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The clouds of Paris, France were dark, greyish, but no threat of a storm appeared on the horizon. Though it looked as if it would storm, the air was rainless, however, a paranoid few left home with umbrellas tucked safely under arm. Michael, a blue-eyed, blonde resident of Paris, France, at least for the last six and a half years, strode down the sidewalk in search of his wife, Lillian. She was part African-American, part Hawaiian, actually raised in Paris, and extremely independent. He saw her sitting on the park bench underneath her favorite tree, the Oak.

He didn't find her playing chess with Ms. Baum like he expected. This time, she was talking to a strange old man. It disturbed him how much older men flirted with his wife, but shoved his hands in pockets and approached without a word. Lillian looked up just in time to see him walk up. She gave him a quick wave, but her smile faltered when she saw the look on his face.

"Hi, honey. This is Chester. He's been teaching me French naughty words. Isn't that wicked?" She laughed ignoring his grumpy frown.

"Hi Chester. I'm the husband. May I talk to my wife? And pardon me, I don't mean to interrupt such corrupting conversation." Michael said over his shoulder as he walked to the light post without waiting for a reply. He refused to look at her, knew that somehow she was apologizing for his behavior, again.

"Why do you have to act like this in front of strangers?" Lillian said once she met up with him. Her hands instinctively went to her hips. Michael had not acknowledged her. "Why are you ignoring me?"

He turned around slowly. "Are you serious? Every time I turn around, you've got some stray dog in your lap. You're never at home when I get off work anymore. You know what I wanted to do when I got off work? Curl up on the couch, and watch your favorite soccer team. But no, I'm married to the Secretary of State. Why not visit this country once in a while," he gestured toward himself.

"Your sarcasm isn't needed, Michael," she turned, giving Chester a quick smile before turning back to her husband. "You know I hate it when you do that, because you're never fair," she said. Her arms were crossed now, knowing her husband hated *that*.

From the side of her eye she noticed that Chester had moved closer to them on the bench. She gave him a curious look, but he only gave her an old smile.

"Look, we can go home now. I'll make dinner."

He turned to her then, eyes wide, "Do you know what time it is? I've already eaten!" Michael hated when they fought, but he was furious, and refused to calm down. They hadn't been intimate in days, and he was near breaking. He never had to beg for sex before, but it seemed she had more on her mind lately. Today at work, he decided to put the last week and a half behind him, and control his temper. He had been waiting all day to kiss and make up, tell her how beautiful she was, and fall into her eyes the way he did when they first met. That's what he wanted. However, something took over, put him in a rage, and caused him to miss out on the things for which he yearned.

And old, wrinkly, smiling Chester was not making it any better. Vaguely, Michael noted he looked somewhat closer to them than he was before.

Lillian distracted him by saying, "As soon as I'm finished with my French lessons, we can go."

Michael's hand slowly balled into a fist. "There is not a French word on this planet that you don't know, Lillian."

She laughed, and though it was playful and innocent, it hurt, but just a little. "This is his old French, not mine," she said.

"What difference does it make?" His eyebrows dipped as he frowned.

Now she was at a breaking point. "Why does everything I do irritate you so much?" She said. Lillian was about to walk away from him when Chester called his name. Both gave him a strange look. "Are you talking to me?" Michael frowned.

"Your name is Michael Phillips, is it not? Then, yes, I'm talking to *you*."

Lillian turned to fully face him. "Chester...where is your accent? And why are you talking like that...you sound funny?"

Chester, who was bent over like a crippled old man, stood up very straight and tall. He wasn't a hunched-over, wrinkly old man after all. He pulled off his face and the beard came off, he did the same to his grey hair, and the wig came off as well. Once he was certain he had their attention, he bowed low in front of them. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Malechi."

"Umm...Michael," Lillian said moving slowly by her husband's side, "I didn't know you had a twin brother."

