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## Paris

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## PARIS

**Kristine Quint**

I arrived at the Giddy Up Café fifteen minutes early so everything could be ready when the doors opened at seven. Inside always smelled like frying butter, Folgers, and cleaning supplies, even before the cooks came in. I flicked on the lights in the glass tank, which would later hold cakes and pies with wrinkled crusts, and navigated through the comfortably crowded tables to start coffee in the back. As it gurgled into the awaiting pots, I stared out the windows of the diner at the interstate, and the red and tan bluffs of Rock Springs, and imagined I was in Paris.

The buttes turned into marble-front apartments with periwinkle roofs and petite rust-orange chimneystacks. The overcrowded sagebrush were swaying treetops peeking over gray cathedrals and pale monuments. Sometimes, after an early rain, the interstate glowed sleek and smooth under streetlights, and it looked just like the Seine I'd seen in all the pictures and movies, wide and defining. As the cooks and other waitresses wandered in, I imagined there was a pleasant afternoon rain shower in Montmartre, and the French were gathering in cafés or strolling through gardens toting red umbrellas under soft veils of rain, the sun still shining through the clouds and filtering faded colors across the city like light in old photographs. If I lived in Paris, maybe I'd really start painting. Of course I'd still work—I would serve soft, steaming pastries and espresso to polite Frenchmen and their elegant wives rather than slabby slapjacks to coal miners with mud-soaked jeans. But I'd be inspired, like the generations of artists living in the City of Light before me. Perhaps I'd meet others like me. Not just expatriates, but people who moved to Paris to live the good life.

“Good morning, Nicole!” Tiffany Jones was our first customer at seven sharp. She came in every morning for a sourdough pancake and “a cup of joe.” I put in the order before I brought a mug of coffee over and sat down across from her.

“Hey, sweetie pie,” she said, sipping through a lipstick stained mouth while her bright brown eyes scanned over me. “I still don't see why no one has snatched you up yet. When you going to find a man to take you on a honeymoon?”

“Tiffany, do you see any of these men taking me to Paris, let alone the altar?” We glanced around the diner, already starting to fill with old men in faded Levi's and

pimple-faced teenagers playing hooky.

“Well, you never know, do you?” she said, twirling a spoon on her paper napkin. “Any day now, some rich man on his way to New York City might drive right through Rock Springs, run out of gas, and come in to look for help, only to leave with a new fiancé.”

Carly, another waitress, swept past us with five plates perched on her thin arms.

“Nicole, it’s 8:15. Your shift started five minutes ago.” Tiffany rolled her eyes at Carly’s back.

“Think she learned to balance plates like that feeding hay to all her cows?”

I smiled and stood up to put on my apron, turning so Tiffany could tie the strings.

“I’ll leave a big tip for you,” she called after me as I went to greet two old men who had just come in.

My big brother Jake never understood why I fantasized about Paris. He scoffed when I checked out CDs from the library when I tried to learn French and mocked me in a Pepé Le Pew accent when he wanted to get on my nerves. Most the time I didn’t care because I knew Jake was usually down and out, and just needed to feel better than someone. He’d gotten in trouble a few times for petty theft and vandalism. I’d had to help him foot the bill because Mom retired to Topeka, Kansas with her fourth husband and converted to Baptism and wanted nothing to do with her heathen children. I think she figured that since we were damned sinners anyways, she might as well cut the cord before Jesus damned her by association. But Jake had always been grateful for my help; he paid me back by buying me breakfast or a new pair of shoes. We had no one but each other; how could I not help him when he needed me?

The last time I talked to Jake was almost a month ago. He told me he was going to move to Cheyenne to look for work, and asked for help with gas money to get there. I hoped he was doing well and keeping out of trouble. But no news was good news when it came to my big brother.

By the end of the day, I’d made fifty in tips and picked up a paycheck. As soon as I

got home, I turned on my laptop and checked my Rock Springs Credit Union account. I sighed when I saw the credit card balance in red. After rent and bills, I could add another \$300 to my savings, which would leave me with \$3,000. It was the best I could do working at the Café and sometimes helping Jake.

