

Upstairs in Paris

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"Tell me about Hugo."

I stare into my interrogator's eyes, seeing only darkness. We have been in this room for over an hour according to the schoolroom clock hanging directly above him. I watch the second-hand tick slowly around the clock and then return my gaze to him. The only two things I know about him are that his name is Jason and I absolutely loathe him. I search his eyes for any indication of the direction of this conversation. Hugo was not someone I wanted to become involved in this. The fact that I made him a part of my own lies, often kept me awake at night.

I do not know why they continue these interviews day after day, as I have no intention of saying anything. Jason repeats his question as if it somehow was not clear the first time.

"What do you know about Hugo?"

Honestly, I did not know that much. But, he was incredibly special to me and I could not help but think back to my memories of Hugo.

Sweet, buttery scents wafting from down below awaken my nose. I unconsciously lick my lips as the smells of fresh bread, warm cookies, and delicate pastries fill my tiny studio. With a big sigh, I open my eyes to a new day and take inventory of my body. I can already feel the tender crick in my back from hunching over my computer all day yesterday. Tense muscles have already formed as I try to release all the negative energy. I

allow myself a few more deep breaths before I swing my legs off the side of my bed and awkwardly rise up.

I part my make-shift curtains to reveal the cobbled street below me. It is still early and the narrow street remains empty. A few warm lights emanate from nearby apartments and a lonely streetlamp attempts to provide visibility. The sun has just started peeking out as I hear a loud bang from downstairs that jolts me back to reality.

I take a quick glance through the small hole in my floor, smiling as I see Hugo fumbling with a large pot before returning to kneading a large ball of dough. He is humming to himself, and he looks completely content. I always feel slightly guilty for not mentioning this hole, but seeing the happiness from down below always starts my day with a smile. His humming has gotten louder and louder as his hearing has begun to fail him. Some mornings I become irritated by the early morning humming, however this morning I simply smile and begin to hum along with Hugo.

I am living the dream, as they always say. And in actuality, I am pretty close to what I thought my dream was. I am a 26-year-old living in Paris, France. Writing my way through life. Spending afternoons savoring fresh pastries. Gallivanting around town and exploring every nook and cranny.

Except, my dream of the future seemed to leave out how insanely expensive it is to live in Paris. I know, I know, everyone knows how expensive it is to live in Paris. Yet, 24-year-old me did not have any concept of just how expensive

that was. I spent months bouncing from hostel to hostel, barely being able to afford food.

Until the day I happened to run into an older gentleman. Now I do not mean run into as a casual encounter. No, I mean run into. I felt awful as I offered a hand to help him off the ground. Small droplets of blood had already formed on his bruised arm and all I could do was mutter the few French words I knew to offer my sincerest apologies. He laughed it off and hustled me inside his cozy bakery just off the main streets of Paris.

I was immediately impressed by the vintage furniture and eclectic art. The walls were painted a dark red which was accented by dim, warm lanterns hung carefully above each table. The counter was small, yet housed piles of freshly baked goods. A simple menu stood proud by the register listing only four options: Coffee, Tea, Freshly Baked Goods, and Homemade Bread. Simplicity at its finest. This warm gentleman immediately pushed pastry after pastry my way and poured me a fresh cup of coffee.

"Manger! Manger! Vous êtes si mince!" the bakery owner excitedly urges me. I use my limited French to understand he is telling me, *"Eat! Eat! You are so thin!"* I had only been eating scraps the last few days, and the golden brown pastries in front of me made my mouth water. I gratefully indulged in the beautifully crafted croissants, eclairs, and profiteroles.

I ended up visiting this coffee shop every day for weeks, attempting to bring small trinkets of apology. I found a true friend in Hugo, the shop owner, and was delighted to learn about his life story. Granted it was bits and pieces, as I

struggled to work my way through his French. He became like a grandpa to me and eventually he offered me a small space above the shop to live in. I was so incredibly grateful and promised to be a wonderful neighbor.

Now here we are. A year and a half later and still living my days in a small, cramped space above a delightful bakery. I press the power button on my computer and listen to it whir to life. I had a lot to get done today and I did not have any time to waste. I have spent the last three days at my computer from dawn to dusk. Typing feverishly away. Frustration has been rampant. Today was the day, I could feel it. It was all going to work out today. I have to be positive.

My fingers already ache as I crack each knuckle and get ready for a long day of work. My keyboard comes to life as I type as if my life depended on it. And in many ways, my life truly did depend on it.

My concentration is shattered by the conversation I overhear from downstairs. The bakery has long been closed so my interest was immediately piqued when I hear Hugo in conversation with a man. My eyes widen and my palms begin to sweat as I slowly maneuver my way to the hole in the flooring. My hand shoots up to my mouth to try to quiet my gasp. Down below are two police officers, as I had suspected from their conversation. But, a part of me did not want to believe what I was hearing.

Hoping that Hugo's mild hearing loss will buy me enough time, I begin slinging my most important belongings into my small duffle bag. I quickly pull out my computer's memory, motherboard, and hard drive. All while I intently listen to the questioning occurring downstairs. The officers are having to repeat every question at least twice, but I can tell they are getting close to the end. I need to be gone. Now.

I give my tiny space one last sweep, grabbing a few items here and there and shoving them into my duffle bag. My heart is beating out of my chest and I know I do not have much time. I have all the important things as I quickly run over the list in my head.

As I glance down the hole, I see Hugo pointing to the ceiling above his head. That is my cue to go. I slide open the window and maneuver my body through the narrow opening. I had measured and tested this escape for hours, ensuring that I was ready whenever the time came. As I pull the duffle bag out behind me, I carefully finesse my way down the slim fire escape and lower myself to the ground.

My eyes meet Hugo's through the bakery window. I raise my hand and wave, smiling faintly. I hope he knows how much I truly care about him and I hope he finds a way to overlook everything he has just learned. He slowly nods his head in return and before I can think twice, my feet are pounding the sidewalks. My feet have no idea where I am headed and all my brain knows is that I need to get as far away from here as possible. And I need to do that quickly.

Three buses, two trains, and miles of walking later and I had arrived at my next home: Antwerp. I checked into a small hostel that overlooked a tranquil garden. Tossing my duffle bag onto the bed and lowering myself into softness, I finally let out a hefty sigh.

It had worked. My code had worked. I was able to make it into the government's mainframe server, but before I could do my damage those officers arrived downstairs. I was scared to see how my sudden departure had affected all my hard work.

You see, I may not have told you the whole truth. I am a writer, just probably not the writer you are thinking of. I learned I had a passion for coding in my junior year of college and I ended up getting suspended for bad grades shortly thereafter. I figured it would be a great time to travel and I quickly realized that I needed a way to earn money.

That is where my coding came into play, and I started hacking for a living. I was ashamed at first, but the successes started becoming exhilarating. After a few more successes, I started aiming higher, but I guess my most recent attempt went too far. My name was now plastered across France's Most Wanted and I have no idea where to run to. I have no idea what to do. All my life, I had been a rule follower and never pushed the boundaries. In my own desperation, I turned to something I knew I never should be doing. However, it seemed to fall into place so naturally. It never occurred to me that these actions would have such real-life consequences. I have been playing with fire and it is burning me big time.