

In Karen's Footsteps by Mana Ray

Synopsis: Giselle and her mother flee France on the eve of the Second Revolution. The wealthy women arrive in Southern California, where a powerful Karen schemes to subjugate them both to her will: serving at her pampered American feet.

A loud explosion woke Giselle up from her slumber. The young Frenchwoman didn't know what to do, although there had been rumors of such things happening across the country. It was the dawn of the second French Revolution, and the young oligarch just froze in her silk sheets until her maman came to get her.

"Pack your things," said her maman Violette, a look of deep worry on her face. "And hurry. Only take what fits in one bag."

"What's happening?" Giselle asked.

"The socialists have started a war. We need to get to my office. Hurry!"

She went over to close the blinds to the girl's room before turning on the lights, then hurried off to do her own packing. Giselle got out of bed feeling her heart race. This was like a bad dream. More explosions followed, closer this time. Then the sound of automatic gunfire. The 18 year-old blonde stepped out of her pajamas and threw on some workout pants and a plain T-shirt. She slipped her bare feet into some Ugg boots and rapidly packed her jewelry, a few different outfits, and some photographs and decorations that were important to her.

Violette was at the door. "Are you done?"

"Yes, maman," was her reply. She wanted to sound brave, but her voice cracked.

"It will be alright," the woman assured her, "We have a home in America where we can go. We just need to escape the city. Hurry now, quick like a bunny."

The Parisian mother and daughter walked the dark hallways of their mansion, down towards the garage. It registered in Giselle's mind that this might be the last time she ever saw it, and the thought made her want to cry.

"What about Francoise?" Giselle asked, referring to their driver and footman. "What about Camille and Oddette?"

"We don't know if we can trust them," her maman replied. "And besides, the socialists won't hurt them... Although we've treated them fairly, they might still turn us in to the reds for a reward."

Giselle felt a pit in her stomach at the thought of being captured by the evil socialists. The reds were known to be lowlifes, drunkards and rapists. Would their maids really do something so awful as that? The two ladies threw their bags into the backseat of a newer Renault – opting to take the economy car instead of the Rolls Royce or the Nikola. Then Giselle drove them towards her office uptown where a helicopter was waiting for them on the rooftop.

On the drive over, they saw Paris burning. Groups of men wearing all-black were smashing storefronts and looting everything within. Parked cars were aflame. Somebody had driven a van through her next door neighbor's gate and now the whole place was on fire – an estate that had stood for hundreds of years. She hoped they had escaped.

A couple of men threw bricks at their car as they drove past, creating cracks in the windshield. But Violette was a competent driver unafraid of running over some rioters, and they reached her office unscathed. This part of the city was untouched by the chaos. After a long elevator

ride, they met a pilot who gave them some headphones and took them on a ride to a small airport nearby where a private jet awaited.

Giselle looked out the window at her beloved city in flames. She couldn't help but cry as she thought about how this wasn't the Paris she had grown up in – it had been overrun by wicked men who would ruin everything. Her sobs became even bigger when she thought back to her childhood strolling down the boulevards and going to dance parties before the no-go zones started popping up. Would her friends make it out alright?

Giselle and her maman got out of the helicopter, covering their ears at the din of the chopper blades which were still going. They hurried over to their private jet, climbed aboard, and departed France.

And that was how they came to America.

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Giselle had her bare feet propped up on the dashboard of their rented Mercedes. She was absently looking at her toes, noticing that her pedicure had grown out a little bit. It reminded her of her favorite nail salon in Paris where the most skilled nail technicians would gently push back her cuticles and give her the extended foot and leg massage for free just because they found her so charming. Were they socialists now, too? Did they secretly harbor a grudge against her the entire time for being a member of the bourgeoisie?

Her maman was a real estate magnate – the sort of woman who graced magazine covers for both business and fashion. Their new house was located in Orange County, California: a gated community where the sun was always shining and the police kept the subversive elements of society far afield. As the elegant woman introduced herself to the female gate attendant, Giselle swore she saw a look of contempt on the heavy-set lady's face. But maybe it was just paranoia.

The first house on the right gave a wonderful impression of the neighborhood. Giselle gasped at the size of the estate: at least four lots combined into one with large magnolia and camphor trees providing partial shade for a flowering garden. The architecture of the place was even more striking when compared to the boxy one-story houses that made up the rest of the development. On the porch, she noticed an unsmiling blonde woman having an argument with one of her gardeners. The woman was clearly angry, pointing her finger in the unfortunate employee's face and dressing her down over something. She wore a simple pink sundress and was barefoot. She looked towards the car and made eye contact with Giselle for a charged moment.

"She must be the one in charge," Giselle's maman remarked, to which the young woman agreed.

The rest of the houses, by comparison, were bland and unimpressive. They were all the same boxy shape and grey color, and had rose gardens located in the same relative locations right by the picket fences. It gave Giselle a sinking feeling – this was the type of place the socialists would have everyone inhabit as equals.

"Maman, are we really going to live here?" The young woman asked.

"What, do you want to go back to Paris and try your luck?" Violette said with a chuckle. But she looked over and saw the hurt expression on her daughter's face and softened her tone. She reached across the car and rested her hand affectionately on the girl's shoulder. "Don't worry, ma cherie. Once I sort out my real estate, we can afford to move someplace nicer... How about a hundred-acre estate up in Malibu?"

Giselle giggled. "Or Beverly Hills!" She suggested.

"Or Beverly Hills," her mother agreed.

There was little unpacking to do, with each of them having all of their worldly possessions

in one bag. Violette left the car in the driveway and they entered the home, which was unlocked via a passcode rather than having a conventional lock and key system. Inside, the place was corporate and soulless: grey laminate floors, cream white furniture, and plastic flowers on the tables. The first thing they did was take showers, washing off the fatigue of their long journey.

Giselle was the first to finish bathing, and she went into the living room to turn on the news and see if there was anything about France. To her dismay, all of the news channels barely bothered covering it. Apparently, the US had its own share of problems with rising homelessness and violent crime taking up most of the broadcast. The only mention of France was on an international channel, which said that the riots were still ongoing but that the police had taken control of most of the city.

"You shouldn't watch that," her maman said, walking into the room with a towel covering her hair. "When it's safe to go back, I will let you know. Until then, you'll just drive yourself crazy following every single development."

She was carrying her laptop beneath her arm and set it out on the living room table. Moments later, she was responding to emails, checking account balances, and doing the day-to-day work of her real estate business. But Giselle couldn't help but notice a frown on the woman's face which gave her an ominous feeling about the future. How could she collect rents if the socialists declared it a crime to own property?

"Should we go shopping for clothes?" The young woman asked.

"I need a few days to settle in. Why don't you go and explore the neighborhood? See if you can make some new friends. Take your mind off things."

Giselle wanted to reply that nothing could undo the trauma of having to flee her home, but it was clear her maman wanted space to herself so she could work. So she nodded, put on some flip flops and took a walk around the neighborhood. But the blonde woman in the pink sundress was walking up to their house with a welcome basket in her hands.

"Bonjour!" She called out with a smile, "You must be the new residents. I'm guessing that you are Giselle and your mother Violette is inside?"

"Oui," Giselle replied. Then she corrected herself, "I mean, yes."

"Oh that accent is just adorable! I love it! My name is Barbara – I'm the head of the HOA. May I come in?"

"Of course."

Upon entering their home, Barbara kicked off her shoes which were a silvery pair of flip-flops that the woman had clearly owned for a long time. She shook Violette's hand and offered her condolences on the recent troubles in France.

"Those socialists are animals," Barbara announced. "We have some in this country too but don't worry: we'd never allow something like that to happen here. We Americans are too strong."

Whatever goodwill she had built up vanished in a moment because now Giselle felt annoyed at the snide remark. Barbara was implying that French people were cowards – an obnoxiously persistent stereotype. Violette thanked her and took the basket, not taking up the offensive remark.

"So I know you're probably busy so I'll get out of your hair," Barbara continued. "I just wanted to give you this welcome basket and let you know about some of the rules we all live by here."

"Rules?" Giselle asked, trying to sound neutral.

"Yes. A lot of it is basic stuff: when the trash goes out, what plants are allowed, no loud noises after 8PM. But you'll want to read through them all to make sure that you are in compliance. I'm sure the government will put down the socialist rebellion and you'll be out of here very soon..."

But in the meantime please do learn our ways. You are in America now, after all."

Barbara laughed at her own joke, and Giselle resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

"Thank you, madame," Violette replied neutrally. She clearly didn't want to spend much time humoring this woman. "We will familiarize ourselves with the rules, of course."

"So that brings me to my main reason for coming here," Barbara said. "Because I hate to say it, but you are actually not in compliance right now!"

Violette blinked at the woman. A slight color rose in her cheeks, but she held her temper in check. "Yes? How so?"

"Oh, it's not a big deal!" Barbara assured them. "And it's not even your fault. After you bought this home, we had a really terrible domestic violence incident. And the police didn't have sufficient evidence to convict. So the board voted that each house should have cameras and microphones built in to prevent future crimes from happening."

Giselle looked at the woman with wide eyes. She wanted them to put up a bunch of surveillance equipment inside the comfort of their own home?

"That will not be necessary," Violette replied sternly. "It's only me and my daughter here. Neither one of us are violent criminals."

"Of course not!" Barbara said, raising her hand to her chest. "I'm sorry. I'm not very good at dealing with people. I wasn't trying to imply anything... But it is the policy, all the same. And I promise you that the footage is kept strictly confidential, and only viewed in the case of a crime. Which has never, ever happened by the way."

Giselle looked the woman over. She was slightly overweight, as she found most Americans to be, and she wore expensive bracelets on her wrists. Her blonde hair probably wasn't natural like Giselle and her maman's was, but it was a very good dye job. Her feet were a bit wide but very well-cared for. When she moved, she left a little footprint of sweat against the floor.

"Very well," Giselle's maman said. "We will get the cameras up as soon as possible."

"Thank you!" Barbara said. "I'm sorry this had to be our first introduction. But I have to be the bad guy sometimes. It comes with the job. I'll go ahead and waive the fine, but please have it done by end of week. I'll send over the company we use."

"Of course," Violette said icily.

"Can I get you anything?" Giselle asked. She felt a little stupid offering this woman comfort who just barged into their house with all these obnoxious rules, but she wanted to be a good hostess.

"Oh aren't you sweet?" Was Barbara's reply. "I know you'll fit in just fine here. I'd love a glass of water. Just a little ice. A squirt of lime if you have it – otherwise, water will be fine."

Giselle walked into the kitchen, the sound of her flip-flops echoing through the home. They didn't have any lime, so she just fixed a glass of ice water for the woman and handed it to her. Barbara took it and drank a little bit, letting out an obnoxious 'aah' sound when she finished. She passed the glass back to Giselle with some of her pink lipstick smeared on the rim of it.

"Giselle, would you like to take a walk with me?" Barbara asked her. "I can give you a quick tour of our little community."

Giselle, having nothing better to do, agreed to the proposition – she also wanted to get this woman out of her mother's business as soon as possible. The two of them stepped out the door together into the pleasant spring day and down the sidewalk.

"Do you notice how clean the streets are?" Barbara asked.

"Yes, they are very nice!"

"Thank you! We actually have a team of volunteers who sweep them every week. Not with mechanical tools – I despise the things – but with an actual broom and dustpan. You won't find a speck of trash anywhere. Isn't that quaint?"

Giselle paused. She had never heard of someone sweeping the street with a broom. It made her giggle.

