

Madeline Cooper threaded her way through the press of bodies at Grand Central. Her bag tugged at her shoulder as it bounced off unappreciative commuters. The last thing she wanted to do was sit through two days of meetings and SEC briefings. Twenty years of listening to the latest and greatest in managed accounts and commission schedules had lost its charm. Being a branch office of a major brokerage house forced her, as its managing executive to sit through meetings Mengele would have found tortuous. Her senior partner managed to have a client crisis that only he could handle, forcing her to endure the endless drone alone.

The doors of Penn Station blew open and she squinted at the bright lights and thunderous sound of Manhattan. Madeline found the city exciting, frightening, and always an adventure, particularly when it came to finding a taxi. She held out a well-practiced arm.

Stores raced by the taxi windows. Nail salons, restaurants of every nationality, and flower shops on every corner. The taxi passed an electronics store advertising a “*Business Sucks Sale*”. A laugh exploded from her as she shook her head, “Only in New York.”

She glanced at her watch and dropped her hand to her lap. Her train had been late, traffic was heavy and if she didn’t get to the hotel soon, she would be forever in line trying to check in among the hundreds of other brokers.

Her cab came to an abrupt halt. “Now what?” she muttered. A large Asian man held his hand at shoulder height as he stumbled into the cross walk. He staggered past the taxi then collapsed on the street. His legs and arms twitched. Onlookers surrounded the man, preventing a city bus from rolling over him.

“Hell of a place to fall down,” said the taxi driver as he pulled around the man’s body out into traffic.

“Only in New York,” she repeated.

Madeline was convinced the Bible had been rewritten. The Seventh Circle of Hell no longer contained fire-breathing devils. It was now populated by badly dressed SEC officials expounding on the regulations du jour. She willed her eyes open as she listened to changes in the US Patriot Act and the newest procedures for their financial clearinghouse.

'John will pay for putting me through this alone; perhaps I'll treat him to a dissertation on the relative merits of socially responsible portfolios. That ought to burn his right wing, cigarette-stock buying ass.'

She tossed her pen on the desk and pinched her nose. Years of coddling spoiled heirs and nervous retirees had taken its toll. She was tired of the paperwork and the endless reports. It had also taken its toll on her personal life. The succession of bad choices ended six months ago with Michael, a tax attorney with a fondness for sports cars, league softball and as Madeline discovered, twenty-something cocktail waitresses. He hadn't even the decency to make up a comfortable lie when confronted. He never even stopped washing his car, ending their relationship over turtle wax, not chardonnay.

"Don't blame yourself, sweetheart. Women your age are content with an ordinary way of life. I need more stimulation," he said as he polished the hood of that damn Jag convertible.

"Are you calling me dull?"

"Well..."

"You didn't call me dull when I made you enough money to pay cash for that car! You called me brilliant!"

“Madeline, you do have a head for numbers but Kitty--”

“Kitty? What is she, a house pet?”

“Now Madeline, there is no need to be unpleasant.”

She snatched the large gym bag from the back seat. She flung the bag to the ground and unzipped it.

“Madeline, Madeline what are you doing?” Michael’s voice quivered.

Metal softball bats make a lovely pattern when applied to the windshield of a Jaguar.

Michael was deleted from her speed dial. No one had replaced him, by her choice. The last thing she wanted was one more self-absorbed blue suit messing about in her life.

The hair on the back of Madeline’s neck bristled. He was watching her, again. She glanced to her right to see the representative from Jersey City staring at her. He had managed to sit at her table at the luncheon and his tasteless jokes had killed her appetite, and it took a great deal to kill Madeline’s lumberjack appetite. The look on his face assured her he would try the same thing at dinner. She forced her attention back to the overhead projection as she plotted her escape.

The faces changed but the questions remained the same. In five-minute intervals reporter after reporter asked the same questions. “How did he like working with Sara McBain? How did he like working in costume dramas? What was it like growing up in Marseilles? What was it like being the French George Clooney?”

Why can't they ever call Clooney the American Paul Beaumont?

This was the movie business version of Chinese water torture and Paul Beaumont was quietly going insane.

He was contractually obligated to promote his latest movie. He was happy with his performance and wanted the picture to do well, but after twenty years in the business, he was tired of putting his private life on display for public consumption.

Reporter number twenty-three stood and reached out his hand. Paul took it automatically. “Thank you Mr. Beaumont. This has been a thrill for me.”

“Not at all,” Paul answered.

“No, really, it has,” the young man pumped his hand, “I’ve been a fan of yours since I was a kid.”

The pasted on smile vanished from Paul’s face. Reporter number twenty-four sat down, and Paul Beaumont plotted his escape.

Embers was a jazz club on the Upper West Side of the city. The concierge recommended the place for good music and good drinks. The atmosphere was relaxed and casual, just what she was looking for. Madeline took a seat at a small table in a corner of the room. A blue haired young waitress came to her table.

“Can I get you something?”

“Cosmo.”

Madeline surveyed the club. A jazz group was warming up as people began filtering in. She saw him at the bar., a dark-haired man nursing a drink. There are those people in the world who stand out, no matter what, without trying. When they walk into a room everyone notices, when they talk everyone listens. Despite the sunglasses, she could tell he was one of those people. “*Sunglasses? Who wears sunglasses at night, unless you’re about to break into a bad disco song?* “

A bartender approached the man and the man’s head tilted up. Her heart skipped a beat. This guy looked like Paul Beaumont, the French movie star. No wonder she’d noticed those beautifully chiseled features. He had the same close-cropped hair, but the shaded glasses hid his eyes.