But he only stood there, dumbfounded. "Neither did I," he said then shook himself. "What am I say? I don't...you know all my brothers," he said looking at her, then back at the strange young man in front of them.

Malechi tossed his cane into the grass beside them, and laughed. With his hands behind his back, he let reality set in for a few moments before telling them why he was really there. "I've been watching the two of you for quite some time. I've come to like you both, but most of all...I like your wife," shifting his gaze intentionally to Lillian. His eyes were piercing, and extremely unpleasant. She turned away.

Michael's anger slowly awakened, instinctively he pushed her behind him, still paralyzed by the sight of this man who, aside from his dark, penetrating eyes, looked exactly like him. Malechi smiled when he saw that Michael would allow him to continue. He clapped his hands together, "So then, I can destroy your marriage now, or I can tell you how you can *try* to win it back," he said with an unfriendly grin.

"What do you mean *try* to win it back?" Michael asked frowning.

"Oh, your wife has given me permission to be her husband."

Lillian gasped. "What are you talking about?!"

Malechi mocked a sorrowful look. "You made the vow yourself only moments ago, with your own mouth. Sadly, *my* old French...was not French at all, but, yes, it is an old language." There was no humor in his eyes, just then, and it made their skin crawl.

"Let's go home, Lillian." More than Michael cared to admit, but he was suddenly very afraid of this man. He had never experienced this type of fear before. There was a serious feel in the air about the whole scene, something seemed threatened, like his world was about to change. Not the change that comes and a life is renewed, but the change that comes rushing through, leaving an indescribable emptiness.

"Are you worried, Michael? Well don't be. *I'm not worried at all.* I have every faith that at the end of three weeks...your wife will no longer be yours."

Michael swung at him, hitting Malechi directly in the jaw. He grabbed Lillian's wrist and headed home. Halfway there, Lillian looked up and covered her scream with her palm. Malechi was sitting at the table of the outdoor cafe across from their town home.

"Oh my g---"

Michael's heart dropped. This was more serious than he had suspected. A sudden, but fierce possessiveness rose inside him. *What is happening*, he wondered.

"You left before I could tell you the terms your wife has agreed to," he said looking Michael in the eye. He nodded slowly when the husband turned to look at him. "Oh, yes. She has agreed to my terms and she didn't even know it. Or did she?" Malechi turned to meet Lillian's wide eyes, trying to rouse suspicion within her husband.

Michael looked at Lillian, he felt helpless. "Sweetheart, what did you..." But he cut himself off. There was no use in asking. *How could she have known what she was doing?* He was confident of that much.

Malechi gestured for them to have a seat. Reluctantly, they did. Michael felt sick to his stomach. All these people surrounding them at the cafe and he felt like the loneliest person in the world just then. No one could save him from this nightmare. No one could help.

"You and your wife have three more weeks together after which I will come to collect her. You may spend it in anyway you see fit. You might even want to take a short vacation if you like," Malechi told them with a dark twinkle in his eye. "Totally up to you." He was mocking them, and Michael hated it.

The waiter approached the table just then. "What can I get you?" he asked. Malechi ordered them something in perfect French in which the waiter replied, "That is good, but you will have three hours to wake."

Michael blinked, and looked up at the waiter for the first time. "What did you say?"

The waiter looked agitated. "You will have three minutes to wait...for the crepes."

Michael was sure he had heard something else. It was an odd thing to say, except for the fact that the mail guy, from his job, had said something similar this morning, only, he had said *seven hours*.

"Why are you doing this? You cannot just *take* my wife. Do you really expect me to give her to you?"

Malechi raised an eyebrow. "I'm not asking. Besides, why does it matter? You're not happy with this woman. I'm a hunter. It's my job to find treasure. And I have found something very valuable that's being wasted on you, Michael."

Lillian could not believe what she was hearing. She was not planning on going with this man. But her heart was beating so fast she thought it would burst. Why was she so frightened? *Why had she confided in that old man in the park about her relationship with Michael?* She really thought that, him being so much older, he could give her some guidance, some advice. She was wrong.

