

## The Sparrow's Return

Patience had been ingrained in her every thought and action since the day her sister died. Aderyn had known little else, waiting for the newest gadgets, new clothes for school, a jacket in winter and food when her mother had spent the long-awaited paycheck on cheap wine to make herself forget. She learned to put her feelings, both emotional and physical, on the backburner. Aderyn wasn't superhuman; she merely held the pale blue egg of hope, which she spent most of her days keeping warm. She would find the man, the one whose possibility had kept her going, and find a way to repay him.

She never realized that determination would send his lanky silhouette into her every thought, or cause her to disregard the law. However, as she looked back on the past, she realized that was the sort of man Antoine Lepasco was; suave, charming, an absolute gentleman, with the thrilling shimmer of danger barely peeking from behind his black metal glasses.

It had started one night, only a few weeks ago, simply enough. Aderyn was heading home from another dreary day at the office she worked in, a small bag of groceries on her arm. She usually kept her gaze averted, the cracks of the pavement much safer than the fellow inhabitants of Chicago, but she glanced up at just the right moment. About twenty feet ahead of her, she recognized Antoine, the man who worked three cubicles over from her, ducking into an alleyway with a young woman on his arm. He was holding an umbrella over her head, his collar turned up against the rain that came down in white fringes. They both ducked into an alleyway, their laughter barely reaching her over the hiss of car tires on wet pavement. A moment later, Aderyn peered around the

corner of the building. Her breath suddenly felt like molten lead slipping down her throat as she watched Antoine nonchalantly strangling his companion, who after several moments ceased to struggle. Aderyn merely stood grasping the cold brick corner so hard it left an angry red streak on her palm for several days afterwards. Disbelief and surprise relieved her of her senses, until Antoine glanced back up the alley in her direction. She gasped and ducked back around the corner, and found herself flying back up the street. All Antoine had seen was a vague shade, and when he looked up the street, all he saw was the garish red of a taxi's tail lights.

She never called the police, and actually made it her goal to become acquainted with him. Constantly telling herself that this was a debt she had to repay, she simply ran into him at the lunchroom at their mutual workplace, and offered him a roast beef sandwich. She knew he couldn't resist, so he sat, chewing it pensively and studying her as she ate a bag of chips and blamed her lack of appetite on a big dinner. He didn't mind the card she sent him when he took a sick day, the reoccurring extra sandwich, or her gradually constant presence by his cubicle during her breaks.

Aderyn called him after a week or two of what could be called friendship, and after a few rings, Antoine picked up.

"Hello? Lepasco here." His voice had a thick accent, but she understood him easily.

“Antoine! I was hoping you would pick up! It’s Aderyn. I was just calling to ask... Are you busy tonight?” She shifted uneasily on the other line, hoping for one little word....

“Yes, I am. Terribly busy, my dear...” He balanced the cordless phone on his shoulder, and walked into his kitchen carrying a hypodermic needle and two bottles made of clouded brown glass. “Seems my evening is quite... Tied up.” He grinned and winked at the young woman who sat bound and gagged in a kitchen chair, struggling hopelessly.

Aderyn slumped against the coffee table in her living room and suppressed a sigh of frustration. “Are you absolutely sure? Maybe after you’re done with whatever-”

“No, no. It’s entirely impossible,” He replied quickly, cutting her off.

“Ah. Well, maybe another time?” Aderyn responded after a moment, no trace in her voice of the annoyance silently bubbling beneath the surface like water into acid.

“Yes, yes. Maybe another time.” He set the bottles down, and paused, debating between the two. He had brought them both into the kitchen because he couldn’t decide which to use. He preferred to administer only one at a time, to make the bottles last longer, since buying large quantities was suspicious at the least. He could use less, but that would make it a possibility that the girl would live, and he just couldn’t have that. How to decide... “Wait miss Aderyn, one moment... Pick a letter, please?”

There was another pause, as she thought to herself ‘what does that have to do with anything?’, and then shrugged it off. What letter to choose whirred in her mind, and the answer bubbled to the top. “C.” Her voice came out faint and ragged.

“C? Right, wonderful. Closer to A.” He picked up one bottle with an old frayed label, adorned with the two black letters *As*, printed matter-of-factly. “Thank you,” He said cheerfully, and hung up, leaving Aderyn hoping she hadn’t heard muffled cries in the background.

The next day, she was on the trail again. She strolled up to Antoine’s cubicle, hopping up to sit on his desk as he talked on the phone with a customer. He smiled warmly at her and winked. She was reasonably attractive, with jet black curls and eyes the color of powdered vanilla, not to mention a slim yet softly curving figure, and being a man, that was enough for him to heartily accept her presence. He had even contemplated being kind enough to kill her, but then he stopped himself mid-thought. He never went after women he actually knew; after all, he wasn’t very eager to be caught.