"Yes, I suppose it is!" She replied.

"It's not like Paris. I know all about your city," Barbara went on. "How it became overrun with... undesireables. And how when the government cut back their benefits, they started getting violent until it built up to the ugly situation they're in now. I have a lot of sympathy for you. I really do."

Giselle nodded. She had frequently thought these sorts of things, but they were very impolite to say out loud.

"Yes, it is very sad," the French girl admitted. "I wish the government had not allowed so many of them in."

Barbara gave her a knowing smile. She rested a hand on the girl's shoulder and gave it an affectionate squeeze.

"I like you already. You're like a tragic French princess who fled from the evil communist regime! And you're 100% correct. The government needs to use force to keep people in line... Giselle, this is going to sound crazy, but there are some ladies here who give a wonderful shoulder massage. Would you like to stop by their house and relax for a bit?"

"Their house?" Giselle asked, confused at the idea. She had plenty of massages in her time, but it was usually the therapist who came to her house – or she went to the spa.

"Well it's my house, technically. But they rent it from me. Come on, you'll love it!"

"Alright..."

The two of them walked up the steps of a house that, besides the address, was functionally the same as any of the other ones. Barbara knocked on the door, and the padding sound of feet approached. The door opened and a strikingly attractive brunette woman in her mid 20's beamed an incredible smile.

"Madame President!" The brunette cheered, putting on a smile so big it made her look like a puppy whose owner came home. "It's so good to see you! Karly! Our President is here!"

The brunette woman stepped very close to Barbara and gave her a lingering kiss on the cheek. Soon, a woman with platinum blonde hair of about the same age approached and greeted her in the same way. Giselle found this weird – even in France the kiss-kiss on the cheek was an outdated greeting – and Barbara sort of received the kiss, she didn't give it back.

"Kat, Karly, I want you to meet Giselle. She's new in the neighborhood and I told her about your lovely shoulder rubs. Do you think you have time to squeeze us in? Pardon the pun."

"Of course!" Said Kat, who was the brunette. "Please, take your usual seat. We'll pull up another one for your guest."

Following Barbara's lead, Giselle kicked off her flip flops and went into the house. Even on the inside, it was identical to the one she and her mom were staying in down to the soulless art on the walls. Karly moved one of the canvas chairs across the room so that the two guests could sit beside each other as they received their massages.

"Will it be alright that I'm wearing a shirt?" Giselle asked.

"That's a good point," Barbara agreed. "Well, you won't get the full experience this time, but

next time we visit they can have a robe for you. In the mean time please, sit."

It was a little weird to walk into a stranger's home and have them start rubbing her shoulders, but as soon as she felt Karly's hands on her back her misgivings were gone. The young woman had an incredibly skilled touch, and Giselle needed it after the long flight and the car ride.

The thoughts drifted from her mind and she closed her eyes, reveling in the wonderful sensation of a skillful massage.

"I'll just let you relax," Barbara announced to which Giselle smiled at her and thanked her.

"Aah! Zat is wonderful!" she called out when Karly worked out a knot that she had carried in her shoulder for weeks.

"Thank you, Miss," was Karly's automatic reply.

Giselle found herself nodding off, and finally forgetting the awful things that she had been through the past couple of days. Karly even gave her a scalp massage that sent pleasant tingles down her spine. She was sad when the brunette was doing her finishing strokes, but delighted when she simply moved on and started massaging her hands and forearms instead. That continued for another ten or fifteen minutes, and Karly was just as skilled kneading the tension out of her hands as she was her shoulders. Giselle experienced physical release, like the trauma was leaving her body. But soon, that part was done too.

"The only bad part is, they don't rub feet," Barbara admitted. "Which is a shame, because I love nothing more than a good foot massage. I'm still looking for the right person to do that for me."

To emphasize her point, she outstretched one leg and rotated her ankle, showing off a pretty foot that was very well-cared for. Barbara had a babydoll pink polish on her toes, and her foot was just the slightest bit plump but overall shapely. Giselle reached up and wiped some drool off her face, then blushed.

"Thank you. Zat was magnifique," the French girl murmured happily. She got to her feet and felt like a new woman.

"It pays to stay on my good side," Barbara said mysteriously. Then she stood up as well, and they continued the tour of the neighborhood. "Kat and Karly used to work in corporate America," Barbara explained once they were back on the sidewalk, strolling lazily down the boulevard. "But then their business had cutbacks, and they both lost their jobs. Unfortunately, this meant that they couldn't afford their mortgage."

"Terrible," Giselle said.

"It really was. They were about to be out on the street when they came to me, begging for help. I moved some money around and took over their mortgage. And, to show their gratitude, they agreed to learn how to give a good shoulder and hand rub. Now they make their skills available to the ladies in the neighborhood, who pay for the service."

This arrangement struck Giselle as odd. It sounded like they had become serfs for the woman, and had no choice but to provide this treatment. They were both young enough that they could find another job – so why were they doing it?

"That was nice of you," was her tactful reply.

Barbara beamed at her. "How would you like a mani/pedi?"

Giselle's eyes lit up. "Are you serious?"

"Come with me, little princess."

This was another thing that struck Giselle as odd. The blonde girl had grown up in a mansion. Her maman had always told her that they descended from French royalty but the way Barbara was saying it made it sound like a pet name, or an inside joke. She wasn't sure how she felt

about being called a little princess – although she couldn't deny that shoulder massages and mani/pedis were welcome treatment. Her heart swelled at being referred to as royalty, that was undeniable. But was this opening the door to a more intimate relationship than she would have liked?

The next stop was at a Japanese woman's house. Natsuki was her name, and she could have been anywhere from her early 20's to her early 40's – it was hard to tell. She had bone-straight black hair cut short and a wide face with almond-shaped eyes. Her complexion was almost ghostly white, but it gave her a striking appearance.

"Welcome Madame President," she said coolly. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit? May I help you with your shoes?"

"Yes please," Barbara replied. She stepped into the woman's home and to Giselle's amazement, the woman dropped to her knees and slipped Barbara's silver flip flops right off her feet! "I'm here showing our newest resident around the neighborhood. I know I'm supposed to call ahead, but would you be able to give her a mani/pedi? She just fled here from France with little more than the clothes on her back."

Natsuki looked at Giselle with a sympathetic, if muted expression.

"How dreadful," the mature woman said. "Yes, I would be happy to do her nails. It is always a privilege to serve, Madame President." She turned to Giselle. "Please, allow me to help with your shoes as well."

"Oh, zat is not necessary," Giselle protested. But Barbara assured her this was fine, so she outstretched each foot and felt the woman's cool hands against them as she pulled off her flip flops.

"Please, come in. I will prepare some tea."

"That would be lovely."

Barbara took Giselle into the house which was much the same as all the others she had seen so far. It was immaculately clean against her bare feet as she walked into the living room and took a seat on a plush chair. But something caught Giselle's eye: it was a clear plastic shelf built into the wall which boasted a dazzling array of nail polish! And beneath that was a cabinet which bore manicurist's tools, a special light to dry nail polish, and massage oils.

"Have you ever gotten a full set?" Barbara asked her.

"Uh, I do not know the English word for this? What do you mean?" Giselle asked as she sat down.

Barbara laughed. "Oh, it's like long nails. Some people call them fake nails, but I hate that term. Like acrylic nails? Only better."

"Oh! I know zis!" Giselle replied. "Ah, yes, I have done zem once before, for a wedding."

"You haven't had a full set until you've had one by Natsuki," Barbara told her. "She's the best nail lady I've ever had. She uses this special hard gel that's lightweight and durable... Would you be open to trying it?"

Giselle wasn't sure. Truthfully, she didn't like having artificial nails. They were too much of a statement. Always getting in the way and making everyday chores more obnoxious. Plus, in Paris, they were seen as a bit low-class. But Barbara's gaze bored into her, and she felt uncomfortable telling this woman 'no.'

"Sure, I would love to try it!" Giselle announced.

"I can tell we're going to be fast friends," Barbara replied happily. "Truthfully, sometimes I have Karly or Kat rub my shoulders while Natsuki does my nails. That's my happy place."

Giselle giggled at the thought, ignoring the fact that Karly and Kat were essentially her bondwomen.

"Zat would be like heaven!" The French girl agreed, nodding her head.

"Wait 'til we get to the sushi. Now, do you have a color in mind? I think this one would go great with your complexion."

Barbara got to her feet, walked over to the wall of nail polish and picked out a deep mauve color, close to purple but with warm hues. She held the bottle up to Giselle's hands and she agreed that it would look pretty. The French girl couldn't help but notice the way their fingers touched as the older lady held the polish up to her, but she didn't pull away.

"Yes, let's go with this!" She said. "And for ze toes as well?"

Then Barbara looked down at her bare feet, which caused a nervous flutter in her heart. But the moment passed, and Barbara said it would go great on her toes as well. Natsuki came back with two cups of green tea and the President told her that Giselle would like a full set in "Martha's Vinyard" color.

"And what shape?" Natsuki asked.

"How about ballerina?" Barbara suggested. The girl knew nothing of this, so she just nodded her head.

Natsuki got to work, pulling up a C-shaped table and putting a towel over it so Giselle could rest her hand on it. The Japanese labored worked with impressive skill, her dexterous hands cutting Giselle's nails, pushing back her cuticle, and then applying some nail forms with super glue. She cut them down to size then began the painstaking process of applying a thin layer of goop onto them with a long paintbrush. Giselle always enjoyed getting her nails done – the gentle, skillful touch of a devoted technician making her body more beautiful.

"So have you thought about going to school, or finding work while you're here?" Barbara asked her as Natsuki labored over her nails, filing the plastic tips into an eye-catching shape that was long with cut corners and flat tops.

"Ah, I haven't had much time to consider it," the blonde teenager admitted. "We didn't have time to secure a visa. Right now, we are here as tourists!"

Barbara laughed at the joke. "Aw, you've kept your sense of humor," she complimented her, "Well if you need someone to put in a good word for you with Immigration Customs, I am very well-connected."

Giselle tried not to show her discomfort at the remark. She knew that when men were this nice to her, it was because they wanted one thing. And truthfully, she was starting to get that same impression from Barbara. What other reason could she have for taking her to all these decadent treatments? She decided to steer the conversation back towards the other woman, to divert attention from herself.

"And you?" Giselle asked. "May I ask what it is you do for work?"

"I'm the President of the Homeowner's Association!" Barbara answered, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "But my money comes from my late husband. He was an incredible engineer who designed the side-passenger airbags that are now standard on most cars." Giselle understood that Barbara was fantastically rich – as though her clothes and demeanor hadn't already revealed that fact. "But he died in a car accident, ironically enough," she said with sadness.

The statement hung in the air.

"I am sorry to hear it," Giselle said.

"It was very hard to live through," Barbara admitted. "But I like to think that I took his

engineering prowess and continued it here, in spirit. Every day I think of some new way of making this community safer, happier, and more prosperous. It's my way of keeping his memory alive."

"Madame President looks after all of us. She is a genius," Natsuki said, her head bowed as she focused on applying the hard gel just right so it was perfectly level on Giselle's nails.

"Oh, you're just trying to butter me up!" Barbara joked. "And it's woorking!"

The three of them laughed at the joke – although Natsuki's laughter was almost inaudible, perhaps so she could keep her hands steady. Giselle wondered about the ethics of engineering people like they were machines. Natsuki brought out the lamp that would dry the gel so she could apply the polish onto it and told Giselle to stick her hand in.