"You said I could win her **back**. What does that mean?"

Before Malechi could answer, Lillian cut in. She was appalled. "You don't believe this...man, do you?! What are you thinking?" She whispered.

"Sweetheart, we are looking at the same guy...right?" He didn't know what else to say to that. It was obvious that they were not dreaming. "How?" he shouted. Some of the guests turned in their direction at the sound of his voice.

"Seeing that she belongs to me already, you might want to give her to me now, because...you're not going to like my way," he said, the sadness in his eyes looking so real.

Michael and Lillian glanced at one another, feeling the dread seeping through them both. They sat in silence, watching the smiling Malechi as he waited patiently for them to except the events unfolding before them. It was too impossible to believe, she thought, but here he was sitting next to them in the same image of her husband.

Lillian was suddenly curious. "Why do you want me? There are plenty husbands who don't really want to be married," she said.

"First of all, I like you. Second, what reward is there to take something from someone that he or she does not cherish? Plus, I've talked to the both of you, and I've heard nothing but complaints about the other," Malechi said as he shifted his gaze to a wide-eyed Michael.

"The disappointment was momentary thing, nothing more," Michael was outraged. "Wait a minute, I've never spoken to you in my life."

"Um, yes, you have. Saturday night, at the sports bar across town. We watched a little football, had a few beers," Malechi leaned forward. "...a few stories were swapped."

Michael closed his eyes. A moment ago he had thought it was impossible for this nightmare to get any worse. "I'm going to take *my* wife, and we're going to go home." They stood up, hand in hand, and walked slowly away from the table.

Malechi tilted his head slightly and smiled. "I'll see you soon, Lillian." Michael lunged toward him, but his wife put her body in front of his. This person was beyond dangerous, and she could not bear to see her husband hurt.

"Let's just go. Peacefully," she whispered, laying a hand against his chest. He turned abruptly, pulling her along with him.

"He's not taking my wife," he whispered to himself. He's not taking my wife.

When they reached home, they climbed the short three floors, and flopped down on the couch hoping they were both asleep. Neither said a word. They stared out the balcony doors until the sun was now on the other side of the brownstone building. Lillian was scared. She didn't know how she was going to sleep that night without some kind of help.

Michael turned to her after a long moment of silence. "Lillian, I believe him. No...let me say this. I'm scared to death. The fact that he even looks like me makes me, and is about to take my place...it makes me sick to my stomach. If there is any truth to what he's saying, we can't let the last three weeks of our time together be wasted on arguing and complaining." He held her face in his hands. "We have to really love one another, I mean, like we never have before. From the way it sounds, I'm going to be left here alone. I don't know where he's taking you." Tears streamed down his face. "I have to make memories I can live on, like the ones we made when we first met. You remember how much harder we worked at our relationship back then? Can we do that for us now?" He asked.

"Yes...but I don't want to go anywhere, Michael" she cried. "I don't want to leave you. Please...don't let him take me."

Michael wrapped her in his arms. "Shhh, don't cry. I'll think of something." They stayed that way for another hour. The feel of her in his arms was comforting. He memorized the softness of her body resting on his. He memorized the way her hair fell over his arm, and the sweet fragrance filling his nostrils.

"You remember that spot by the lake where you love to watch the sun set? Let's go there and have lunch," he suggested. Capturing her eyes with his own, he thought about it, smiling, "By the time we get there...we'll have to watch the moon." Lillian tried to smile, but could only nod as she shuddered against him in sobs.

They made love before going to the lake that evening. Instead of rushing, Michael took his time enjoying the feel of his wife's body, as did she with his. They tried their best to not break eye contact whenever it was possible. It was so beautiful, so bittersweet, that they couldn't help but shed a few tears. They got dressed, watching each other and smiling. Michael felt as if they were meeting for the first time. Lillian was having similar feelings. He blew a kiss to her, and it made her feel as if their romance was brand new. Where had this guy been? she thought to herself.