Oh it can’t be. What would he be doing here?

Madeline sipped her drink and turned her attention back to the band, listening to the opening set. The vodka and the tunes combined to relax the tight muscles in her body. She smiled as she imagined the Jersey City rep’s disappointment not finding her at the dinner tonight.

All Paul wanted was to relax and have a drink. He needed a few hours to himself. He sipped his whiskey and looked out over the crowd. Most were couples or groups, busy finding tables and ordering drinks.

He became aware of her the second she entered the club. The porcelain skin of the Black Irish always stood out, even in the dim lighting of a jazz club. She slipped off her black leather jacket and tossed it on the back of her chair. Her trim figure fit agreeably into a pair of jeans and a blue cotton top. Jet-black hair fell just below her shoulders. Pale blue eyes searched out the waitress. He couldn't be certain of her age, but Paul guessed mid-thirties. This was no girl.

Movement to his right caught his attention. The two men next to him had also spotted her. One nudged the other in the shoulder and his friend slid off his chair. He leaned over the woman, placing a hand on the small table. Paul saw the swagger and could imagine what line the man was offering. Paul smiled when he saw the shake of her long black hair. The defeated man returned to his friend and the woman returned to her drink.

A couple leaned against the wall of the building along side Madeline. New York laws had forbidden smoking in all public places. It was a balmy late spring evening, making it not altogether unpleasant to be forced outside. She didn't do it often, but tonight, she needed a cigarette. She pulled out a box of Dunhill's and put one of the long brown cigarettes to her lips. A flame appeared before her.

“Not many Americans smoke those.”

His rich French accent rushed straight through her, pushing her heart to her throat. The shades were gone. Streetlights revealed world famous eyes so distinctively brown the shade had been named Beaumont.

Oh my God, It is him. What's he doing here?

She held out the box, hoping her internal earthquake wouldn't show in her hands.

“A nasty habit I picked up studying in England. Would you like one?”

“Yes, thank you,” Paul replied. He lit one and inhaled deeply. “Ah, I haven't had one in ages. Thank you...?”

“Madeline.”

“Thank you, Madeline. What a lovely name.”

Madeline glanced down. She'd thought it a provincial name, stuffy and old fashioned just like the grandmother she was named for. When he spoke it, it *was* a lovely name.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“I'm Paul.” He took her hand and held the back of it to his lips. “Enchante,” he whispered.

Last month's cover of People is kissing my hand. How strong was that drink? The absurdity of the moment found its way to her funny bone and she erupted in a burst of laughter. “Save it for the tourists.”

A smile crept across his lips. “Sorry, old habits die hard.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Beaumont. I just don't know why you're standing here with me.”

“I’m here promoting a movie.”

“And you’re going person to person?”

“I needed a vacation. I decided to spend some time enjoying the city. Why are you in the city?”

“I live here.”

“No you don’t.”

She tilted her head against the brick wall. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re accent, East Coast but not New York, and not Boston...Philadelphia?”

“You’re good.”

“So I’ve been told,” he grinned.

“And the smarmy actor reappears.”

“Sorry,” he laughed, but he did not release her hand. “Have dinner with me.”

Madeline looked at him for a long moment. *Okay, Okay, breathe. The most popular actor on the planet has just asked me to dinner. That can only mean the next cross-town bus will smash me flat.*

“What did you have in mind?” she asked, hoping her sweating palm wouldn’t extinguish her cigarette.

“I saw a restaurant a few blocks down. Do you like French?” A sly grin slid across his face.

She returned his grin. “On occasion.”

LaMonde boasted a fine wine selection and unparalleled mushroom ravioli.
“Ummm, this is delicious,” she purred.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

“How’s your salmon?” she asked as she took another bite.

“Quite good.” Paul laughed.

Madeline stopped in mid-bite. “What’s so funny?”

“You.”

“Excuse me?”

“You keep making these rather provocative noises as you eat.”

She set her fork down and dabbed her mouth with the linen napkin. “You aren’t the only one with old habits.” She could feel her cheeks flush. “I make Yum-Yum noises.”

“Pardon?”

“When I’m having a particularly good meal I make a kind of yummy sound,” she reached for a sip of wine. “I don’t even realize I’m doing it.”

Paul smiled as he sipped his wine. A warm rush flooded her body.

Careful girl, he’s an actor. He seduces for a living. Get a grip. Besides, what the hell does he want with me? This is ridiculous. We’ll have a nice dinner and we’ll go our separate ways. Jesus, I’m having dinner with Paul Beaumont. No one will ever believe it. Hell, I don’t believe it.

“What are you hiding from?” he asked.

“Excuse me?” She stopped in mid bite for the second time. He was beginning to annoy her. Nobody stood between Madeline and a good meal, not even tall, dark and gorgeous.

“You’re hiding out, like me.”

Madeline finished off the last ravioli and set down her fork. “Who are you hiding from?”

“It’s a collective who; my agent, my publicist, the movie company and half the entertainment reporters on the east coast.”

“Only half?” she laughed.

“The other half already marched through my hotel room. I needed a break, a chance to relax and not answer any questions for a few hours.”

“Yet here you are answering my questions.”

“Only in the hopes of getting answers to mine.”