"But there are jobs you could do without a work visa," the blonde woman told Giselle. "You could be an influencer, for example. You're definitely pretty enough."

"Actually, I would like to be an artist," Giselle admitted, surprising herself with her candor.

"Arist?!" Barbara said with obvious contempt. "Yeah, maybe if you find a rich husband to support you!" She laughed at her own joke, and Giselle deflated. "I'm sorry, that was rude," the President hastened to correct herself. "I only mean that in America, artists usually don't make any money. It's usually seen as a job for a trophy wife. Not that there's anything wrong with that – I've often toyed with the idea of having one, myself."

Giselle looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "A wife?" She asked.

Barbara beamed at her. "Oh, it's just an old joke. Successful women say that what they really want is a wife: someone to look pretty, clean the house, cook for them, and rub their feet after a long day. You don't have that saying in France?"

Giselle shook her head. This conversation was taking a weird turn. But just then, Barbara's phone started ringing.

"I'm sorry. I need to take this," the industrious woman excused herself. She turned to Natsuki and said, "If I don't come back, just finish her nails. Oh, and Jacqueline and her daughter want pedicures later tonight – maybe 6PM? I'll text you the details."

Giselle's nail appointment continued without much fanfare. At first, she tried to make conversation with Natsuki but the woman would only give brief answers and didn't seem interest in talking. Her craftsmanship was beyond reproach, however: when she finished, Giselle had a flawlessly balanced set of fashionable nails on her hands that were lightweight and stunning. The pedicure was extremely pleasant: Natsuki brought a copper basin for her to soak her feet, then she filed off what little callus Giselle had before removing her old polish, trimming her nails, and applying a fresh coat of deep mauve polish to match her manicure.

Giselle observed that the pedicure didn't come with a foot massage – a first, for her. Usually it was the main thing she looked forward to in the whole service. But she knew it would be very rude to ask.

"Thank you for doing my nails, they look amazing," Giselle told the hardworking Japanese lady.

"You are welcome... You are friends with the President?"

It was a pointed question, and Giselle was unsure of how to respond. "Ah, she is showing me around for my first day," she finally said. "But we could become friends!"

"She is a very powerful friend to have," Natsuki replied softly. "And an even more powerful enemy."

"What you mean by zees?" Giselle asked, her French accent becoming more pronounced in this uncomfortable moment. Natsuki just shook her head and gave a wan smile. The teenager

thought that she noticed a great fatigue in the woman's eyes.

"Forget I said anything. Please, stop by if you break all of your nails."

"Thank you," Giselle said awkwardly. She got up and left the house, trying to ignore the uncomfortable image that Natsuki had just put into her mind. What woman ever broke all of her nails? It gave her a terrible thought of a bourgeois woman caught by the reds and subjected to horrible torture. The idea made her shiver, despite the warmth of the day.

She didn't want to go home and Barbara was nowhere to be found, so Giselle continued her walk to try and clear her mind. She needed to be careful how she walked, since the polish on her toes was still wet, so she figured she'd go to the pool and community center in the middle of the neighborhood. There she found an unusual scene: it was three young women barefoot in cheerleading uniforms, about her age, doing tik tok dances in front of a smartphone on a tripod.

She stepped into the spacious room which had an open floor plan and watched with curiosity. Two of them had sandy blonde hair and could have been sisters, but the third had sultry lips and a tan complexion. Right away, she noticed the contrast between how they acted on film and off of it. The dance routine saw them all smiling, rolling their hips and doing highly choreographed hand gestures. But when they finished, the smiles went away and the Middle Eastern girl would go review the footage. She would call out, "Michaela! You screwed up the third part! You rotated your hips the wrong direction!"

And they would go back and film the dance again, all smiles. Giselle thought their outfits were cute: red vests and white skirts. Even the polish on their toes was matching: virginal white. Eventually, they took notice of her and took a break from their task.

"You the new girl?" Said the taller woman with sandy blonde hair.

"Oui, I mean, yes," Giselle said with a slight blush. "You are filming something for tik tok? It looks very good."

"It has to be good," said the same girl. "It has to be perfect. Otherwise Madame Cunt will fine our parents."

Giselle was taken aback to hear someone talk about Barbara like that.

"Michaela!" Cried the other, shorter blonde, "You can't say that sort of crap!" Then she turned to Giselle and continued, "Please don't listen to her. She's having a bad day. I'm Becky, this is Farra, and my sister with the dirty mouth is Michaela."

"I am Giselle. I just moved here from France," she introduced herself. "May I watch?"

"Yeah, if you subscribe to our Onlyfans!" Joked Michaela. The three of them had a bitter chuckle.

"I don't know what is this?" Giselle asked, tilting her head.

"It's a dirty joke," Becky replied. "All the guys who watch our page want us to start a foot fetish Onlyfans. You know, they pay to watch us kiss each other's feet and encourage them to jerk off to it."

Giselle had never heard of such a thing! She knew men were perverted, but her maman had kept her away from such ugliness.

"We need to have this dance up by noon. Let's focus, ladies," said Farra in an exotic accent.

Giselle sat and watched the three of them perfect their dance. She felt that any of the versions would have been good enough, but every time there was some small error that made them do it again. As the hour wore on, the girls were frowning and at each other's throats between takes. Becky and Michaela bickered like siblings, generally not bringing Farra into their arguments.

Finally, they got the video they were looking for. Farra took her phone and excused herself to go back to her house and do the editing, slipping on some cotton ankle socks and cheerleader's shoes. Becky and Michaela came to sit with Giselle on some plastic folding chairs that were stacked against the eastern wall.

"Why'd you move to this dump?" Michaela said. Up close, Giselle could see the freckles on her face and her piercing green eyes. She was still barefoot, as was her sister.

"Ah, there is a political struggle in France right now. The streets are not safe. We decided to come to America where the socialists couldn't get us."

"Power to the people!" Michaela called out, echoing a socialist slogan. She raised her hand in a fist above her head. Giselle narrowed her eyes at the impetuous girl. How could she support a group of violent thugs?!

"The socialists are very bad," Giselle explained. "They break into people's houses and rape the women. This is nothing to joke about."

"Michaela just grates on people. It's her thing," Becky explained. "She doesn't know that if the socialists got to this neighborhood, they wouldn't give a shit if she supported their movement or not. She would just be three holes for them to use. But I'm going to be honest with you: you should move anywhere else but here."

"Why?" Giselle asked.

"What, you haven't met Madame President yet?" Becky said, putting disdainful emphasis on Barbara's title.

"She came to our house this morning. She was very nice. She took me to get a shoulder massage and my nails done."

Becky and Michaela exchanged a look.

"She's nice until she doesn't get her way," Becky explained. "Then she comes crashing down on you like a nuclear bomb until she does get her way."

"She's getting you all dolled up," Michaela added. "You don't think that's a bit weird?"

"I thought, in America..." Giselle tried to argue. But as soon as the words left her mouth, she could sound how stupid her idea was. To make matters worse, Michaela and Becky laughed at her.

"I sot, in Amehrika, zey gave you massages and pedicoores for free!" Michala said, mocking her accent.

"Hush," Becky told her sister, whom Giselle was starting to dislike intensely. "Listen, Barbara Nevers owns like half of the houses in this neighborhood. She's probably figuring out a way to own yours, too. And once she does, she'll have a humiliating new job for you. She might want you make you her French maid."

Giselle was mortified at the thought. She widened her eyes at the young woman, hoping that this was all a joke.

"No! I would not do such a thing," Giselle replied with disgust. She knew all the stereotypes Americans had of French people and found the 'maid' one the most distasteful: a sexually submissive servant with a strong accent and a feather duster, available for all kinds of debauchery.

"That's what we said when Barbara told us we should we get into making slutty tik tok dances," said Michaela. "Do you know the kind of crap guys post on our account? And she makes us reply to every one and thank them for saying stuff like 'nice tits!' or 'I jerked it to this video, not gonna lie.'"

The color drained from Giselle's face. A part of her didn't want to believe that Barbara was

capable of such awful things but the proof was right there in front of her. She looked at her nails with a newfound sense of disgust and hid her feet beneath her chair.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this," said Becky. "But I'm serious: get the hell out of here. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to go film some videos where we try on tight clothing and bend over."

They put on their shoes and socks and left Giselle horrified in the empty community center. She didn't bring her phone with her and it hadn't been activated in this country anyway so she didn't have anything to take her mind off the terrible news she just received. If the socialists were bad, then Barbara was like the power-mad queens that they had been fighting against in the first French Revolution! After a time, she gathered herself and walked home, having a bit of difficulty finding it because of how repetitive everything was. She noticed that on the streetlights, there were cameras built in following her every step.

When she got home, her mother was crying on the sofa.

"Maman? What's wrong?" She gasped, going to sit at the woman's side. Her mother, who throughout her youth had been a strong and unflappable woman was now looking at her with red eyes and an expression of total weakness.

"The government has frozen my bank accounts. We're ruined."

And that was how they arrived in America.

**

"It's... It's not possible!" Giselle exclaimed.

"I'm so sorry ma cherie. But it is so. We have no credit cards, and only the cash I took with us. It's only enough to get us by for another month or two – and that is assuming that I can pay my mortgage in cash."

Giselle felt pinpricks of fear dart through her body. She was just about to tell her maman that they had to flee this awful community, and now they couldn't possibly find another place to stay.

"We can sell our jewelry," Giselle suggested. "I brought all of mine."

"That's a smart girl," her maman said, "That will definitely help us. But there's still the matter of opening a bank account."

Now was Giselle's turn to be the strong one. "Maman! We have an address! We can go to any bank and make a deposit. There are places where they will turn cash into cheques. Come on, let's turn this around."

"You're absolutely right. I shouldn't despair like this in front of you. Let's go get some lunch and see what we can do."

But Giselle had underestimated the political tides going on in America. Due to a new anti-immigration sentiment, it had become extraordinarily difficult for a non-citizen to open a bank account. That obstacle might have been surmountable – and they even found a Chinese bank that would have given them an account. But when they ran a background check, they saw that Violette had some accounts frozen already which triggered red flag laws. The bank teller was very polite, but explained that they wouldn't be able to help them until they got that cleared.

After an afternoon of failure, they ate in miserable silence in the Mercedes outside of some hamburger joint. Giselle's long nails made this task more difficult. She noticed that even here in Orange County, there were a lot of homeless people. Her thoughts were growing darker – Malibu was a distant dream. Even shopping for new clothes was out of the question. Instead, she was about to pawn off all of her jewelry. She was never one to wear such things, but the thought of selling it felt like a betrayal of who she was.

The jewelry that they had spent thousands purchasing, sold for hundreds. Giselle's maman took to drinking wine for most of the days, wallowing in self-pity. She continually ignored her daughter's suggestions like asking her old business associates for a loan, or using her social media presence to sell coaching classes. The blonde girl watched, horrified, as her mother became an entirely different person. And with the cameras and microphones now installed in their home, she was worried that other people would see how pathetic she had become.

Barbara knocked on their door a few times but neither woman had the courage to answer her. Each time Giselle looked down at her hands, she was reminded of the awful woman's gift – and they also got in the way of her day-to-day chores such as taking out the garbage bag filled with empty wine bottles.

It was when Giselle was doing such a thing that Barbara found her moment to approach. The French girl hadn't checked the street to see it was clear before tossing the bag into the container, embarrassed at the sound of so much glass clinking together.

"Giselle! It's been ages! I was worried about you!" Came the saccharine voice of Barbara. She was wearing a pink tracksuit and expensive running shoes although she was only taking a power walk around the neighborhood.