To cheer myself up, I poured a glass of wine and looked up one-way flights from Salt Lake to Paris. If I left in a month I'd spend just over \$900 on a ticket, which would leave me about \$2,100. After Googling long-term apartment rentals, I realized I'd need at least \$3,500 before I could afford to rent the cheapest apartment I could find and still afford food, not to mention utilities. Even Parisians needed to pay for their electricity. It would take me a few weeks to find work, but what I had would last me until then.

That's when I realized—I already had \$3,000. All I needed was \$500 to move to The City of Lights. Paris. It was all I worked for, and it was so close. But I needed \$500.

Suddenly I heard a few sharp raps on my front door. It was Jake.

“Hey, Nic.” His breath tumbled from his mouth, unfurling into the darkening sky. I flipped on the porch light as he glanced into the apartment over my shoulder. “Mind if I crash here tonight?” He gave me a quick hug and slipped through the doorway.

“What are you doing here?”

“I picked up Chinese. It's in the truck, with a couple of other treats. But the deal is you have to go get it.”

“Jake, I'm not even hungry—”

“I got sweet and sour chicken.”

“Alright,” I sighed.

The truck was unlocked. The interior stung with the scent of cologne and cigarettes, and a Colt 45 tall boy was perched on the dash. Behind the driver's seat was steaming food in slick plastic boxes and a bag with extra fortune cookies. A plastic bag next to the food held clinking bottles of Everclear and Black Velvet.

Back in the apartment, Jake has clicking through something on my computer.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Just checkin' my email,” he said before closing the screen. I grabbed two forks and a

set of glasses from the kitchen and poured us each a whiskey.

Through forkfuls of rice and sweet and sour chicken, Jake told me about how much he hated Cheyenne, how he had tried to date some girl someone else had already knocked up, and that was just typical drama.

“Don’t even get me started on what the real losers do,” he said through a mouthful of rice. “After all the shit in Cheyenne, I decided Rock Springs was heaven. And here I am. Sorry I didn’t call, I just had to go.”

I thought about telling him I almost had enough money to move to Paris, but kept silent and cradled the whiskey in my palm.

When Jake got tired of the Black Velvet, he moved on to mixing Everclear with the Coke in my fridge. He moved closer to me each time he poured a drink, his stories about Cheyenne becoming more extravagant. Eventually he crept across the couch until we sat right next to each other. Soon his hand was on my knee. Only two boys had ever put their hands on my knee before—once in middle school, and once after prom. Those hands were soft and warm. Jake’s were hard and hot, even through my jeans.

“Look, it’s midnight. I really should go to bed,” I said. “Do you need to stay here?”

“Actually,” he slurred, “I was wondering if I could borrow a little money.”

“What? For what?”

“Just enough to start me off in an apartment with a deposit.” He tried to take a sip from his glass, but it was empty, so he tossed it to the table and grabbed the bottle of whiskey.

“No.”

“Aw, come on Nic. I promise I’ll pay you back. You know I will. I love you, sis.” He tried to wrap an arm around my neck but I pushed him off.

“Jake, I’ve helped you enough in the last couple of years, and, well, frankly, I can’t afford to help you right now.” He took another swing.

“That’s not true. You always save,” he said, wiping a sleeve across his mouth. “What did you spend it all on? You haven’t even moved.”

“I’m going to move to Paris.” He laughed, slopping whiskey down his shirt.

“And why the hell would you do that, little sister?” He put the bottle on the table. “Oh wait, I know. You’d rather spend your money on your own stupid selfish dream than help your own brother. Your only family.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “I’ve helped you a lot. But this money is for me, to go to Paris. If you don’t like it, too bad. If you need an apartment, get a job. You can stay here for a couple days if you need to.”

I picked up the empty boxes of Chinese food and the glasses covered in the sticky ringlets of our fingerprints and took it all into the kitchen. Just as I began to rinse the cups, Jake came up behind me. I could feel the warmth of his body first at the low of my back, then on my neck and around my shoulders, and down at my knees. He pressed me into the kitchen counter until my belt buckle began to sink into my skin.

“Please?” he asked.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll pay you back,” he murmured.

“Go away, Jake.”