“Fair enough.” She paused to sip the last of her wine. Paul waved at the waiter for another bottle. “I’m an investment broker. I’m in the city for a series of meetings. After eight hours, I couldn’t take it anymore. I needed a break.”

Paul tilted his head and smiled. “An investment broker, I’m impressed.”

“No you’re not. You haven’t the vaguest idea what I do.” She slipped her hand into her pocket and removed a monogrammed card case. She withdrew a card and set it in front of him. The heavy card read Madeline Cooper, President, Oak Tree Brokerage. “I manage one hundred million dollars in personal and corporate assets, and I’ve been doing it for twenty years. Now you can be impressed.”

“Why do you assume I don’t understand what you do?”

“Because you don’t have that much day to day experience with the real world.”

“My English is not that good but I think I’ve been insulted.”

“Your English is perfect, and no you haven’t. I’m simply stating fact. When was the last time you were out without an entourage?”

“What makes you think I have an entourage?”

“You keep looking around to see if anyone recognizes you. You aren’t used to traveling alone anymore, are you?”

Paul fingered the card as her ice blue eyes challenged him. He slipped the card in his suit coat. “You’re right. I don’t go anywhere or do anything on my own. I haven’t for years. My whole life is lived by committee.”

Madeline shook her head. “Good Lord. No wonder you need a vacation.”

His head tilted as if he were trying to bring her into focus. “You’ve been in business twenty years?”

“Yes.

“May I ask how old you are?”

“Forty-four.”

“Really?” He looked at her as if she were an abstract painting, crooked and confused.

“Why are you looking...?” Madeline stopped and laughed loudly. “Are you trying to see if I’ve had work done?”

“I can usually tell, but I can’t with you. Extraordinary work, really, and I’ve seen the best.”

“I’ll be sure to thank my parents on your behalf.”

Paul sat back in his chair looking slightly ashen. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to insult you, it’s just I took you for much younger.”

“I’m flattered, I think,” she laughed again, a sweet natural sound.

Paul leaned forward and stared at her with such intensity her heart skipped several beats. “Tell me about you,” he asked.

“There’s not much to tell. I work constantly, not much time for a personal life.”

Paul reached for her left hand and gently rubbed her ring finger. “No husband?”

Madeline glanced down and shook her head. “No,” she whispered.

He stroked the top of her hand with his fingertips. Every dormant hormone in her body was stretching and waking. A familiar tingle started in her toes and was dangerously working its way north. She retrieved her hand and reached for her glass.

“My life is all work. I don’t do anything spectacular like climbing mountains or drive race cars. I’m rather ordinary.”

His deep brown eyes held her gaze. “Somehow, I doubt that very much,” he whispered.

The tingle moved at warp speed to places it hadn’t been in a very long time. *Oh Christ, I’m in trouble. It’s the wine. Yeah that’s it, the wine. Oh, Christ.* Madeline fortified herself with another sip.

“Didn’t you want to marry, have a family?” he asked.

“Yes, very much, but it never worked out that way.”

“Regrets?”

“I’ve learned not to dwell on what I lack. Of course there are things I wish I’d been able to do, but I am happy with the life I’ve created. I’ve built a successful business. I’ve

made a family for myself of good friends. For the most part, I like who I turned out to be, not as good as some, not as bad as others, but as human beings go, I'll do."

Paul's intense gaze made her shift in her seat. "Tell me something about yourself, something I haven't read in *People*".

He took a swallow from his glass. "This is a very nice wine." He looked away from her for the first time.

She touched his hand and brought him back from where ever he had gone. "What's wrong?"

Paul stared into her smiling ice blue eyes

"Nothing, really." He smiled his best movie star smile and he knew she didn't buy it for a second. Agents and career moves and movie star bullshit meant nothing to her.

Setting his glass down and took both her hands in his. He touched them lightly and it brought him a strange sense of comfort, of connection he hadn't felt in longer than he could remember.

"It seems I am going to be a grandfather."

"Really? That's wonderful. Congratulations."

"My daughter, Chloe called me a few days ago. You're the first person I've told."

"Aren't you happy about the baby?"

"Yes, of course. Chloe will be a wonderful mother."

"Why haven't you told anyone?"

“Just yesterday I was teaching Chloe to tie her shoes. Now...” Paul glanced up and smiled. “I just never imagined myself as a grand-père.”

“Are you worried about your career?”

“A bit.” Paul took a long sip and then refilled both glasses. “Perception is everything in movies. It could change the type of roles I get.”

“It probably will.”

His head snapped up. He didn’t expect her to agree, let alone do it so quickly. He wanted her to say he would always be the romantic hero he was today.

“Paul, you’re a lot better than the roles you’ve been playing. I saw the World War II movie you did last year.” She reached for his hand. “No car chases, no love scenes, and you were wonderful.”

“Thank you, but the movie didn’t do that well.”

“My point is you did well. The critics said so. You can’t play the romantic lead forever. Do you even want to? We all have to grow up, Paul, even you.”

His warm smile grew. After so many years of having everyone’s lips planted firmly on his ass, it was exciting to meet someone who dared to look him in the eye.

They headed back in the direction of the club, walking slowly and peering in windows of shops. They came upon a combination flower-market deli that was doing a brisk business, despite the fact that it was nearly eleven.

“That’s one of the things I love about this city. You find the strangest combinations. Corned beef and roses, only in New York.”

“French and American,” he said.