"Oh, hello Barbara," was Giselle's stiff response. The woman's smile faltered.

"Is everything alright?" She asked, darting a glance down to the recycling bin. "I thought we could get some sushi and catch up. It'd be my treat. Aki is the most talented chef this side of the Pacific."

"No thank you."

Barbara was undeterred. She stepped closer to Giselle and outstretched a hand, resting it on the girl's shoulder. "Sweetie, please tell me what's wrong. I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Giselle looked at Barbara and found that she was the sort of woman that her maman once was: powerful, confident, in-control. Against her better instincts, she felt the need to disclose her situation to someone – anyone. Her friends were scattered to the wind, focused on their own survival. They never had much of a family – a distant aunt who was resentful of their fortune, perhaps.

"It's just..." Giselle began, feeling tears well up in her eyes. She shook her head, unable to continue.

"Baby, I hate to see you struggling. Why don't you come back to my house, we'll have some sushi, and we'll just talk. Would you do that for me? Please?"

Giselle looked at the house she was staying in. She knew that if she went inside, she would just end up binging the news and reading that the rebels were now in control of the city and setting up a provisional government. That the police and the military were expected to surrender any day as ambushes became more frequent and deadly. And her mom would either be passed out or wallowing in self-pity.

"Okay, let me change," Giselle said.

"Nonsense! You look fine!" Barbara replied. But Giselle felt self-conscious about her attire. She was wearing nothing more than muslin cotton sleeping shorts and a white tank top with no bra underneath since she had been lounging around the house. "It will be just us."

The French girl found herself succumbing to the woman's power once again. She agreed, and walked through the neighborhood feeling protected by Barbara's authority. It was a complex sensation – she had always wanted to be a powerful woman like her maman, but something inside of her responded to the idea of being protected by someone stronger. Like a princess sitting behind her guards.

Up close, Barbara's home was even more impressive. It was the only two-story house in the neighborhood done in the colonial style from a bygone era. The garden boasted a dazzling array of flowers and even things like blackberry bushes and strawberry plants bearing fresh fruit. They walked up the brick path up the stairs to her porch and into its lavish interior.

"Ah, it feels good to get those off," Barbara said as she removed her running shoes to reveal that she had been barefoot beneath. Giselle followed her example, although she was only wearing a frilly pair of white slippers.

"Go have a seat in the living room. I'll call to have the sushi delivered. Can I get you a drink? Maybe some wine?" Giselle shook her head and wondered if Barbara trying to pry to see who was doing all the drinking. "Fine, be that way," she finally relented.

The industrious woman excused herself, the sound of her soles slapping against hardwood floors announcing her departure. Giselle walked them barefoot, not feeling a speck of dust beneath her French feet. The walls bore impressive artwork usually in an abstract style. The living room had all-leather furniture, a tufted fainting sofa, and several ottomans. Giselle took a seat on the sofa, feeling the soft leather against her exposed thigh. She felt even more absurd dressed in her pajamas in such an expensive home.

Barbara came back with a bottle of mineral water and two glasses. She poured one for herself and one for Giselle, handing it to the girl who took it despite the fact she had said she didn't want a drink.

"It's good to see you again," Barbara beamed. "I was worried some of the people here had poisoned you against me."

"I've just been distracted," Giselle said evasively.

"I'm sure you have. I've read the news. It seems like the French government is about to surrender to the socialists. We might see a red Europe in our lifetime."

The words stung like a lit cigarette against her cheek. Hearing them from someone who wasn't a newscaster made it even more real. She closed her eyes and fought back tears. Barbara was seated in a chair across from her, studying her expression.

"It is 'orrible," Giselle whined. "It's like I am living a nightmare!"

"It's okay. Let it out," Barbara encouraged her. Giselle loathed feeling like a whiny girl being comforted by her mother – but there was an appeal in having someone to listen to her without judgment.

"I can't! Zere is nothing I can do! Zey have frozen all of our bank accounts! We had to sell our jewelry!" She exclaimed. Her accent always became more pronounced when she was upset. Then Giselle began sobbing.

Barbara got up and hugged the girl's head to her chest. She realized she might have said too much, but the desire for comfort won out against her caution. The aristocratic girl sobbed openly, hugging onto the soft body of this woman. Barbara reached down and stroked her hair, murmuring, "It's okay... It's okay... Shhh... Shhh... I'm here for you. Mommy's here."

The last comment got lost in the paroxysms of Giselle's outburst. She held onto Barbara for a long while, having a good cry at her ruined homeland. When she was finished, Giselle handed her a lightly-scented tissue, scooted her own chair closer, and smiled at her.

"Do you feel better now?" She asked.

"A little," Giselle admitted. "Thank you for listening."

"Any time. Truth be told, I knew that the bank had frozen your accounts. I have friends in the world of real estate finance and it's a small community. Nobody could keep such a big thing a

secret. I'm glad you trusted me enough to share."

Now that Barbara was closer, Giselle couldn't help but notice the aroma of unwashed feet filling the room. She looked down at Barbara's peds, immaculately cared for and still flushed pink from her little walk. Giselle put one of her own feet over the other self-consciously.

"Is it true that zat you make ze young women perform tik tok dances? And zat Karly and Kat must massage your shoulders whenever you want? " Giselle asked, her accent still embarrassingly prominent.

Barbara sighed. "I gave them an opportunity that they were free to decline. They chose to do it because the alternative was even worse."

"But zees is not right!" Giselle complained. "Zey should be studying, and getting careers, and being free! Zis is America!"

Barbara gave her an indulgent smile. "Oh Giselle. The thing I love most about you is your optimism. I wish I could protect it forever. To keep you in a world that would never let you down. But if I thought like that, I wouldn't have any of this," she said, gesturing to her beautiful home. "I'd be working for some nonprofit, putting in fifty or sixty hour weeks for peanuts, and driving my crappy car back to my rented apartment. And the people I helped wouldn't even care if I was dead and buried. They'd just go looking for the next handout."

Giselle furrowed her brow at the older woman. It had never been spelled out for her like that before. Although just like Barbara's comment about foreigners invading the country, it was an unspoken truth that everyone seemed to agree on but were too polite to say out loud.

"But... But tik tok dances? Why couldn't zey be studying chemistry, or computers?"

"They can," Barbara replied, "And they probably will once their account gets big enough. Then they can monetize, make a bunch of money, and go to college without any loans. All I did was offer them a revenue stream that they hadn't considered. They'll make a lot more money doing that than they would as some office bitch, or retail clerk."

"But it iz undignified!" Giselle countered.

"What good is dignity to the man with the empty stomach?" Barbara replied, letting the question hang in the air. Giselle had no counter to that. "You've met Michaela. You think she isn't the sort of person who would become poor, then resentful, then join up with the American socialists and plot how to take down our country?"

"Zis is not my country," Giselle spat out. "I am a proud Frenchwoman. We will drive out ze socialist menace, and retake Paris!"

"And what are you, personally, doing to make that happen?"

Giselle paused. The question caused her to frown and slump her shoulders. She was starting to see herself as a pampered rich girl who had lived on the largess of others. When she went for her bi-monthly Swedish massages, she paid with someone else's card. She had never worked a job – her maman said she could get her one at her company and in the meantime she should study the arts and literature and poetry. But she was starting to realize how unprepared she was to face the world on her own. Thankfully, there was a knock at the door to interrupt their conversation.

"Oh! That must be our sushi! You'll feel better after you've eaten, my little princess."

Barbara went to the door and came back with three trays of delicious-looking sushi arrayed artfully upon them. The sight of the delicacies made her mouth water, although it was mixed with the aroma of Barbara's unwashed feet.

"Bon apetite," Barbara said, handing Giselle a pair of chopsticks.

They ate in pleasant silence for a little while. Having such wonderful food in her stomach

did greatly improve Giselle's mood. It was a delight to even her refined palate, perhaps the best sushi the French girl had in her entire life. After complimenting the meal and making some small talk about it, they re-started their more serious conversation.

"So I'll ask again: What are your plans for education, or work while you are here?" Barbara prompted her.

"I am starting to think about this influencer job," The French girl admitted. But Barbara shook her head.

"No, I agree with your comment that being an influencer is lacking in a certain dignity. Women of our status value privacy. It would demean your image to put it out there online for a bunch of men to gawk at."

Giselle let out a sigh and shook her head. "Do you have any recommendations?"

"Yes, but I know you'll think it's crazy."

"Try me."

"Your mother Violette has a very impressive real estate portfolio," the blonde President began, "But she has no cash flow. When you get to our level, cash flow counts for a lot more than raw assets. She needs a bridge loan from someone who's willing to take a foolish risk that she can somehow maintain control of her properties in socialist France."

"I have suggested this to her," Giselle replied, ignoring the comment about her maman only receiving money from a fool, "But she has done nothing to make it so!"

"How could she?" Barbara demanded. "The lenders know they can just wait her out. Then they can purchase her properties at a discount – and that's assuming the socialists are willing to sell them at all. They might just burn them down or turn them into group housing."

Giselle's breathing got quicker and panic set in. She hadn't thought about the business implications of her maman having her properties confiscated by the evil reds. "So, what are you proposing?" She finally asked.

"I will give Violette a very generous sum of two million dollars, and sponsor you and her as citizens of the United States. And in return, you will become my domestic partner."

Giselle's heart skipped a beat. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. "Domestic partner? What is this?" she asked, but she already knew.

"My wife, Giselle. You would become my wife."

A suffocating silence crept into the room. The French girl was too stunned to make a reply. She was not a lesbian, even if she did appreciate women's beauty and preferred their company to men's. She had always dreamed of a tall, dashing husband who spoke many languages and had his own private jet -- not marrying herself off to some blonde tyrant-queen twice her age!

"I am... I am not...," the flustered girl began.

"Just consider the offer," Barbara told her, "Because it would solve all your problems rather neatly. I've shown you this neighborhood: you'd have a life of massages, pedicures, and the best food imaginable. I'll buy you a Lamborghini if you want. And in exchange, you will be my doting and attentive wife. You will rub my feet, and put on pretty clothes for me, and serve me in the bedroom."

"This offer is 'orrible!" Giselle shouted. "You cannot purchase me like I am a cow! I would never marry you! I would rather take my chances on the street!" She got to her feet and stormed out of Barbara's home.

"That's what princesses do, Giselle! They marry people they don't love to protect their

empires!" But the French girl was already putting on her slippers and walking out the door, shaking her head at the woman's twisted offer. Barbara followed her, but only as far as her porch. As Giselle hurried down the brick path, she continued shouting, "And you won't end up on the streets! They'll deport you back to France! The socialists will marry you off to one of their soldiers and he'll make you his whore!!"

When Giselle got home, she found a pair of nail cutters and removed the artificial nails on her hands. Then she found some nail polish remover and took off her polish, peeling off the plastic tips that had been so artfully placed atop her fingernails. She was red with anger, scrubbing at her poor nail beds as though they were the culprit for all her misfortunes. The room reeked of acetone and purple cotton balls littered the kitchen table.

Her maman walked into the room buzzed but not drunk enough to have passed out yet.

"What are you doing?" She slurred.

Giselle narrowed her eyes at her maman. "You must get a hold of yourself! That blonde President woman just said that if I will marry her, she will give you two million dollars! You must think of a way to get us out of this!"

"She... what?" Violette asked. Her eyes became clearer like the news had shocked her into sobriety.

