

Bastienne

Steam rose from the Stenton Suite's large bathing quarters, extravagant even for the best room at the famed but notably out-of-fashion Bastienne Hotel. The shower's fizzing spray of hot water combined with the cool morning air to cloud up the room. Adored at one time by the stars of what was in truth a bygone era; now, the only inhabitants of the sprawling resort were a motley crew of misguided tourists and shady recluses. It was clear, from the faded bedding and sparse hallways, that the hotel had seen better days.

As Randall peered across the pool, with its deeper limits just about merging with the overflowing banks of the Aegean Sea, he thought about this first time he set foot in this lonely mediterranean outpost.

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It must have been early October, or maybe late April. It was certainly off-season and in the days when it was fashionable for to slick back one's hair in dark pomade. Starved of the nostalgic memories of her Greek childhood, his lover chose the Bastienne as the location for their first rendezvous. Selena had spoken, in their many forbidden letters, of her grandmother's farm in the southern Greek isles and the purity of love she had been fed at that farm. He loved her, for no more reason than her tendency to say such things. So it was decided, that the distant lovers would reconnect in secret and in haste at the magnificent and famously exclusive island retreat.

Gilded on both sides by leaf-strewn hills so high their peaks seemed to almost graze the clouds above, the steep ascent to the resort was itself an incredible sight. The narrow winding paths that led uphill were only accessible in those days by horse-pulled carriage.

His thoughts drifted to the delicately suggestive letters Serena had written him over the last year, each one more intoxicating than the next. He had read one particular letter so many times he was sure he could quote entire lines by heart. Her words had struck deep chords, managing to overpower most of his idle moments. So it did not seem strange that he spent most of the voyage to the island rereading their latest correspondence. In truth, he had forgotten what life was like before he needed her.

Birds, from both sides of the elevated ground that snugly cradled the path, rang out in fluttering songs as the horses galloped ahead. The sun had begun to set when the destination finally came into view, letting a warm pink glow over the overflowing horizon. Hemmed in on it's northern side by the sea, the boldly-lit hotel seemed from a distance, at least to Randall, like a fixture from a dream.

The carriage pulled up to a halt just after a deep-set stone signpost that read "The Grand & Regal Bastienne Hotel". Up ahead the mostly silent carriage hand leapt off his perch to stay the bucking horses. The other guest carriages were lined up under a large gazebo, with the horses manned by two burly men sporting tanned work hats and maroon boots covered in beach sand.

Randall stepped out of the carriage, creaking his long neck and carrying with him his favored briefcase and a suffocating sense of anticipation. A swooshing gust of evening breeze tussled with the leaves of the large trees that encircled the resort's front landing. He wondered whether Selena had arrived, how she had gotten here and many other unknowable things.

Surveying the expanse of neatly manicured buildings and lavishly decked outlets, Randall felt a familiar tinge of unease. It was a feeling that had made of his mind a frequent resting place since he left the service.

Draped in the four-button Spellman sports coat that was popular with aviators of his day and a large brown hat, he appeared even taller than he was. He scanned the common areas visible from the hotel's landing, barely making out distant figures straddling the edge of a fleeting shoreline. The possibility that she could be among them was delightful and torturous in equal measure. Bellboys sporting tight-fitting beige waistcoats scurried towards the recently unloaded carriage, unaware or perhaps indifferent to the internal rumblings of its sole occupant.

A large man with an outstanding mustache sauntered into view just as the last bags were offloaded from the carriage. Dressed in a smart fluorescent blue shirt that was dimmed only by the evening sun, He gestured in Randall's direction, urging him towards the large oval cavity that led into the hotel's pristine lobby. A white stone corridor, lit almost exclusively by glistening chandeliers, welcomed guests to the Bastienne, as a sizable fleet of waiters corralled the hallways wielding cucumber water in tall glasses.

He did not recollect much else of the man's appearance. His thoughts had been completely engulfed in the many possibilities his stay held for him. Though he had never courted her close company, he swore he had closely imagined what she smelt like. One of the small ways the mind copes with unknowns as significant as this.

"What name is the reservation booked under? Sir," The question may have been asked a few times before Randall came to.

"Gorane, Randall" His words prompted a knowing smile from the front desk's attendant. He motioned to present proof of his booking lodged in his coat pocket before politely being discouraged with the wave of a hand. A faint chord rilled from a piano in a room hidden beyond the vast corridors.