The next week, they spent every waking moment together. Luckily he had saved up enough off-days so that he could be with her without worry. One of the first places they went to was the library...they didn't know what they were looking for, but maybe, they thought, it would eventually lead somewhere that would give them answers.

"Hey, look at this. I think I found something: 'A trickster is a deceiver, a cheat, a fraud. A person who plays tricks' and this is what the dictionary says. I remember my father telling me something about this when I was a kid. And the bible has also called another by that name: the deceiver," Michael said, slowly turning to Lillian.

"What the heck does that mean?" She asked, looking at him as if she were expecting him to tell her who this man is.

"He's a fraud, Lillian." He wasn't sure where to go from there, but it was a start. "He's the one the stories were written about. The trickster whose fairy tales have lived throughout the ages, but these fairy tales are not make-believe, Lillian."

"I don't believe in that trickster stuff," she waved her hand through the air.

"Doesn't matter, because this thing is here. And you know something, I don't think he's human. I can't let something come and take you that isn't human."

Lillian watched her husband as he poured through book after book looking for answers. Her heart swelled at the thought of him wanting to protect her, to fight for her. Why couldn't he have shown her this type of loyalty before...she would've kept her mouth shut. Her eyes watered then, but she stopped herself from crying out loud. "Can't we just leave the country?" she asked out of desperation.

Michael looked in her eyes willing himself not to fall apart. Her willingness to be with him, to defy this trickster despite how they've been treating each other lately moved him deeper than he ever imagined. He didn't have the strength to speak just now so he only shook his head slowly to answer.

"Why is he doing this to us?" she asked more to herself than to her husband.

"We can't be the only ones. He was in a disguise. Maybe he thought he would be recognized. I don't know," Michael said throwing his hands up.

"This sounds so crazy when we talk about it out loud," Lillian said a little too loudly. She looked around, apologizing to the other library patrons. Then she saw him. He was smiling at her through his old man disguise, but could still see his wicked, horrifying eyes.

"Leave us alone!" she cried.

"Lillian, honey, keep it down or they'll kick us out of here." He looked in the direction in which she was shouting. Michael impulsively jumped over the table, heading straight for him. Within seconds, he and Malechi were on the floor wrestling. Because he was wearing his disguise, everyone nearby just saw a helpless old man. He put his hands over his head as punches rained down upon him. Michael was suddenly jerked away by a strong pair of hands. He fought against them.

"Don't do this...you don't know who this man is!" A policeman had been called from the street. Three men were holding Michael back when he came in. He struggled to find the words that would explain his behavior, but he could not find any. They were ready to put him in jail when Michael pleaded with them. "You don't understand. I only have two weeks. My time is precious, every second of it...please. I'm begging you," his voice breaking.

The policeman didn't understand a word he was saying, or why a grown healthy man was beating up a defenseless old man, and simply cuffed him without question. "It's not me, son, he's the one who's going to press charges," the policeman told him.

Michael pleaded silently with Malechi.

The trickster remained in his old man form as he wobbled over to the policeman, and whispered something in his ear. "I don't really understand that, but it's your decision."

The handcuffs were removed. Michael and Lillian sighed, holding one another. The next week, they spent most of their time in the bedroom. They bought groceries that lasted three or four days at a time. They cooked together, danced while they cooked, and made love in the kitchen as dinner slowly burned on the stove. What else could they do but laugh, and then they laughed some more because of all the other times it wasn't so funny...but could have been.

"This is week three, honey, what would you like to do?" He asked, smiling weakly. Michael's heart was heavy. He had been dreading this week more than anything, but he kept his face pleasant.

"First, I would like you to stop counting down. Then, I want to..." She whispered.