"She is a witch!" Giselle spat. "She has this entire neighborhood under her thumb! She will take our house if you cannot raise some money! We will be deported!"

"I understand," Violette said calmly. "You are correct. I have been selfish lately. I will go and speak with her..."

"No!" Giselle roared. "That is the last thing you should do! You need to find a way of raising some fucking money!"

Violette jerked her head – never had Giselle sworn at her before. But she sighed, and walked over to her daughter and embraced her. "You are correct, once again. I have been terribly selfish. I promise to find a way of making money. Please forgive me for my behavior."

"I love you, maman!" Giselle sobbed, clinging to her mother in a dear embrace.

"I love you too, ma cherie," Violette replied, holding Giselle in her arms as if she were the greatest treasure in all the world.

The next day, Violette was up at 6AM stone sober. She went and got them new phones that would work in this country and printed out fliers for a new business she was starting. It was nothing glamorous: housekeeping, to be precise. But she said that there were enough houses in this neighborhood that if she took on ten or twelve clients a week, she could pay the mortgage. By mid-morning, her phone was already receiving calls and text messages from interested ladies who were looking to book her service.

"Maman, thank you for doing this. I know it must not be easy on you," Giselle said, looking at the woman with admiration for her newfound strength.

"A little scrubbing and mopping won't kill me," Violette replied. "Just don't let our friends back at home find out!"

While her maman went out to clean her first houses, Giselle racked her mind on things she could do for money. Influencing was out of the question, since e-payment of any sort required a bank account. She decided on French lessons, and started mocking up her own flyer she would put on people's doorsteps. If all else failed, she was prepared to get into housekeeping like her maman. It was no small blow to her Parisian ego to stoop to such work, but it would help pay the mortgage and keep her from Barbara's clutches.

That night, as they dined, there was a knock on the door.

It was Barbara. She was dressed in a tailored charcoal pantsuit and flanked by a Nordic woman with brunette hair, glasses, and a clipboard. "I hate to bother you!" Came her loud voice, "But this is official Neighborhood business! Please answer the door!"

Violette told Giselle to stay in the kitchen but the girl followed her anyway.

"What do you want," was Violette's acidic greeting.

"So it's come to my attention that you have started a new housekeeping business in the neighborhood," Barbara said, handing one of Violette's flyers back to her, "And I'm here to say that I'm very sorry! But it's not allowed. Didn't you read the neighborhood charter?"

"What rule have I violated?" Violette demanded.

"Section 2.42-A," the Nordic woman replied with a matter-of-fact tone, "Any home business must be approved by the Council. It must also follow all relevant state and federal labor laws, including licensing requirements."

"You heard the woman," said Barbara, "As much as I like the idea of you on your hands and knees scrubbing people's floors like a proper French maid, it has to be done by the books! I'm going to have to fine you."

"This is outrageous!" Violette hissed, her face turning red.

"It's the rules, my love. Now for each infraction there's a two hundred dollar fine. You did three houses. That, plus the fine for putting up flyers without a permit, plus the fine for not trimming your rose bushes... It puts us at \$4500. Will you be paying with cash or card?"

"Neither," Violette replied.

"Community service it is, then! Okay, you can report to the center at 8AM tomorrow and we will have you fitted for a uniform for our local carwash program."

"I will not be doing that, either," Violette said sternly.

"Then the fine accrues interest and we will have to move to disciplinary measures," Barbara threatened her in an ironically warm voice, "I'd really hate to notify my friends at ICE that there is an illegal immigrant causing a ruckus in my nice neighborhood. I strongly urge you to re-consider."

"We are tourists," Violette argued, her voice shaky.

"Not for much longer. There's a thirty day limit now. So I think it'd be best if you smiled and said, 'Oui, Madame President' and reported for community service tomorrow."

"Fuck you," Violette cursed her.

Barbara laughed so loud that the neighbors would take notice. "Cussing at the President is another fine. But we'll get this sorted out in your disciplinary meeting. Hey, by the way, have you told Giselle about the Handley account?"

"Goodbye!" Violette said, her cheeks going red as she slammed the door in Barbara's face. She walked to the sofa and rested her face in her hands, looking down at the floor. Giselle's soul ached to see her mother so thoroughly defeated, and she went to sit down next to the woman.

"I can... I can continue my housekeeping business outside of this neighborhood," her maman said to herself, "Or give yoga classes in the park! Or I can teach real estate principles to agents in the US!"

Her maman's hands were shaking as she yammered off these ideas. Giselle wanted to say something mean about how the real estate idea should have come first, but she suspected that she was probably planning to do that long-term and this maid business was just a stopgap measure.

"Maman, I think you need to do the community service for now," said Giselle, the words tasting bitter in her mouth, "But what is the Handley account?"

Violette moved her hands from the side of her face so they were covering it altogether. She let out a sigh and shook her head. "It is a mistake I made very early in my career," she explained, "Charity embezzlement I did in order to dodge taxes and get approved for a loan. But how would she..." the woman's words caught in her throat. She looked up at the home security system Barbara had them install that took video as well as audio. The egg-shaped device was pointing right at her.

Giselle's eyes followed her maman's to the camera and the horrible realization dawned on the girl that she had just confessed to a serious financial crime. If anyone viewed that footage, they could use it to convict her. They sat in awful silence, not even bothering to finish their dinner. Giselle went back to her room and spent the rest of the evening researching things like charity fraud, who could access their home security footage and, to her shame, domestic partnerships.

The next morning, she decided over her Violette's protests to accompany her to the community service assignment. The two Parisiennes walked through the cookie cutter neighborhood to the community center at its core. Giselle had on yoga pants and an athletic shirt while her maman wore yoga pants and a grey T-shirt.

"A car wash," her maman muttered, "What a silly idea. You know she's just trying to humiliate us."

"Barbara must be a very unhappy woman," Giselle supposed, "That she finds joy in treating people this way." The thought of marrying such a person caused her to cringe.

"We will get through this," Violette told her daughter. "I have already made contact with someone from China who can provide me a loan. We will make it to Malibu, ma charie."

The news was a spot of cheer on a dreadful morning but it begged the question: then why was she agreeing to do the community service? Maybe the loan would take a while to come through and she wanted to hedge her bets. Giselle smiled and reminded herself not to do anything stupid. To avoid giving Barbara any reason to fine her and get her family further in to her twisted clutches.

But the moment of happiness was short-lived when they saw the outfits on the other community volunteers. Each of the six women milling about outside of the community center were wearing micro bikinis that barely covered their nipples and their lady parts. The color was a garish orange – the same color used on prisoner uniforms.

"Maman!" Giselle gasped. The woman reached out and gripped her shoulder.

"Don't worry," her maman joked, "I look very good in a bikini!" But she was tight-lipped as she spoke.

Giselle walked up to the check-in desk manned by the Nordic woman with glasses who had been Barbara's right hand the day before. She gave them a polite smile and asked if they had come to pay their fine.

"Actually," Violette said, "I was hoping to take the community service instead."

"Wonderful!" The bespectacled woman said, "I am Ingrid. I run the program. We are always looking for more hands. Will both of you be joining us?" She asked, daring a glance at Giselle.

"No, just myself."

"Too bad," Ingrid replied. "What is your age?"

Violette blinked at the question. "Why could you possibly want to know that?"

"Just part of the process," Ingrid explained, but they both knew she was just trying to offend them.

"I am 40."

"And how much do you weigh?"

Violette blushed. "59 kilo."

"In pounds, please."

"I don't know. Maybe one hundred and thirty pounds?"

"Are you sexually active?" Ingrid asked casually. Violette's blush deepened. She frowned at the woman and took a deep calming breath.

"No," she replied.

"How many sexual partners have you had in your life?"

"That is a ridiculous question!" Violette said bitterly. "You couldn't possibly need to know such a thing!"

"I'm sorry!" Ingrid replied, pointing at her clipboard that had long list of boxes to check and lines to fill out, "But it's all part of the process. If you don't answer it all, we can't offer you community service."

The threat was clear, but Violette was defiant. "One," she said, which even Giselle knew was probably a lie.

"Lying on this form can get you fined, even kicked out of the neighborhood. Are you sure you want that to be your answer?" Ingrid asked in a clinical tone.

"...Seven," Violette replied, slouching her shoulders and looking at the ground.

"And what were their names?"

Giselle gave a pitying look at her maman. It pained her to see this proud woman humiliated by such invasive questions. She wished she hadn't come, but felt too awkward to leave at this point. There would probably be some fine for doing that anyway: then she would be the one divulging all her personal information to this dreadful lady. She looked up and to the right, racking her brain for names.

"Francoise, Thomas, Gerard..." she began, rattling off the names of her most intimate partners to be entered into a database somewhere. But Ingrid interrupted her.

"First and last names, please."

Violette gave a withering glance at the bespectacled woman, who kept a professional smile on her face. Then she said, "Francoise Rayon. Thomas Butler.. Gerard Vallet. I don't remember Ivan's last name... Eloise Bien-Aime. Toussaint Charbonneau, and Michael St. Claire."

Giselle felt an inexplicable humiliation to listen to all her mother's sexual partners listed before hearing her departed father's name. But it also helped see her as a woman with an existence outside of her family and shed some light on the life she had before marrying which had, until then, been unknown to her. But a perverted voyeurism under girded the whole experience and made her feel like she was gaining access to information that hadn't been intended for her ears. Especially the fact that her maman had once made love to a woman – she blushed to her ears when she heard Eloise's name.

"Are you taking any medications?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Birth control, to manage my menstrual cramps and anti-anxiety medication."

"Do you drink or smoke?"

"I drink occasionally."

"How many drinks a week?"

Giselle tried to keep a neutral expression on her face, although she swore that Ingrid saw the way her face twitched when she asked about the drinking. Her maman had been going through at least a bottle of wine a day for the past week. Should she lie about it?

"A couple of glasses of wine a day," was Violette's guarded reply.

"Great! Thank you so much for answering honestly. Please sign this form stating that all your answers have been truthful, and I will get you your bikini and your number. You'll be number seven."

Violette's eyes shot open at the implication of this. Were they so brazen as to give her the number that matched her sexual partners, so the whole world would know? She shook her head and glanced at the paperwork before signing this.

"Uhh, what is this?" the Frenchwoman asked, pointing to a line on the form that said the Neighborhood Council could review their home footage to verify if her answers were correct.

"That's a formality, really," Ingrid replied, fetching out a laminated square with 7 printed boldly on it and a small tangle of neon orange fabric, "We have the right to review your home footage anyway. Do you need sunscreen?"

Violette just glared at the form. Giselle could see the gears turning in the woman's mind, and knew that they were finished. They'd be deported back to France and taken as war brides or beheaded.

"No, I don't need sunscreen," her maman growled, angrily signing the paperwork. "Just give me the bikini. Merde!"

In a huff, Violette picked up the skimpy swimsuit and the laminated card with the little alligator clip attached to the back and stormed away into the bathroom. Feeling a pit in her stomach, Giselle walked back to her home. It was becoming clear that she would have to accept Barbara's proposal in order to save her family.

On her way out, the first car of the day arrived. It was a new Range Rover driven by a frowning blonde woman in a summer dress. She parked it on the sidewalk in front of the community center and sashayed over to a plastic beach chair that had been placed on the lawn beneath an umbrella. The woman lied back on the chair and kicked off her high heels, the image of luxury as a team of four women in orange micro bikinis started washing her car.