“Yes, ma’am, I understand that our vaccums have a life-time guarantee, but it says clearly in the instruction manual that if you use them for anything other than they are intended for, you’ve voided your warrantee.” He paused and shot a look at Aderyn that gave the general impression of *‘kill me now’*. “No ma’am, the vaccum is not meant to be used in a pool. Yes, it actually *does* say that on the box. No, you may not speak to my superior.” He rolled his eyes dramatically. “I’m sure you will. Thank you for calling, and have a nice day.”

He tapped the button on the side of his headset to end the call, and then spun to face Aderyn slowly in his office chair.

“So... Antoine, you said another time, so I was thinking: how about tonight?”

He tilted his head in response. “What about tonight?”

“Doing something. You know, dinner, a movie, something like that...” She attempted a sweet smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. Her hand flew up to her necklace and fiddled with the small gold ring that acted as a charm, like she usually did when nervous.

“You mean a date?”

“I... I guess you could call it that...” She shifted on the desk, and glanced up momentarily to meet his gaze, her cheeks a swiftly darkening swatch of red. Their eyes only met for a moment before she glanced back down at the dark plaid pattern on her skirt. Her mind traced the reassuringly patterned and predictable dark lines, slowing her wild pulse.

“Alright. I’m not doing anything.”

“Really? Good! Great! I’ll call you later, and we can work the details out!” Her gaze darted back up as she nodded sharply, then hopped off his desk and made a hasty retreat. She wasn’t giving him any chance to change his mind, even if he wanted to.

The evening was, by Antoine’s view, going perfectly. He had picked Aderyn up at 6, taken her to dinner at the Thai restaurant they had agreed on, and then drove to the cinemas to see a movie. The movie had let out late, and a stark, cold breeze hit the both of them as the door opened. Antoine slipped one arm over Aderyn’s shoulders to protect her from the cold, and small white snowflakes began to fall, gently plummeting to the pavement to leave faint dark spots.

Aderyn turned to him, cheeks glowing red. He could tell she was excited, and it pleased him. He rarely had a positive effect on women... She smiled sweetly, and for once it was loose and natural.

“I would invite you for drinks at my place, but I really don’t think it would be remotely comfortable. The heat’s out, and the landlord just refuses to fix it.” Her breath came out in a white mist, caressing her coat in swirls before dieing out, and she watched its progress. “I would hate to intrude, but maybe... Your place?” She turned to him, her white teeth flashing in what looked almost like a predatory grimace in the dark of light, but quickly melted into a gentle simper that let out a tarnished ray of hope. Her voice carried the feeling that coming home with him would be so incredibly important, and staring into those dark and ever-shifting eyes made it impossible to refuse.

He shrugged. “Why not?” He had been sure to hide the evidence well, and the girl was... entrancing.

Antoine *thought* things were going perfectly. One moment, he striding into his apartment, a beautiful woman on his arm, and the next he was tied to a chair, the same one he had bound his last visitor to the previous afternoon. He recalled the vaguest scent of chloroform, and he opened his eyes groggily.

Standing in front of him, leaning on the counter, was Aderyn. She held a pistol with a silencer aimed at his heart, and a wicked grin.

“A-Aderyn... What are you doing? Let me go!” He tugged at the ropes binding his wrists and feet tight, but they merely creaked and chafed at his skin. He didn’t like the familiarity of it all, the strange twist his life was taking.

“Do you know why I picked C, Antoine?” She asked, her voice sweet and gentle, the grin unwavering.

“What should I care why you picked C? This isn’t funny! Untie me, now!”

“It’s for Christine, dear Antoine,” she continued, ignoring his rapidly growing frustration. “Christine Bunker.”

Antoine stopped struggling, and looked up at her, mouth slightly agape. “I know that name from somewhere...”

Her response was a slow, rasping laugh. “I should hope you would remember your first victim.”

Eyes widening, he gasped. “I-I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Fat chance.” The hammer on the gun clicked back.

“N-n-no! I’m innocent! I’ve done nothing! Please, stop!”

“I’m sure that’s what my sister was thinking, you son of a-”

Antoine never heard the end of that sentence, because at that moment, his world exploded into black. She set the gun down on the counter and left the apartment, smiling slightly as she took a cloth out and dabbed at the blood on her sleeve while walking

home. She didn't care about getting caught, in fact she welcomed it. Let everyone know, let it be announced from every radio and news channel in the country, the beautiful news; The world was finally right.