"Sweetheart, my back is really sore," he said. When he saw her bottom lip poke out slightly, he added, "Let me run to the market, then meet me in the bedroom," he smiled.

Lillian squealed and ran to the back room. She lit candles, brought out her peach scented massage oil and some towels. She loved Michael's massages, and always wondered why he never became a masseur. She heard the door shut and rushed to finish setting up the ambience: the music. She placed herself on the table and eagerly awaited his fingers to massage her aching muscles. She thought she heard him put the bag on the dresser before he crossed the room.

"Perfect timing," he said as he picked up the warm oil and poured it down her spine. Lillian shivered. She moaned when his hands smoothed over her shoulders and down her back. When he did it a second time she jumped.

"Michael, I think you have something sharp on your hands. It's scratching me," she said.

"I know it will take some time getting used to, but you'll have to call me Malechi if this marriage is going to work," he said in a grimly mocking tone.

Lillian bolted from the table screaming. She wailed as the dark figure came toward her. "Michael! Where's my husband?!" She screamed louder as he came around the table.

"I'm right here, darling," Malechi said calmly.

Lillian screamed some more. Michael burst through the door just then. "Get away from her," he hissed.

Lillian grabbed a towel, and wrapped herself in it. Malechi turned on Michael. "Your time is up, my friend. You've had your chance with her. Look what you did with it," he taunted. Malechi swung at Michael this time, catching him in the temple. He stumbled and hit the wall with the back of his head. As he lay on the floor, bleeding and disoriented, he saw Malechi grab his wife. She fought, she screamed, but she could not disentangle herself from his grip.

Michael couldn't get up, he tried but slid down the wall and back to the floor. "No...wait," he said as the two moved closer to the window.

"Michael, please. Help me," Lillian whispered in sobs.

"Don't do this. Malechi," saying its name for the first time, "don't do this. I want my wife, I need her," he said, a trembling hand stretching toward them.

"Wake up, Michael. It's time to say goodbye. Say goodbye, Lillian."

Michael's eyes widened as he pulled her up on the windowsill. "No," Michael whispered, his head spinning. The second foot landed on the windowsill. "Wait!" Michael cried before losing consciousness. The last thing he heard before blackness settled in was his wife screaming his name.

The next morning he awakened in his bed with a tremendous headache. He looked at the time: a quarter after eleven. He never intentionally slept this late. Just then his cell rang, he almost jumped out of his skin.

"You taking the day off, Mike? We had a meeting today..." a friend from work said on the other end.

Michael frowned. "What is today?" he asked. He rubbed his eyes, his memory sparking, his eyes opening fully, awareness finally setting in...

"Uh, Friday. Where have you been?"

Michael's heart was racing. "No! What day!" He shouted. His eyes widened as his friend from work quoted the date that was three weeks ago. How can it be three weeks prior when it was three weeks past? He had just lived through those twenty-one hellacious days. He was confused.

"Wake up, Mike," his friend said before hanging up.

Oh I am, he thought, I am fully awake. He threw his clothes on and rushed out the house. He ran to Lillian's job.

"She's at lunch. She could be in the park," Lillian's co-worker yelled after her husband as he burst out the door.

Michael ran the whole way. His side was hurting and he was breathless, but he ignored it. That's when he saw her. She was walking, and she was alone, until he looked over and saw the old man. He started to yell her name when he saw the old man slowly reach out, beckoning her to sit down. She noticed him and smiled innocently. Before she could shake the old man's hand, Michael yelled out. She turned, startled. He was running toward her as fast as he could.

"My god. What's going on?" she said.

"I need you to follow me. If you've never trusted me before, trust me now. Please. Walk and I will tell you on the way."

Lillian saw the seriousness in his eyes, and didn't ask another question. Michael turned around, the old man was looking at him very strange. Suddenly, he smiled at Michael, stood up very straight, and whistled as he walked along the path through the park.