Giselle watched the scene unfold with morbid curiosity. One of the bikini women was clearly the alpha: a 30-something brunette with tan skin that suggested she might have been at this job for a while. She called out orders to the other women who worked with speed and efficiency, dipping large sponges into buckets of water and cleaning every inch of the woman's monstrous vehicle. Each of them had a laminated index card pinned to their bikini above their left breast but from her distance she could not read it.

"Hurry up, ladies!" The driver of the car called out to them, "I have a Pilates class at 9:30!"

This motivated the scantily-clad women to work even harder. They were already sweating from the exertion, bodies slick with perspiration as they buffed and polished her forest green SUV. Some of the car wash girls were white, others were Latina or perhaps Arabic. They ranged in age from their 20s to the alpha brunette who was in her early 30's. Each of them had a bikini body that was put on display by their matching uniforms.

The door behind her swung open, and she was shocked to see her maman wearing the same

slutty uniform. The woman blushed across her entire body as the tiniest scraps of fabric emphasized her pert breasts and... And Giselle didn't dare to look any lower. The woman gave her a sad expression as she gloomily walked over to the woman seated watching all of this. She carried an oversized fanning feather on a long stick that the French girl had only ever seen in cartoons about the pharaohs. Then she dropped to her knees beside the woman and started rhythmically fanning her as she relaxed sipping lemonade. The shade from the umbrella did not reach her maman, who quickly turned red from the morning sun.

"Seven!" The blonde woman exclaimed, "You French women are very adventurous. I'd like a little bit more of a breeze, though. And would it kill you to smile?"

Now Giselle had really seen enough! She marched back to her home, threw on a cute white dress and walked to knock on Barbara's door. She could feel her heart in her throat as the woman's footsteps approached. To give herself resolve, Giselle imagined that she was a princess about to negotiate a deal to save her empire – which was essentially her situation.

"Hello," was Barbara's cool greeting.

"Bonjour Madame President!" Giselle beamed. "May I please come in?"

Barbara looked her up and down, then opened the door and invited her in. The powerful blonde woman had on another charcoal black power suit and a blazer, but she was barefoot. Giselle followed her into the living room and they sat down together in the same positions as the day before: with Giselle on the leather sofa and Barbara on an armchair across from her.

"It ez wonderful to see you, Madame!" Giselle said, "You look very attractive in that business suit."

Barbara smiled. "I hope you've given some more thought to my offer?"

"Yes. I have. And I would like to accept! I would be honored to be your wife. I promise to be a dutiful and attentive partner for ze rest of our days," Giselle said, just as she had rehearsed. She could scarcely believe that her life had changed so much in the past few weeks, but between Barbara's rhetoric and her mother's desperation – this was it.

"I'm happy to hear it," Barbara began, keeping a flat affectation in her voice, "Only, there's a little hitch in the plan."

Darts of fear needled at Giselle's heart. She tried to maintain her composure: to play the part of a charming and adorable French girl whom anyone would want to marry. Secretly, she planned on filing for a divorce as soon as the situation improved in France, but she needed to buy time. "What you mean by zees?"

"First, I don't buy your change in attitude," Barbara said, "And second, your maman was stupid enough to confess to a major financial crime on video. So you can see how my hand might be a little stronger today than it was before."

Giselle could only stare at her. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't lie. You're terrible at it," Barbara scolded her, "Do you really want me to pull up the video? Of a penniless Violette St. Claire crying and admitting to her daughter that she engaged in charity fraud and tax evasion? Or would you rather I leak it to the press?"

The threat frightened the aristocratic girl. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Okay. So what ez our situation now?"

Barbara got to her feet and walked over to take a seat beside Giselle, the cushion shifting under her weight and lifting the French girl up a little as it bent to accommodate the more powerful woman. She held out her hand, which Giselle took. They looked into each other's eyes.

"Giselle, I do like you. And I think you would make a wonderful wife. But I can't pay two

million dollars for something I could get for much less."

Giselle flinched at the words. It was a clear insult: this woman was talking about her like she was a house that was about to go up for foreclosure! Or one of those items in the grocery store with a sticker on it: 'Reduced For Quick Sale.'

"It would be money very well-spent," Giselle teased, which drew an honest laugh from the woman. Barbara's expression softened as they sat on the couch holding hands.

"I still want to help you, but the offer has changed. We will get married and I will give your mother \$200,000 and a legally binding work visa. As a maid. If I am unsatisfied with her performance, I may cancel the visa at any time. If I become unhappy with your performance as a wife, that could also be a reason for me to send her back to France."

The French girl furrowed her brow at this sadistic plan. Barbara planned on keeping them both as her prisoners: her mother to scrub her floors and Giselle to warm her bed. And they would both have to constantly strive to meet her outrageous expectations, or it was back to France – to the gallows. She looked into Barbara's blue eyes and silently begged for mercy but only saw cool resolve within them.

"And if I accept ze offer and become your wife, would we...?" Giselle began, too embarrassed to finish the question. Finally, she whispered, "You know, have sex?"

Barbara's face lit up into a smile. "Of course!" she replied happily, "Only there's something you should know about me. I'm what's called a pillow princess. It means that when it comes to sex, I just want to lie back and let my partner do all the work... you know, with her tongue. And there is a lot of work to be done, believe me. It takes me a good hour to finish the way I'd like – and I've found that very few women have the willpower and stamina to get me across the finish line, so to speak. You'd have to do a lot of mouth exercises to get up to snuff."

Giselle blanched. "Zis sounds..." she wanted to say 'orrible, but thought of the socialists who would probably just rape her as a bourgeois whore as soon as she set foot in her homeland caused her to hold her tongue. "Tolerable," she finished.

Barbara gave her hand an affectionate squeeze. "I'm glad that you are coming around. Because the good news is, I'll make sure that the footage of your mother's confession gets corrupted. I'll keep a copy for myself, of course, but the authorities will never find it."

"Thank you," the French girl said, ignoring the implications of blackmail that Barbara had just laid out.

"And think of the bright side!" Barbara encouraged her, "Ma cherie, this neighborhood will become your playground. Kathy will rub your shoulders, Natsuki will do your nails, you'll get facials and hairstyling and you'll never have to touch a broom. Your job will be keeping me happy. And when I'm happy, I'm more generous. Maybe after you finish licking me, you could ask me for little favors and... who knows? Maybe I'd indulge my sweet young wife and her silly liberal ideas."

"I accept," Giselle replied. This was never the life she would have picked out for herself but she had always enjoyed helping people and making the world a better place. If that meant licking a blonde woman to orgasm before begging her to show mercy towards her serfs, she could find a certain honor in that.

Barbara leaned in for a kiss, putting her hand on the back of Giselle's head and pulling her face into her own. It was firm and domineering, but only lasted a few short moments. Mercifully, Barbara didn't try to turn it into an open-mouth kiss. Giselle wasn't sure if what she would have done if she felt another woman's tongue in her mouth – even if she was fated to do things far more sexual than that in a marital bed with this same lady.

"You are a smart girl," Barbara murmured in a soft tone, "And very noble. I think you will come to love it here. But there's one thing we need to do first."

"Get married?" Giselle guessed. The blonde woman chuckled and affectionately tapped her on the nose with her index finger.

"That comes later. For now, I want you to give me a foot massage while your mother is hard at work." She stood and walked over to the tufted leather fainting sofa across the room, reclining with her bare feet outstretched expectantly. "Go and get a towel from the bathroom and some of my foot cream."

Giselle nodded and made her way to the bathroom down the hall. She retrieved a large pink towel hanging on a rack and rifled through the medicine cabinet until she found a white plastic bottle with a pump lid on the top. She came back and placed the towel underneath Barbara's feet so she wouldn't get lotion on her nice furniture. Then, taking a kneeling position at the bottom edge of the recliner, The French girl spurted some of the lotion into her hands and prepared to adore this powerful woman's feet.

"Think happy thoughts as you work," Barbara told her, "I can feel them through your hands."

"Oui, Madame President," Giselle answered. She rubbed the coconut-scented lotion between her hands remembering strolls along the Seine with her friends, the rollicking countrysides, and trips to Berlin where she would dance the night away with beautiful young people. She rested her hands atop Barbara's left ankle: an introduction to the service, then cradled it lovingly between her hands, coating it with a slick layer of cream.

"Ah! That is wonderful! Thank you, ma cherie!" Barbara intoned, her whole body relaxing under Giselle's skillful attention.

Giselle didn't like that Barbara had picked out the same term of endearment for her that her own mother used. But the French girl felt a swell of pride in her heart that managed to triumph over her feelings of degradation and loss. She had always been the one receiving foot massages: in high-end nail salons and ski lodges in St. Moritz. It was a profoundly humbling experience to be the one serving the feet of another – especially someone who held so much power over her as Barbara. She tried to mimic the strokes that masseuses had used on her own feet in better times, and apparently she was doing a good job of it.

"A little more pressure, love," Barbara said. Giselle nodded her head and put more of herself into the foot rub. And she called to mind more happy memories: the beaches of Nice, shoe shopping in Sicily, the museums of Paris that were probably being ransacked by the socialists at this very moment. The intrusive thought seized her and she found herself frowning, looking down at Barbara's feet with a sudden frown.

"Giselle? What's the matter?" The woman asked, taking notice of the dark wave that was passing over her face.

"I just sot of ze evil socialists," Giselle said to her future wife, "And how zey are probably burning all the paintings at the Louvre!" The woman nodded her head sadly, but ended with a meaningful look into Giselle's eyes.

"I promise that I will keep you safe from them," she told her, "I will hire armed guards and tell them to shoot any socialist who sets foot in our neighborhood!"

Giselle laughed at the idea. She knew that even Barbara wasn't that powerful, but the thought still lifted her spirits. "Thank you, Madame."

"All you need to do is keep rubbing," Barbara commanded her. "Just focus on my feet. Make me happy. Be my beautiful little French wife, and I will keep you safe and secure and rich."

"Oui, Madame President!" Giselle said, looking down at the woman's peds. They were actually rather pretty – if the slightest bit plump. She had reasonably high arches, toes that tapered orderly from big toe down to her pinkie, and very pronounced insteps. Her nail beds fit her toes

perfectly, adorning each digit with an attractive window of pink polish. There was some callus on the balls of her feet just beneath her first and second toe, and on the backs of her heels but it was nothing a pedicure couldn't fix. Or maybe she preferred it that way: her tough armor against a world that conspired against her.

Barbara enjoyed the foot massage in pleasant silence, closing her eyes with a serene smile plastered on her face. When Giselle had worked all the tension out of her right foot, she switched over to the left one and began the process again. Always thinking happy thoughts, even if the idea of her mother's subjugation as a maid weighed heavily on her. Giselle decided this would be her first project: finding some way of charming Barbara into giving her mother a desk job, at the very least.

As Giselle was performing her finishing strokes against Barbara's well-oiled sole, the woman gently opened her eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "I will take you as my wife. I'll have Ingrid draw up the paperwork right away."

"Magnifique!" Giselle said, bowing her head to the imperious woman.

"Only, I want to remember our proposal. Sitting on a sofa buying you for \$200,000 isn't very romantic... So I had something special in mind that I wanted you to do for me."

Giselle's heart rate increased. She thought she had crossed the finish line, only to have Barbara move it a few meters away. "What would zat be, Madame?"

"I want you to kiss my feet," Barbara told her. Ignoring the look of shock on Giselle's face, she went on, "I want you to kiss my feet all over and beg me to take you as my wife. Say that you're a poor French princess and you need to live under my American thumb. Things like that. Make it something I'll remember for the rest of our lives."