“Please,” he whispered, closer to my ear. His left hand cupped my shoulder and ran down my arm until it rested on top of my damp hand on the sink. His other hand began to push past my hip and further down my leg.

“Jake, leave me the hell alone, or I’m calling the cops and you’ll never get a cent out of me again.”

He grabbed the soapy glass from my hand and threw it against the wall. It didn’t shatter until it hit the floor, splintering across the checkered linoleum like a swarm of fallen stars. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

“Why won’t you help me? You’ve never wanted to lend me any money, even when you did. You’re such a penny-pinching whore!” He shook me again as I tried to push him away from me.

Then he seemed to realize what he had done. He stepped back.

“I’m sorry, Nicole, I’m just drunk, I’ll buy you a new one, I’m really sorry—”

He picked up a rag from the counter and started to pick up the shards from the

floor. I stumbled away from him and ran to my room, locking the door behind me. I half expected him to begin breaking more dishes, or to throw awful words like knives and pound on my bedroom door, but there was only silence throughout the apartment. All I heard for the rest of the night was the clock on my wall, ticking.

The next morning, the kitchen was clean and showed no signs of the night before. The trash was taken out and the bag replaced. No glass winked at me from the floor when I turned on the light, and the dishes were washed and left in the dish rack. Relieved that I wouldn't have to clean up before work, I tossed a packet of Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop Tarts into the toaster before getting my laptop from the living room. Looking for apartments in Paris before another shift at the Café seemed like a good way to unwind before the day started.

I stepped into my living room. Jake had cleaned the kitchen, but destroyed everything else. My Vogue magazines, organized by date on a bookshelf the day before, were ripped into thin shreds of color ads and black and white text on the living room floor. The Lonely Planet guides to Europe, France, and Paris were shoved between couch cushions, some of their pages strewn on the floor like dead birds. A butter knife was sticking out of a couch cushion, a weak attempt at inflicting damage. It was a miracle he had left my laptop unscathed.

Hands shaking, I brought it into the kitchen and went online, trying to stay calm. I checked the browser history for the night before. The last page that had been pulled up was my bank account. Whatever Jake had been doing on my computer, he'd had time to delete the history. I opened the link, knowing the numbers would give me comfort. I only needed \$500 for Paris. If that wouldn't get me through the day, I didn't know what would.

The Rock Springs Credit Union site told me my account was empty. Last night I had had \$3,000. Today, I had \$100. I started to sway, lightheaded, and checked my transaction history.

Last night at eight, \$2,900 had been transferred to an outside account. I remembered checking it just before Jake had come home—I must not have closed the window before

answering the door. He'd probably seen the screen was open, and when I'd gone out to the truck to get the food...but why had he tried to get me to give him money when he'd already taken it all?

I slammed my fist on the table. "Damnit, Jake!" Now more angry than scared, I stumbled into my bathroom to brush my teeth and put on makeup. I needed to do something normal before work. Now more than ever I needed to work, even if I got my money back.

Jake had found a Sharpie from somewhere in my apartment and inflicted its permanent ink on my bathroom mirror. The scribbles started with "Fuck you" and were illegible till the end, where he wrote "sorry." I decided to put my makeup on in the car.

I tried to pretend nothing had happened. I gave Tiffany a hard smile when she came in but didn't make conversation, and felt an ache of guilt when she left me a larger tip than normal. Customers came in, took one look at me, and smiled at the other waitresses, hoping to be seated in their sections instead. I shuffled the menus at the front counter into a neat pile over and over, not able to get my mind off my money and Jake. Should I call the cops? The bank? Was this something I could even get them to help me with? Would they even bother, when I had been stupid enough to let my notoriously ill-behaved brother into my home? And even worse, what would Jake do if he found out I'd reported him? I didn't think about what would happen if I couldn't get my money back—I just knew I needed to.

The bell at the front counter pinged, breaking through into the thick, pancake-infused air. An old man kept one wrinkled finger on it and stared at me. I sat him and his friend in my section. I figured if they thought they had the right be so rude to their waitress, they could put up with me for the next hour.