"If you would just follow me," grabbing hold of some spare notes she had been writing on, the attendant led the way through the sparse lobby and down a level via a winding trove of stairs. The bottom of the stairwell revealed a considerable landing that bled into smaller, more narrow hallways. Veering into one of the lower level's openings, she glanced at Randall and started to speak again. "The reservation's other guest has arrived, leaving detailed instructions for your pre lodging entertainment." Her soft voice easily occupied the space between them.

"Where is she?" He could barely hear himself speak.

"Just through here," She had stopped halfway through the hallway. To her right stood a large double door fronted by large wood handles, and on her left a small painting of a farm set by the sea. "Your luggage and house supper, will be with you in a few hours," His heart had pumped more blood than his large head needed and he could feel himself heating up. "Till then, we do hope you enjoy all the seclusion and tranquility of the grand Bastienne hotel" She handed him what appeared to be a tassel and a blindfold, before walking past him the way they came and vanishing into the distance.

Looking around, as if expecting to be interrupted by an unseen party, he cranked the large handle and stepped into a completely blacked out room. Aided by the dim lighting of the subterranean hallway, he slowly made his way into the room, shutting the large door behind him. A lush expanse of rug softened his steps into the dark. Before he could really take in the calming lavender essence that floated in room's cool air a voice, unlike any he had ever heard, reached out from the darkness.

"Surely you'll do me the honor of assuming the blindfold." The soft timber in the voice's request deeply compelled him. "I find that's it's just the right way to start things off." Dropping the briefcase he had been carrying since the carriage, Randall slipped on the blindfold, ushering himself further into the void.

"Are you to stay hidden forever?" He called out, more a statement than question.

"Does my valiant aviator tire of my silly games?" Randall could taste the delicate invitations in her words. "We have only just begun." Silence, save the hum of his heaving breath, enveloped the room. Images, of every unclean variety, crowded his mind. These were thoughts so strong, he could as well taste them.

He soon heard slow steps motoring in his direction, bringing with them the most perfect scent he had ever known. "I might just die, you know," Soft hands met in lock with his folded arms as he spoke.

"Not before you serve your God,"

A measured but decisive motion slipped away the blindfold, with it relieving some of the room's now titanic tension. His eyes narrowed quickly, failing to adjust to the wonder of nature that stood before him. His hands, undeterred by the dark, felt up her full hips, bringing to light more truth about her glorious form.

Long brown hair barely covered star-bright eyes that looked in his direction as though to consume him. Up close in the dark, he could barely make out the skin-brown dress that housed her full frame so tightly he figured it might beat him to exasperated explosion.

The effect her presence had on him defied description; drawing him closer and closer till they practically shared a breath. Randall raised a hand to part her long hair, revealing a devilish smile on a face so striking he felt himself shudder. Leaning in, his long lost love planted a soft kiss on his chin.

"You are quite astonishing, you know" She said, almost to the ceiling above them. "A man of war need not have such good looks." She continued, slowly stripping him of his sports coat and jacket. "Rather a waste of resources, don't you think,"

"I am now, a man of love," He shot back, after a small pause. "If you care to know" By now, the only garments that remained on his person were his underwear.

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The misty fizz from the morning bath subsided as reality drew Randall back down to the present, to meet his aging bones and weary heart. Sat alone in the hollowness of the famed hotel's largest room available for hire, he surveyed, in his own somber way, the decisions that had been made over the years that brought him to this exact moment.

A long way from his cavernous room, the chilling horn of a large cruise ship rang out. The morning breeze that flowed in through the large French windows brought with it the ocean's simmering salty scent. What a scene for an old soul's worn melancholy.

Few places on earth brought him closer to his now deceased wife. The letters, he perpetually carried on his person gained new life when he returned to lodge at the Bastienne. He could hear her feathery laughter as he read letter after letter.

Randall found that the letter he considered his favorite changed as the years went by. His consumption of them shaped the changing seasons of his life. In the first years after her death, he could not bear to read even a single line. That subsided, when he became accustomed to the overwhelming crush of the silence Serena left in her wake. Some time around the 5th anniversary of her passing, he read the very first letter she wrote to him. It was a pointedly poetic one; an ode to the life she sought to live if her circumstances as a war-time reporter ever changed.

The burden of years past breathed new life into the other letters Serena left him, enriching his memory of her and most importantly reviving their bond.

His fingers careened over the soft worn-white parchment that held the words from his beloved. This morning's highlight: an incredibly vivid love letter written in cursive French, cradled him as he settled warmly into another day dream from a glorious past.