Giselle withdrew her hands from Barbara's feet. This moment of intimacy had rapidly descended into one of abject humiliation. "You cannot be serious," she murmured.

"Do it, Giselle," Barbara said more firmly, "Do it for your maman. I need you to understand who I really am, and that process begins today."

"I will not!" Giselle protested, shaking her head.

"Do it, Giselle," repeated the blonde president, "I need to know that you accept your place. That you have brought your spoiled Parisienne lips across the Atlantic to my doorstep just to place them upon my superior American feet. Otherwise, the deal is off."

Giselle was beside herself with fury and indignation. She balled her fists – the 'Parisienne' comment really dug at her because the people of her home city were known for their pride. It was the ultimate act of surrender: to kiss another woman's foot and beg to be her submissive plaything. But the blonde girl knew she had no other cards to play. So with quivering lips, she lowered her face to Barbara's creamy soles. The woman reached into her nearby purse and pulled out her smartphone to record what was about to transpire.

"Go ahead, Giselle. Remember: happy thoughts."

The French girl placed a single peck on Barbara's right sole at the ball of her foot. Her cheeks were burning with shame. She kissed Barbara's foot again at her arch, and again at her heel.

"Madame President," she began, her voice trembling, "Please take me as your wife. I am a foolish French princess who has lost everything. I need to live beneath your strong American thumb," she said, the words violating her down to her very essence. She placed more kisses upon Barbara's feet: on the pads of her toes, on the tops, on her ankles. "Please marry me, madame. I have nossing! All I possess are my soft hands to massage your feet, and my French mouth for you to use as you please... Paris belongs to ze socialists. Please let me belong to you."

Barbara's breathing was growing heavier and a pink color crept into her cheeks. Giselle redoubled her efforts, dragging her tongue across the woman's arches and planting many quick little kisses upon the area beneath her toes. Her mind raced with snatches of happiness from her youth, but it was like they were being contaminated by getting crossed with her subjugation.

"Let me serve you," Giselle continued, "Let me be your attentive, loyal wife for ze rest of our days!"

Then, suppressing an urge to shudder, the French girl took Barbara's big toe in her mouth and began to suck it. She looked up at the woman with a her most disarming expression: eyes wide, smiling, and eager to please. Barbara moaned out loud and curled her toe within Giselle's wet mouth. Then she set down the phone and took a deep breath.

"You may stop," she said in a low, lust-laden voice. "You passed the final test. I promise to marry you, and to give Violette \$200,000 and a work visa. Just know that I will expect this level of performance every time I call you to serve at my feet. Which will happen quite often."

"Oui, Madame President," came Giselle's unsteady reply. Her head was swimming. Every part of her felt alive. She could taste Barbara's coconut-scented foot cream in her mouth: it had a bitter, chemical taste despite its pleasant aroma and she didn't want to use it again. "But could we use coconut oil, ze next time? Zis cream has a very foul taste."

"Of course, we can, Giselle. We will try out all different types of oils – how about truffle oil next time? We can even use things like honey and nectar to keep things interesting," she added with a flirtatious wink.

Giselle nodded her head. Her stomach quivered at the thought of licking various things off of Barbara's feet, but what other choice did she have? "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome. Now hurry on home, I have much work to do today. Come back again tomorrow at 2PM and start looking at wedding dresses in the meantime."

Giselle padded out of the living room, glad to be away from the scene of her grand humiliation. She slipped on her sandals and walked through the cookie cutter neighborhood back to the house she supposed she wouldn't stay in much longer. For the rest of the afternoon, she looked at wedding gowns but found little enjoyment in it. Her wedding had morphed from a momentous occasion to a ritual that would cement her as another woman's foot-licker and sex slave. Who would they even invite to the ceremony?

Giselle's maman came home later that afternoon still wearing the preposterous orange micro-bikini, including the laminated '7' that was clipped about her left collarbone. Giselle winced as she looked at the number which coincided with the woman's number of sexual partners. Violette carried her clothes in a small cardboard box she carried at her pelvis and her once-fair skin was terribly sun burnt.

"Maman! Let me get that for you," Giselle said, approaching the woman to take the box from her hands.

"Thank you, ma cherie," she replied. Her face contorted in pain with each step to the sofa, where she sat down upright to avoid placing her back against the furniture. "Would you please bring me a glass of ice water, as well?"

Giselle set down the box in her maman's room and returned with a cool glass of water for the woman. On the trip back, she grabbed several hand towels to run under cool water to help provide relief for the poor woman. She handed the glass over and gently placed the towels on the woman's shoulders, her thighs, and over the back of her neck.

"That feels wonderful. Thank you," Violette said. Then, wincing in pain with every

movement, she reached for the TV remote and started browsing its menus.

"Let me get a fan," Giselle offered. She didn't know if this house came with any, so she took a while searching through the closets and the garage for one. But she came back empty-handed.

Violette was watching a broadcast of the car wash that she had just come from. It was filmed from multiple angles: some shots from the neighborhood's surveillance system, some inserts taken from people's phones, some that were obviously taken by Ingrid. Someone had edited the footage together to make the car wash look like a dramatic television program with music and everything. The women's numbers were heavily featured: 7, 23, 41(!), 1.

"Why are you watching this?" Giselle asked her mother.

"It's part of the assignment. I have to review footage and see any place I could have done better. I must also wear the bikini until 6PM."

It was plain as Violette's first-degree sunburn that this was just another humiliation: forcing her to re-experience the unpleasant event that she had just escaped from. And her maman was featured heavily in the footage. She appeared to have spent the entire day either sitting or kneeling to the side of a reclining beach chair, fanning a wide array of wealthy women as they relaxed and watched their cars get washed. Their comments about her number made their way into the video, of course.

"7?" Said one woman, an blonde Russian in a tracksuit, "I suppose not all French women are as libidinous as the stories say."

Giselle watched her maman swallow the remark, continuing with the rhythmic motion of her ridiculous feather-fan on a stick. This must have been early in the morning, because Violette wasn't sun burnt yet.

"Number 23!" Called out one of the bikini-clad women, "I want you to re-do the windshield! I can see a streak!"

"Maman, I have some news," Giselle began, looking away from the footage of her mother fanning some 20-something influencer who scrolled through tik tok videos on her phone the entire time.

"Yes, what is that?"

"I have decided to accept Barbara's proposal for marriage. She says she will give you \$200,000 and a job. After three years, I can apply for citizenship. That way, we will be safe here." Giselle's maman looked over to her but had nothing to say. She wished she could decipher the woman's expression, but French ladies are renowned for their secrecy and apparently, that applied to mother-daughter moments. After a miserable silence, Giselle said, "Does that sound alright to you?"

"Alright?!" Violette roared, "Look at this, Giselle! She makes women dress up in sex costumes and wash cars for people's amusement! All because they put up some flyers on people's doors! She charged me \$100 for every single advertisement I placed! How could you think I would approve of this?"

"She is not that bad..." Giselle began, but the menacing glare on her mother's face made her pick a different approach. "Maman, what else can we do? In a few weeks, our tourist visas will expire and we will have no place to go!"

Violette turned away from her daughter, staring at the television for a while with a thoughtful expression on her face. After a little while, she said, "And what would my job entail?"

"Ah, she wants you to continue your cleaning business in the neighborhood," Giselle said, trying to sound upbeat.

Her maman got to her feet. "I'd sooner kill her!" She screamed, "I did not leave our country to become a French maid in the US and marry my daughter off to some... fucking cunt!"

Never before had Giselle seen her mother so angry. The television went ignored, which was probably for the best since it had switched to lascivious, slow-motion shots of the women working the sponges with music that would befit a pornographic film.

"This is our only option!" Giselle persisted.

"I told you that I was just about to get a loan from a Chinese company. Why didn't you listen to me?"

"And where is this loan?!" Giselle shouted. "Can you hold it in your hand? Show it to me! How would they even get you the money? A big duffel bag stuffed with cash? What happens if it falls through?"

"Then we go to live somewhere else in the European Union!" her maman said with contempt. "Have you forgotten about the Freedom of Movement Act, you silly girl?!"

Giselle bit back tears. "Do not call me 'silly!'" she exclaimed. "Let's say we move to Germany. What happens when the socialists say that you need to appear in court? Or they send the secret police to kidnap us because we are bourgeois landowners? I am doing this because I love you!"

"I can't talk about this with you right now," Violette replied, storming off to her room and slamming the door. Giselle marched back to her own bedroom, threw herself on the bed and began sobbing into her pillow. In the living room, the television stayed on broadcasting video of a mute Violette forcing a smile as she fanned a soft breeze across a procession of wealthy American women. Crisp twenty dollar bills were folded and placed beneath the spaghetti strings of the bikini that crossed her body in thin horizontal lines.

The next day was overcast and much cooler. Grey clouds hung in the sky as Giselle made her way to Barbara's house. When she got to the door, she gasped as Michaela greeted her wearing a truly strange maid's uniform. The sandy blonde girl blushed as she greeted Giselle with a curtsy, but her black miniskirt was so short she didn't dare lift it so as not to expose herself. Her top consisted of a dangerously low-cut white smock with a frilly trim, tied behind her back with a large white bow. Black nylon fabric clung to her shoulders like pauldrons with white frills. They went no lower than mid-bicep.

"Welcome to Madame President's house," Michaela said, "Please follow me." She turned on a heel and walked back towards the living room with her head held high, despite the fact that she was blushing across her entire body. And when Michaela turned, Giselle could see that the smock was totally backless – her torso on full display from the neck down to the crest of the bow that wrapped around her waist.

Barbara was seated on her fainting sofa, working on her laptop. "Your guest is here, Madame," Michaela announced reverently, curtsying again.

"Wonderful. Please stand at attention, we will need you in a little bit," the blonde woman replied in a professional tone that bordered on belittling. Then she turned to Giselle and said, more warmly, "Welcome back, ma chérie! Did you pick out a wedding dress?"

"Not yet," Giselle answered.

"You're not getting cold feet, are you?" Barbara asked, rotating her ankles and flexing her own peds which reminded Giselle of the humiliating thing she had done yesterday as the woman sat in this very spot. Michaela's ears perked up as she watched the scene unfold.

"Not at all, madame. It's just that, my maman was... unhappy with your job offer. I think she could use her skills better in an administrative role."

"Not an option," Barbara replied firmly. "Besides, she hasn't even seen her work uniform yet. That's why I have Michaela here. She's modeling it. Isn't it adorable?"

Giselle looked over at the girl with sandy blonde hair, standing in this humiliating maid's costume. She hadn't had time to notice the accessories: the little cuffs around her wrists, the white headband holding back her hair, and the fact that she wore just a single thigh-high stocking on her left leg. The choker around her neck was the finishing touch: the entire outfit was meant to showcase her body and illustrate her subservience.

"Madame, please," Giselle whispered, giving Barbara her big doe eyes in an attempt to win even a scrap of mercy.

"I'm sorry, Giselle. But no," the odious woman replied, "This is what I want. And if you are going to be my wife, you need to find happiness in giving me the things I want."

Michaela gasped at this news. Her eyes shot open and she put one hand over her mouth, darting a glance over at Giselle. The furrow in her brow asked the silent question, 'Are you serious?!'

"But how will we convince her to do this?" Giselle asked.

"We don't have to. She is free to take the money and run back to the Euro Zone. But if she doesn't take my offer, I can't guarantee that her home footage remains private. I might be obligated to turn it over to the authorities."