The phone rang as I walked their order to the kitchen. Carly answered the phone with a curt, "Giddyup Café, how can I help you?" I could hear the person on the other end of the line over the hissing bacon and murmurs of the diners. Carly frowned.

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" The voice on the other end garbled until she said,

“Fine, whatever, I’ll tell her,” and hung up. She turned to me, forehead wrinkled. “Your idiot brother just called.”

“What did he say?” I asked, my heart thrumming.

“He wanted me to tell you he’s back in Cheyenne. I don’t know why he wouldn’t just tell you himself, but whatever.” She started to walk away.

“Carly,” I said. She turned to look at me. “Will you cover my shift for a little while? I have something I really need to take care of.”

“I’ve been covering your ass all morning. My tables are full. Where do you need to go?”

“It’s personal. An emergency,” I said.

“Fine, whatever,” she huffed. “More tips for me.”

“Thanks, I owe you one,” I said as I stepped out the door.

I called Jake while I drove to the police station. I could hardly hear my voice over my rushing heartbeat as the phone rang.

“Hey, what’s up, you reached Jake. Leave a message, I might call you back.”

I was surprised he even had his voicemail set up.

“Jake, it’s Nicole. Carly told me you’re in Cheyenne. I know what you did so there’s no point avoiding me. Look, if you transfer my money back today, as in right now, I won’t hold this against you. But if you don’t call me back within the next five minutes, I’m going to the police.”

When I pulled into the parking lot, five minutes had passed. I sat in the car for another five and thought about calling him again, but decided against it.

Inside the police station, the secretary took my name and ushered me into the sheriff’s office, where he sat reclined in a monstrous office chair. I sat on an uncomfortable plastic bench on the other side of his desk and told him what had happened while he twiddled his thumbs, his hands resting on his gut as if pregnant.

“Basically, what you’re saying, ma’am,” he said, “is that your brother stole all your money.”

He scratched at the stubble on his neck. I recognized him as a regular weekend customer. He always ordered banana pancakes and hot cocoa.

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, if he did it from your account as you say, it could be difficult to prove that you didn’t just transfer the money yourself.”

“Sherriff, with all due respect, why the hell would I be reporting him if I had wanted to give him all my money?”

“Hey now,” he said, holding up his hands. “Just trying to help.”

“Look, my brother stole a significant amount of money right from under my nose. If you can’t get him for that, couldn’t you at least arrest him for something else?”

“Like what, Miss...Nicole? That’s your name, right?”

“He came to my apartment last night. He stole money from me. He vandalized my home. He stabbed a knife through my couch. And he stole almost \$3,000 from me. Vandalism and assault, if not theft? Hasn’t this police force or whatever you want to call it arrested him multiple times before? I’m sure you can find a warrant for a skipped trial somewhere,” I said. There was no doing this halfway; now that I’d reported him, they might as well catch him.

The sheriff leaned forward and scribbled something on a piece of paper before settling back into his chair with a squeak.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said. “You said you think he is in Cheyenne?”

“Yes,” I said. Perhaps this was going somewhere.

“Well, I have his vehicle information and a description. I’ll call my associates at the police department and tell them to keep an eye out. I’ll let you know if we hear of anything.”

“Can I get my money back?” I leaned forward, hands on his desk. He looked at them uncomfortably, shifting notebooks and papers as if to create a wall between us. “If you catch him, can I get my money back?”

“We’ll have to find him first, miss,” he said. My eyes lingered on him a moment before I thanked him and walked out.

I returned to the Café and clocked back in. As I tied the apron strings behind my back, Carly came up, propping up a tray of pancakes against her hip.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

“Fine.”

“I’ve been serving everyone in your section. Not a big deal, but, I’ll keep the tips. I hope you’ll be here for the rest of your shift, the afternoon crowd will be here soon.” She walked away, hips swaying, pancakes held high above her like an offer to the gods.

I greeted the next customers and sat them in my section, my waitress charm turned up full throttle. Yesterday I only needed \$500 to go to Paris, but today I needed \$3,500. Who knew when Jake would show up again? When he did, he would have spent all my money, there was no doubt about that. But by the time he would think to come to my home and grovel at my feet for money again, I hoped to be long gone.