“Exactly,” she whispered.

Paul snatched up a bouquet of white roses and placed them in her hands. “In the interest of international relations.”

She laughed and sniffed the blooms as Paul handed a few bills to the clerk who’d crooked his neck to get a better look at him.

“You’re that Beaumont guy, aren’t you?”

Paul slipped into a Mid-Western accent. “I get that all the time, don’t I honey?” He turned to Madeline and winked.

“All the time,” she sighed. “Puffs him up like a peacock.” She elbowed him in the ribs. “I’m going to hear about it the whole rest of our trip.” She grabbed Paul by the hand and pulled him along the street. They waited a full block before exploding with laughter.

“Puffs me up like a peacock?”

Madeline wiped at the tears streaking her cheek. "I'm sorry, I couldn't resist." Paul handed her a crisp linen handkerchief. Eyes dried and control restored, they continued up Broadway.

"American accents are tough to do. Most Europeans think we all sound like Archie Bunker or J.R. Ewing. You're very good."

Paul tipped the brim of an imaginary cowboy hat. "Why, thank ya kindly, ma'am." He slipped her hand in his almost without thinking. It felt like it belonged there.

"Here we are, back where we started," Madeline said. A large crowd gathered around the door of the club along with the haze of their cigarettes. Music grew loud and then quiet each time the door opened. She peered up at Paul. "Do you want to go back in?" she asked.

"No," he whispered. He touched her chin with his finger tilting her face toward him. "No, I don't." He leaned down and covered her mouth with his. The kiss was soft, delicate, testing. She met his kiss with caution, kissing him slowly. He pulled away and looked into the eyes that had held him all night. He also saw what amounted to a substantial audience. He took her hand and crossed Broadway to a quiet corner opposite the club. He smiled and dipped his head for another taste of her lips. This time she met his kiss with passion. Her lips parted and welcomed his tongue. He explored the warmth of her mouth while his hands slipped inside her jacket. Her nipples harden under his palm and he responded in kind. He pulled her tight against him. Her free hand rubbed his back as the other clutched the bouquet. His senses were swimming in roses and traffic and her. A moan escaped her and he wondered if he tasted as good as mushroom ravioli.

He placed small kisses on her throat and couldn't resist tasting her earlobe. "Maddie," he whispered. She pulled back.

"No one's called me that since I was a kid."

"Sorry, it just slipped out."

"No, I think I like it when you say it." She slipped her hand to his head and pulled him to her.

Paul had more than his share of beautiful women. They came to him as easily and as often as room service. Now he was faced with something he barely recognized, genuine desire.

"Maddie, I...my hotel would be...awkward."

"And mine is all the way downtown and very crowded." Madeline nodded her head at something across the street. "But there is that."

Paul turned and saw a long purple canopy with white letters. *The Montgomery*. He turned back and smiled. "Are you sure?"

Madeline ran her finger under his jacket and up his back. "Oh yes," she whispered. "But first..." she nodded toward the opposite corner and the all night drug store.

Paul nodded. "Of course." He took her hand in his and crossed the busy street. The bright lights of the store were an unwelcome, but necessary intrusion into the evening. Paul quickly found what he needed and met Madeline back at the counter. She tossed an armful of items on the counter. He pulled out enough cash to pay for toothbrushes, toothpaste and several bottles of water and other necessities.

Paul was grateful the sleepy desk clerk appeared not to recognize him and signed the register with a quick scrawl. The hotel was the type more commonly seen in Europe. Long and narrow lobby was clean but plain. The elevator was barely big enough for two people, which suited Paul just fine. He pushed her against the wall and kissed her deeply as he and the elevator rose.

The rooms were on either side of dark hallways that were so narrow they were forced to walk single file. The heavy wooden doors were dark and scarred from 100 years of entrances and exits.

“Here we are,” Paul said as he unlocked the door. The antiques brass knobs were no longer used to lock the doors in deference to the dead bolts and inside the door was a steel slide bolt.

Paul flipped on the light and gasped.

“Oh dear God,” laughed Madeline.

This room was lilac, not purple, not mauve, but a bright spring lilac. The room had a ten-foot ceiling with a bare circular fluorescent bulb in the middle. The large windows would have provided little light during the day with only a few feet separating them from the next building.

There were two beds in the room that appeared to be only one step above prison issue. They were curved black iron with bars running the length of each headboard and footboard. Over the beds hung a worn print of Van Gogh’s ‘Irises’. As old as it was it looked surprisingly good on the wall. On the far wall by the window was a print from a Metropolitan Museum show from 1990. Under the print sat a small refrigerator. It was

battered and covered with small stickers ranging from welcoming extra-terrestrials to pledging lifelong devotion to the Grateful Dead.

“Madeline, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. We can go somewhere else.”

She walked over to the bed and pulled back the covers. Everything was old, but apparently clean, in a hospital disinfected kind of way. “It’s like something out of a Bergman movie.” *Just like everything else about this night.*

“It’s perfect,” she laughed. She walked back to him and slipped her hands around his neck. “I don’t want to go anywhere, not for a while,” she whispered.

Paul smiled and kissed her softly. He lifted the bag still in his hand. “Perhaps I should unpack our things.”

He put the water bottles in the small, surprisingly chilled fridge while Madeline found a plastic trashcan large enough to serve as a vase for her roses. He tossed the toothbrushes and paste on the dresser and looked around the room. “Bathroom?”