Giselle felt a pit grow deep within her as she was reminded of the blackmail. Barbara would blackmail her maman into working as a lowly, scantily-clad maid for the amusement of all her bitchy friends. Her French pride reduced to an ironic joke as she scrubbed the floors on her hands and knees for Americans. The aristocratic girl balled her fists and closed her eyes, trying to find the willpower to contain her anger. This was the end of her family: trapped in domestic and sexual servitude. The only thing that prevented her from screaming was the idea that she just had to do this for three years. Then she could take her citizenship visa, tell Barbara to fuck off, and escape.

She could do three years.

"Very well, madame," Giselle said, taking a conciliatory tone, "You are right. Please forgive your foolish fiancée for her silly liberal ideas."

"You're learning quickly," Barbara complimented her. She shut her laptop and continued, "But I'm still not convinced. I think you could use another lesson, and that Michaela could help us out with it."

Giselle just stared at Barbara.

"What do you need my help with?" Michaela asked, nervously toying with her hair.

"Giselle will give you a wonderful foot massage," Barbara told her, "Then she will finish by giving your feet a bit of extra attention: mostly kisses, but there will be some tongue in there as well."

It horrified Giselle to perform this demeaning act for a random person. She went white as a sheet as she listened to the President offer her up to worship another person's feet outside of their relationship. With Barbara, it had at least made a warped kind of sense: the woman wanted to feel adored by her future wife and to demonstrate their power difference. But if Giselle started kissing other women's feet, and running her tongue across their soles just to entertain her partner – that was too close to whoring for her comfort.

"I'm not really comfortable with that," Michaela replied, crossing her arms in front of her torso, "I was doing tik tok dances all morning with Becky and Farra and I didn't have time for a shower before coming over here."

"That's even better!" Barbara replied, which caused a wave of revulsion to wash across Giselle's body.

"Madame, please," Giselle beseeched her, "I would gladly do this for you, but please do not ask me to do it for someone else."

"Yeah... I'm sorry but I really don't want someone kissing and licking my feet," Michaela said, which put Giselle's nerves at ease in this tense situation. "Becky might be into that, though. Or Farra. But I just don't think I can agree to it right now. Sorry..."

Giselle frowned as she looked at Michaela, reminded of how much she didn't like her when they first met. What a coward this girl was! Throwing her sister under the bus for a task she found too distasteful to perform herself. Then a dreadful realization dawned on Giselle: Maybe Michaela wasn't throwing Becky and Farra under the bus. Maybe the other two would actually like to feel another woman's lips and toes against their bare feet. And even if they didn't, Barbara's cronies would probably agree to the treatment just to stay on her good side.

"Fine," the blonde woman huffed, "I can see this won't work the way I'd hoped. Run along, Michaela. And see if Becky or Farra would be willing to step in and help provide their feet for Giselle to practice her technique. They'll need to wear the maid's uniform, as well."

Michaela curtsied, said, "Thank you, Madame President," and hurried out of the house before Barbara could change her mind.

"You said that I had passed your final test," Giselle started to argue, "So why are you expecting me to do this for other women?"

"Yes, you passed the test," Barbara answered, "But now it's time we start your training. As for why I'm doing it? It's simple: Because I like to watch." She paused, giving Giselle an expression like the cat that ate the canary. Her impish grin was defying the French girl to do something about it. When Giselle just gave her an exasperated sigh, Barbara continued, "And I think the more you do it, the more comfortable you'll get."

The French girl could only grimace at the thought of such a thing becoming part of her everyday life. Yet she knew it would unfold this way, because it was what Barbara wanted. That she would become a kept woman who performed tricks on command; tricks that involved salivating over women's feet. They would use her on movie nights and at hush-hush political meetings where she'd provide the entertainment while they plotted and schemed on how to conquer more of the neighborhood.

"Oui, Madame President," Giselle said, bowing her head in defeat. She could no more oppose this woman than she could pick up a rifle and drive the socialists from Paris. Before her lay three years of outrageous psycho-sexual humiliation – but beyond that was a green card and an opportunity to start her life anew. Even her maman's charity fraud had to have a statute of limitations. The great wheel of history had turned, and now the French aristocrat had lost her place at the top, cast into degradation and debauchery for this Karen-Queen of Southern California.

Giselle did not despair. She didn't even frown. Instead, she approached Barbara's feet with playful grace, smiled up at the blonde woman, and began showering her peds in kisses yet again. Her mind filled with happy thoughts: the song of birds outside her old bedroom, croissants fresh from the bakery, and lazy mornings with her maman as they drank black coffee and watched the snow fall on the streets and rooftops of Paris. The pleasant ideation worked as a healing balm for her ego – a reminder that she might be at a low point right now with her tongue exploring the space between another woman's toes, but that she came from a loving home and she was helping to preserve it.

There was a knock on the door, and someone quickly let herself in. Giselle blushed to be caught in this compromising position, and she blushed even deeper when she saw Becky wearing the outfit that she had just seen Michaela in. The sisters' bodies were similar enough that the maid's

uniform fit them both, although Becky's legs were shorter and her hips wider.

"Madame President," Becky said with a coy smile on her lips, "I'm here to present my feet for your special project! Should we film it for our tik tok?"

Barbara chuckled. She rested one finger against her cheek and gave a pensive expression for a little while before shaking her head. "No, I don't want this on the Internet," she decided, "But if you want to film it so you can review it afterwards and help her find ways to improve, I'll allow it."

"Well then," said Becky, "It's a good thing I brought my phone!"

The young woman switched seats with Barbara and outstretched her legs. From Giselle's vantage point, she could clearly look up Becky's skirt and see her sky blue panties. She could feel Barbara's leer upon her as she leaned her pretty French face down to the California girl's stocking-clad foot and placed a kiss upon her sole. The nylon fabric was surprisingly coarse against her lips as she thought back to her first kiss – on a dare, with Leala, atop a cashmere rug beside a roaring fire. Giselle's pulse quivered as Barbara grabbed onto the back of her neck, encouraging her passions with her iron grip. Electricity coursed through her body from her abdomen up to her neck, down to her most intimate region that no person apart from herself had ever touched.

One of the last coherent thoughts that went through Giselle's mind: 'Who knew doing the right thing could be so much fun?'

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Epilogue

As much as Barbara liked to believe that she was in control of her marriage, everyone knew that Giselle was the big wheel, so to speak. Barbara's tyranny and lust for power had become legends from a bygone era – Giselle and her big blue eyes was all it took to get the powerful blonde Karen to show mercy towards someone that she had complete power over.

Becky, Farra and Michaela had abandoned their tik tok channel and were going to college on full-ride scholarships. Kat and Karly launched a podcast reviewing ingredients in popular foods – they were on their way to becoming celebrities renowned for their deep research and inability to be swayed by corporate influence. Natsuki worked as a florist with an emphasis on high-end weddings although she always made time to do Giselle's nails, per Barbara's request.

None of these victories came easily. To call Barbara 'high maintenance' was totally insufficient: her expectations were so enormous that an army of obedient women working incessantly could hardly live up to them. But Giselle was the French Resistance compressed into one girl: she had the conviction of Joan of Arc, the elegance of Coco Chanel, and (if truth be told) the tragic provenance of Marie Antoinette. She grew to understand Barbara's moods and her world view; became as skillful at manipulating the powerful woman's decisions as she was manipulating her clitoris beneath her dexterous tongue. Then, as the two women would lie together after some passionate but invariably one-sided lovemaking, Giselle would work her magic.

"Ma tigresse," she would whisper, her tongue still dripping with Barbara's cum as it now tickled the woman's ear, "Would you be so gracious as to give my poor maman a three-day per week schedule? She is not so young as she once was. And us silly Frenchwomen need so much time to relax so we can stay beautiful for you. Please, ma reine! Have pity upon your poor young wife!"

Barbara would always deny the request at first. But it was just part of the game between them; an opening move that would lead to Giselle passionately cajoling her wife into giving up a little more power, a little more need for control. There were few people in the world who could have resisted Giselle's charms but for Barbara the situation was hopeless. The neighborhood that once feared and hated her had come to see her as a benevolent ruler – and whenever Barbara would bemoan her loss of respect, Giselle was there to lavish attention upon her body and assure her that people adored her. And remind her that every day, there were new applicants wanting to join their

community and live beneath her.

Foot worship became a pillar of Giselle's life. She did it for Barbara's friends, for Ingrid, and for the whole upper echelon of the neighborhood. She had salivated over the peds of every one of the disdainful oligarchs who called this place home, usually in the evenings when they would come over to Barbara's house for hors d'oeuvres and wine. They behaved as if it were the most natural thing in the world to have a young woman kiss their feet, and it was a powerful aphrodisiac for Barbara who would often drag Giselle to the bedroom to use her tongue in a more intimate way, her guests completely forgotten.

Violette never quite swallowed the humiliation of being forced to work as a French maid in this new country. But she could see the changes that her daughter's sacrifice brought to the neighborhood, and it made her love the girl more than she thought possible. The mature woman's days were filled with menial domestic labor in a skimpy costume and Barbara's friends were not all so merciful as the blonde woman had become since marrying Giselle. But Violette, being a businesswoman, was good at assessing situations and realized that it was this or the guillotine.

France remained a socialist country – their family's assets had long since been nationalized and distributed amongst the people. Sometimes, the idea of never seeing their ancestral home would make Violette weep. But she drew strength from her daughter's example and reminded herself that her family was more important than any title or deed. At some point, she even took a lover of her own – but that is a tale for another day.

In the meantime, Giselle's revolution had rocked her world, upsetting everything she knew to be true. Only sometimes did she think back to the world she had left behind – usually as a source of 'happy thoughts' when she was servicing Barbara's feet or worshipping at her shrine. It wasn't with sadness or anger that she thought of Paris; but with a poignant sense of longing the way you might look at a handwritten postcard from a special person who had passed away long ago. Over time, Giselle's happy memories were drawn more from her American life than from her time in France – a fact that puzzled the girl to no end.

The three year anniversary of Giselle's marriage to Barbara approached. Recently, the woman had been cold and distant: taking unnecessary overnight trips to far-flung cities and finding any excuse to avoid spending time with her young wife. The French girl sought Barbara out in the living room one day, carrying a sealed envelope in her hands.

"I suppose those are the divorce papers," Barbara managed. She tried to keep her emotions in check but Giselle could tell through her rapid blinking that she was distressed.

"See for yourself," Giselle replied, handing the envelope over to the imperious woman. Barbara opened it and out came a pregnancy test: it was positive.

"You... This..." Barbara began, struggling to come up with anything to say. Giselle took her usual place at the woman's bare feet, taking one of them in her hands with years of practiced skill.

"Oui, Madame President," Giselle said, "I am with child. Will you forgive your French wife for her indiscretions, and help raise a child togezer?"

Barbara laughed – whether from the joy of the moment or from the tip of Giselle's tongue brushing against her arches was anyone's guess.

"So... no divorce?"

Giselle gave Barbara an exaggerated expression of shock and dismay. "Madame! I would never divorce you! You are ma reine! But will you be alright bringing a child into our relationship?"

"Of course," Barbara replied without hesitation. "I love you."

"And I love you, Madame President," Giselle replied.

The two women kissed passionately upon the tufted leather fainting sofa. Barbara lowered a

hand to Giselle's abdomen, fighting back tears of joy. In a faraway nation, the socialists schemed against the capitalists while the capitalists dug trenches to defend their control. But Giselle hardly cared about such things anymore. She had found her nation – the blessed land beneath this Karen's footsteps where she was safe, adored, and powerful.

And that was how she called America her home.