valentine's adventures in the city

where they found each other and love. It was a story they forbade the two of them from telling their grandchildren until it was part of their memoirs, but it did give Oliver and Nicole something to aspire to.

**The End.**

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