“I think I saw it across the hall.”

“Perfect,” he sighed. “Really, Madeline, I can make a call. A limo could be here in twenty minutes and we could be in a suite at the Plaza in thirty.”

“And on the cover of the Enquirer by morning.” She slipped her arms around his waist. “Paul, stop. Everything is fine, unless you want to leave.”

“God, no.” He dropped his head down to kiss her. The room and its mental ward décor disappeared in her arms. He slipped his hands under the soft cotton of her shirt and found skin just as soft. His hands ran along her back, unhooking her bra. Caressing her breasts was pure pleasure. Full and perfect, they filled his hands. He needed to see her, all of her, now. He pulled the shirt and bra over her head in one swift move. Sitting her on the

bed, he began to undress her, boots, hose, and jeans. Carefully he slid her panties down and tossed them aside. A thousand years of Celtic genetics, perfect and naked, sat before him.

Paul whispered, “La majeste de sa beaute classique captivait l’attention de ceux qui osaient la regarder.”

“I don’t speak French.”

Paul smiled. “I’m sorry. Actors quote all the time. Another bad habit.” His hands traveled the length of her smooth thighs. “It was from my first movie, about Marie Antoinette.

Madeline tilted her head and smiled. “I remind you of Marie Antoinette?”

“No,” Paul whispered, “It’s just...I never understood the line until now.”

“Oh,” she said a little embarrassed, but very pleased. “Thank you.”

He thought she said something but was lost to him. She stretched like a sleepy cat out before him on the bed as he stood to remove his clothes. He watched the play of her muscles as she slid toward the top of the bed and his heart pounded thinking where he would be in just moments. He tossed his jockeys on the other bed and returned his full attention to Madeline. This time he heard her.

“Oh my,” she gasped. Her gaze moved up to meet his eyes. A wicked grin crossed her lips. “Now that’s what I call star power.”

Paul laughed out loud. Everything felt so right with her, so natural. He lay next to her and stroked her hair, kissing her lightly.

“So beautiful,” he whispered. He explored her with his mouth, his hands. He wanted all of her. He’d never felt so greedy.

Madeline ran her hands over his body as his hands roamed over her. She cupped his tight backside.

Ummm, nice.

Her thoughts screamed back to reality. *I'm naked, in bed with Paul Beaumont. This is freaking unbelievable. What am I doing? Falling into bed with someone I barely know even if it is...*

Paul stroked her thigh, his hand moving gently between her legs. Reality faded with every gasp she made. Her body arched to meet his touch. He scattered kisses over the soft flesh of her breasts. Light nips at her neck brought groans of pleasure from the both.

“Paul,” she whispered.

He raised his head above her and she stared into his eyes. Photographed, envied, these expressive brown eyes were famous all over the world. Those eyes said he wanted only her. For now, that was enough.

“Paul,” she repeated as she slipped her hands around his neck and pulled him to her. She tasted him deeply, tongues dancing as his hand continued to enflame her. She cradled him between her legs, arching against his arousal.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered.

Paul rolled to his side. Her hand slipped between them as her fingers ran the hard length of him.

“Mon Dieu,” he murmured as his fingers slipped inside her. He moved gently, caressing through her moist heat. Her nails clutched his back as her breathing turned shallow.

“I need you,” Her voice cracked. “Please.”

He released her and grabbed for the drug store bag. Quickly covering himself, he positioned himself over her. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he eased into her. With great effort, he held himself from taking her all at once. A deep moan escaped her as nails dug into his shoulders.

“Am I hurting you?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “More,” she gasped.

He was undone.

She slipped her legs higher about his waist and met each of his thrusts with one of her own. She murmured in his ear, passionate and pleading, begging for release. He felt her climax wash over her before engulfing him in its power.

“Maddie,” he cried out as he thrust with a final explosive pleasure before collapsing on her shoulder.

Paul gathered enough strength to raise his head and look into her half closed eyes. The slightest of smiles crossed her lips. He had no words for what was happening to him. All he could do was kiss her.

Paul had fallen asleep on top of the sheets. Madeline was tightly wrapped under them. She glanced back up at her sleeping lover. Paul Beaumont, her lover. Amazing. His perfect form transfixed her. His broad back was well muscled but not overly so. Her eyes trailed down his back to his waist. One leg was thrown wide over the other, displaying his tight, round bottom.

Ummm, he must do a lot of work on glutes. No man his age should have an ass this fine. It's criminal.

Pushing her self on one elbow, she looked at his peaceful face. The crow's feet were a little deeper than photos led her to believe. The close-cropped hair minimized the gray temples. She stared at the movie star who'd held her so close and saw the man. He was funny and kind, strong and sexy. Facing the next half of his life, he wondered where it would take him. When he dropped the movie star persona he was fairly wonderful. Images of the two of them walking hand in hand on the streets of Paris came to her unbidden.

Don't be ridiculous. She shook her head and Paris disappeared.

Paul scrunched his head further down in the pillow as a smile played across his lips. She hoped she had something to do with that smile. Madeline laid her cheek against his back, snuggling in his warmth.

Paul felt Madeline press against his back. Her warm breath touched his skin and he was instantly awake.

“Hello,” he whispered.

“I didn’t mean to wake you. I’m sorry”

“I’m not,” he said as he kissed her neck and gently pulling at the sheet. “Let me look at you.”

“Paul,” she laughed as she tugged the sheet tightly to her chest. “I’m not exactly a model for the swimsuit cover of *Sports Illustrated*.”

He looked at her and smiled. *Telling her I’ve slept with this year’s cover model probably wouldn’t win me any points.*

“Maddie, please.” He tugged at the sheet and exposing her breasts, kissed them lightly. “Do you mean you have no carefully hidden scars from your augmentation?” Or do you mean you don’t have the dermatologist on speed dial because the sun damage has aged you before your time? He slipped his head down and placed soft kisses on her belly. “Or were you talking about the therapy you’ve never had for bulimia?” He kissed her lips as he whispered, “You’re right, Maddie. You’re not a model.” He kissed her neck and nibbled on her ear. “I wouldn’t want you any other way.”

Madeline laughed. She was always laughing. “I’ve gotta tell you, Beaumont, that was definitely the right answer.”

“Yes?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Is there a prize for this right answer?”

“I do believe there is. You know how we Americans are about prizes.” She slipped her hand from under the sheet and slid it down his body. Her fingers touched him, lightly stroking and teasing the rest of him awake.

“I think I like this prize,” he said.

She kissed him tenderly and slid her body down the length of him. Her tongue joined her fingers.

He pushed his head back into the pillow as he gave himself over to her. Wet kisses, feathery touches, warm breath were driving him to the edge. Soon, his ragged breath was joined with hers. He heard her moan. He raised his head to see her looking at him through heavy lidded eyes, gasping.

Paul reached under her arms and pulled her to her back. He pressed his mouth to hers taking what breath she had left. He broke free and slid to the end of her body. He grabbed her legs and pushed them over his shoulders. Now it was his wet kisses, his warm breath.

“God, Paul,” she cried.

Madeline arched to meet him as her hands ripped at the sheets. He felt her muscles ripple under him as the climax tore through her. The waves subsided and he released her. Sweat soaked hair clung to her forehead. As he wiped it away he saw tears running down her cheeks.

“Maddie, are you all right?”

She turned her head and let out a small laugh. “Paul, I can honestly say, I may never be this right again.”

He held her close while her breathing calmed. She turned to him. “Why did you stop me? That was supposed to be your prize.”

“It was.”

Paul watched her as she slept. Curled in his arms, Paul stroked a soft curl from her cheek. It had only been a few hours, but it felt like a lifetime. Everything about her felt right. He didn't care that everyone he knew was most likely scouring the city for him.

Paul pictured his home in Provence, beautiful gardens stretching before him. He saw himself sitting at the wrought iron table having an early morning breakfast, and across the table, his beautiful American.

This is crazy. We've just met. I wonder if she'd like Paris?

Madeline stirred in his arms. "Ummm...Good morning," she said.

Paul kissed her forehead. "Good morning." His hand traveled the length of her, resting on her belly, when he felt and heard a large rumble. "Good Lord, woman," he laughed.

"You need to feed me."

"That's what I had in mind," he said nibbling on her earlobe.

She pushed him off with both hands and a hardy laugh. "I'm serious. Give me a minute and then we can hit a café."

Madeline jumped out of bed and grabbed towels stacked on the dresser. Wrapping one tightly around her, she picked up her purse, what toiletries they'd purchased and opened the door.

"Paul, that thing you said to me last night, what did you mean?"

"I said many things last night, chere." Her smile faded and he instantly regretted his glib tone. Maddie was not someone to be toyed with. He knew what she meant. His

voice softened. “The majesty of her classic beauty enthralled those who dared look upon her.”

“Wow,” she whispered as closed the door behind her. He felt ridiculously happy to see her smile return.

Paul sipped his coffee while he watched Madeline enjoy a large omelet and sausages.

“Are you sure you don’t want any?” she asked.

“No coffee and croissant are the most I can manage for breakfast.” He smiled. Lord, woman. Where do you put it all?”

“Hollow leg.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s an American expression. It means I have a high metabolism.”

“I see.”

“I seem to be particularly hungry this morning.” Madeline turned her attention to a stray sausage.

Paul smiled, again.

I can’t stop smiling. I must look like a complete idiot. Maybe I should ask her to come back to the hotel with me. We could make a long weekend of it. I could take her to a show, get some hard-to-get tickets, impress her.

Madeline was finishing off the last of her sausages. She smiled at him and he knew all the lines of romance he’d ever spoken in every movie he’d ever done were meaningless until now. Now, with this black haired beauty stuffing her face with sausages, a weekend would never be enough. A lifetime wouldn’t be long enough.

A turn of a page at the next table caught Paul’s eye. A woman was reading a copy of *Entertainment Weekly*. Reality reared its ugly and highly inconvenient head. He had an interview scheduled with one of their reporters in less than three hours.

“Where did you go?” Madeline asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You were a million miles away.”

“More like a few dozen blocks.” Paul glanced at his watch. “As we speak my manager is screaming at my assistant and scrambling to rearrange interviews.”

Madeline’s fork clattered against her plate, her appetite gone. “I’m sorry. You have to get back. I’m keeping you.”

Paul reached for her hand. “Maddie, there is no where in the world I’d rather be right now than here, watching you wolf down sausages.”

“You have responsibilities. I understand if you have to go. I should be sitting through a rather dull breakfast meeting at the moment.” She struggled for an air of nonchalance. She failed. “There is a randy agent from Jersey who will be very disappointed not to see me there.”

“First of all, I don’t *have to* do anything. I can stand up half the journalists on the planet and they will write it off to star temperament.” He pulled her hand to his lips and placed a soft kiss on her fingertips. “Second, who is this randy agent and perhaps I should have a word with him.”

Madeline’s soft laugh halted when she saw in his eyes he was quite serious. “Paul, I think you have more important things to do than putting a horny guy in his place.”

“I don’t like the idea of you being bothered.”

She sat back in her chair. “You really don’t, do you?” Retrieving her hand, she attempted a convincing smile. “The French are so gallant.”

He tilted his head to catch her gaze. “Don’t do that, Maddie. Don’t write this off.” He became very still. “Come back with me.”

The noise and the people blended into a haze. All she could see were intense brown eyes. It was a simple declarative statement yet it sent her mind reeling. “What?” she asked in a whisper.

“I have a home in Provence. It’s very beautiful and very quiet. We could spend time together without phones or tourists or randy agents.”

“Paul, you can’t be serious. We’ve just met. I have my business you have your films...”

“Will that be all?” They both started at the sudden appearance of the waitress.

“Yes,” Paul said gruffly.

She handed him the check. “I’ll be back for that shortly.”

“We’re ready now.” He pushed a few bills at the waitress as he grabbed Madeline’s hand. “Come on.”

They no sooner hit the street than Paul tugged Madeline into a doorway, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I’m sorry I was abrupt back there.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. I am too used to getting my way.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Just promise me you’ll think about it.”

She managed a nod.

Hand in hand, they strolled back to the hotel. Madeline's ebony hair gleamed in the sunshine. His eyes caressed her body as she leaned over examining a street vendor's jewelry. He envied the jeans hugging her tight round bottom. A manicure finger played over a piece of silver filigree. Suddenly aware of his gaze, she glanced up.

"I'm sorry, I'm dawdling."

Paul picked up the silver necklace, a long filigreed teardrop accented with an onyx cabochon. "How much?"

"Thirty," said the vendor.

"Oh Paul, you don't..."

"Hush..." he whispered as he handed bills to the man. Undoing the clasp he moved behind her as she lifted her hair. He placed a kiss on her neck along with the necklace.

Madeline pressed the necklace to her chest. "Thank you," she whispered.

He tilted her chin up and looked into her pale blue eyes. "You're welcome," he said as he pressed his lips to hers.

She pulled away and glanced around. "People will see."

He slipped his arms around her waist as easily as he slipped into the Mid-Western accent. He turned to the vendor. "Hey buddy, do you care if I kiss my girl in the middle of the sidewalk?"

"Mister, this is New York. Go for it."

Paul smiled broadly. "I love this town." A light touch of her lips proved not enough. One more, another, another, time slipped away. He slowly explored her mouth as his hands traced her spine. A groan escaped him as he pulled away.

“We need to get back to the hotel...now.”

Madeline had to quickstep to keep up with Paul’s forced march up Broadway. His face was a picture of determination, as if he were about to go into battle or climb a mountain. She dropped her eyes and saw how determined other parts of his body had become.

‘His girl’ Her heart pounded. *Could I do it? Could I take off for France?* The visions of walking hand in hand through Paris flooded back. Breakfast in his garden after a long night of loving. Lunch at small cafes, dinners at elegant restaurants. Being catered to because she was *‘his girl’*.

Traffic lights halted Paul’s advance. He glanced down at her, stroking her cheek. He smiled. That was all it took, not the roses, not the movie star manners, not the earth shattering, mind blowing sex. Just a smile. Madeline Cooper, stolid, no-nonsense professional, always together, always on top of her game, was head over heels in love. Not just in love, in love with a freaking movie star. She glanced over her shoulder to see if Rod Serling was hanging around this obviously alternate universe. Rod was nowhere to be seen, but the late great Mr. Serling would have been welcome instead of the vision she had. The corner newsstand had the weeks periodicals displayed in a neat row. Half had pictures of Paul. Most of those had his arm around a beautiful young starlet. Operative word-young.

She glanced back at Paul who thrust her once more into the crowd crossing toward their hotel. *Who am I kidding?* Paris dissolved.

They rode the elevator to their room for the last time. If this were all they would have, it was a memory worthy of a lifetime.

Madeline looked at his blissful face. She stifled a laugh when he let loose with an inelegant snore. He had been forceful, passionate...overwhelming. All of it was overwhelming. It was time to go while the blooms were still on her roses and her memories.

Reaching for her jacket, she turned too quickly in the narrow gap between beds and tumbled back onto cheap springs.

“What?” Paul raised a sleepy head.

“I’m sorry. I tripped.”

“What are you doing?”

“It’s after 12 and I must get back to my meetings. And you know your manager is looking for you.” She tried to push off the bed. Paul grabbed her wrist.

“Were you going to leave without a word?”

Her brave smile left her. “No, I would have woken you in a moment. I wouldn’t have left you without saying goodbye.”

“Maddie, don’t go. Come back with me to my hotel. I will be finished with promotion in a few days. Then I will take you to France.”

Madeline’s eyes held his gaze. “And what would I be doing while you are doing interviews? Sitting in your hotel room, watching TV, avoiding paparazzi? I have a business, Paul, clients, employees. I have responsibilities too.”

He sat upright, letting the sheet fall to his waist. Madeline was tempted to run her hand through his warm weave of chest hair.

“Maddie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...but I don’t want you to go.”

“I know Paul. It’s all right, really. It was wonderful but we have to get back to our lives.”

He slid his hand into hers and lifted it to his lips. “This was more than an interlude. I can’t explain it. Something about us feels so right, so different.”

She gave a sad smile. “I am different. I’m not in your business at all. You’ve had a taste of the real world and you like it. I’m glad. You should spend more time here with the rest of us civilians. I think you would find you’ve been missing out on a lot. Ivory towers are lonely.”

“That sounds like the voice of experience.”

“A bit. I’ve spent most of my life building my business. I’ve had very little time to devote to a relationship.” Madeline pushed on her thighs as she stood. “Unfortunately, nothing has changed. I still have a business to run and you have...responsibilities.”

“I suppose you’re right”

Madeline’s heart clenched. It was the answer she expected, the answer she wanted. Why did it hurt so much?

She reached for her bag and pasted on a false smile. “I’ll catch a cab back to my hotel.”

“At least let me take you back.”

“That wouldn’t be wise.”

“I am not so fond of you always being right.”

She laughed. “At this moment, I’m not so fond of it either.” She leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his lips. “Goodbye Paul.”

At that was it. The events of the past eighteen hours were taking on a haze, blurred by the cabs racing by her.

“Taxi,” she shouted.

“Where to lady?” asked the driver.

She stared at him through the bulletproof glass.

“Lady, you ok?”

“Four Seasons on 57th.”

“You got it.”

It felt like waking from a dream, a warm, erotic dream. Blaring horns and screeching brakes brought her further back to her world. Her real world; where boring meetings and nights alone waited for her.

Charles had been flitting around the suite since Paul's return. A nervous little man, Charles Lamont had been Paul's manager and friend for nearly thirty years. Paul's reappearance an hour ago caused a flurry of phone calls and orders, but not one reproach.

"I'm sorry I've made things difficult for you, Charles."

"Not at all. I have rearranged the important interviews and cancelled the others."

"Please give them my apologies."

"Not necessary."

"Excuse me?"

Charles stopped his whirlwind long enough to look at Paul as if he'd asked the most redundant question of all time. "You are Paul Beaumont."

Charles barked orders at underlings while flipping through his overflowing agenda. Paul watched in awe as he schmoozed an irate TV reporter on the phone while terrorizing a waiter for slow room service. Twenty years of hard work and success had given him the right to be rude to anyone and it would all be written off to his title... *Movie Star*. This right apparently extended to his staff.

Paul looked out the window. The view was perfect. His hotel was perfect. The cut of his jacket was perfect. Of course it was; he was Paul Beaumont. Movies, interviews, merchandizing rights, somewhere along the line he'd ceased being an artist. Now he was an industry. He reached his hand into the pocket of his perfect jacket and pulled out a heavily embossed business card. His fingers trailed over the printing as he thought of jazz clubs, mushroom ravioli and roses served with corned beef. Life wasn't quite so perfect.

The line to check out ran the length of the lobby. Madeline was more than glad to be on her way. The afternoon meetings had been just as dull as they had the day before. At least she thought they were. She didn't hear too much of them. Her case was stuffed with brochures and manuals she would start reading on the train. Anything to take her mind off...

"Hey there. I missed you at the dinner last night."

"Hello, Vinny." Madeline coughed at the assault of his sour cologne.

"I don't have to head right back. Why don't you stick around and we can have dinner" Vinny slid a finger down the lapel of her jacket. "Maybe you shouldn't bother to check out."

Smooth. He wants me to pay for the room. "I don't think so." She turned her attention to the advancing line.

He reached for her shoulders. "Come on babe. Let's get to know each other."

A deeply accented and very angry voice all but growled, "Let her go."

Madeline turned toward the voice. "Paul," she whispered.

"Hey buddy, what's your problem?" Apparently raging hormones affected Vinny's vision.

"You are the problem." Paul leaned very close to Vinny's face. "Now go away," he growled.

Vinny fled to the back of the line and whispered to his friends. Recognition was close at hand. Madeline grabbed Paul's hand and pulled him into a quiet corner.

"What are you doing here?"

Paul smiled as he wrapped his arms around her waist. "I want you to be a part of my life."

"You just met me."

"No, I didn't."

"What?"

"I've always known you. I just didn't find you until now."

"I don't understand."

Paul shook his head. "This would be so much easier in French." He held her tightly as he placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I have had a charmed life, professional success, a wonderful daughter and the women, well..."

"Careful there, Beaumont," Madeline warned with a smile.

"Sorry. But none of it ever felt quite right. There was an important piece of my life missing."

"Paul, it's not me."

"No, it's not."

Madeline pushed back on his chest. "What?"

"It's me. For the first time in longer than I can remember I'm not playing a role. And I only feel that way with you."

“I don’t know what to say. Nothing’s changed. I still have my job, responsibilities.”

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a long envelope. “It’s a ticket to Paris, with connections to Provence and limos to my home, everything you need.”

“This is very flattering but...”

He opened the flap and pointed to the dates. “It’s open ended. You can come when you’re free. Stay as long as you wish.”

Madeline looked up into those famous brown eyes and smiled.

“Please, Maddie. Say you’ll think about it.” Paul swept her up into a deep kiss. Air France was looking better by the second. She pulled back and glanced at the travel folder and smiled. “First Class?”

He put his hand to his chest, feigning offense, “Mademoiselle, I’m Paul Beaumont!”