A week later, Michael finally began to feel some sense of stability. He and Lillian had spent every waking moment together when they weren't at work. She had called in sick a few of those days, and so did he. Whenever they slept, they were entwined so tightly that when they awakened each morning, they found themselves in the same position. Lillian didn't know what

had gotten into her husband, but if a nightmare was what he needed to inspire him to get their relationship out of the muck, then she was loving the new man.

One day, Michael was sitting at his desk smiling. It was over, he had a new marriage, and Malechi was gone forever. He was so relieved he wanted to cry. There wasn't a moment that passed where he didn't feel the need to weep for joy at the thought of being able to keep his wife, to love her, to cherish her. It was his second chance. He looked up as his co-worker walked through the door.

"I just passed your wife in the lobby," he said.

Your wife. He loved the sound of those two words, but as the co-worker continued speaking, the smile on Michael's face faltered.

"Did Lillian get color contacts, or something? Her eyes looked different," he said, putting the mail on his desk. Michael could not speak, his co-worker never noticed and kept on talking. "But that's not the weird part. Our secretary knows your wife, but she insisted that Christine call her *Lalliin*," he looked up at Michael, who was slowly turning as white as a ghost. "Is that your wife's middle name, or something?"

The day was bright, warm, but not unbearably hot. There were no clouds, but the winds were pleasant enough. Lillian was walking through the park. She looked up just in time to see a woman passing by. *Wow*, Lillian thought. There were not many times where she saw a semi-doppelgänger of herself, but this was too close for comfort. Mostly everyone she knew had told her they had seen women that looked exactly like her. She didn't believe them, of course, not even when they exaggerated the similarities.

But today was the first time she'd come face to face with someone who looked so much like her that it made her look twice. Of course, you would have to squint your eyes, toss your head around until you were slightly dizzy, and then, maybe, the woman might look like her, she thought smiling to herself. She nodded at the lady. The woman gave Lillian a very sobering, very familiar look, and smiled slowly as she nodded back.

Later, she called her husband to see if they were going to meet at their favorite restaurant for dinner. When she spoke to him, he sounded distracted. "Honey, what's wrong? Did you hear me?" she asked.

"Uh...uh...ye-ahh," he said, truly distracted. "Man, I'm sorry, sweetheart. What did you say?" he asked, his voice coming through louder in the receiver.

Lillian giggled, wondering why he had answered her if he didn't even hear her. "So is that how Americans talk? You answer the question, first, then have them recite the question just for fun?" Lillian was tickled.

Michael grinned. "No, baby. Um...we have to talk," he said, His tone turned serious. He didn't know what he was going to tell her.

"Can we meet at La Magdeleine's?" she asked in French.

By now he had learned her language very well, but he couldn't speak it enough to be totally understood. He only knew special words he could whisper in her ear at special times, and that was good enough for Lillian. When he saw her standing outside of the restaurant, he stared at her. It had been a couple of months since the visit from a woman his co-worker thought was his wife. He hadn't had time to get over the Malechi incident before a twin of his wife showed up. It had made him so nervous that he stood up from his desk, and bolted out the back door.

He ran to Lillian's job out of fear that Malechi had gone after her again. She was soon to get off work, so he begged her to leave with him immediately. They went home, Michael glancing behind him every minute they were exposed to the outdoors. Soon as they were inside, he held her for a long moment. He didn't want to scare her again, so he left out the details of his visit from Lalliin.

But this afternoon, he saw her walking down the hallway. He almost called out to her thinking it was his wife, but Lillian never owned the type of dress she had on. He turned to find an exit just in case she were to discover him there, but when he turned back around, she was gone.

"Are we going to order?" Lillian asked ten minutes after they had been seated.

The waiter was standing over him, pretending to have a patient demeanor. "Monsieur?"

Michael blinked, his mind coming back to focus. "Yes, I'll have the Salmon Napoleon. Thanks." He said giving his menu to the waiter. He didn't understand why they gave him a menu, he ordered the same thing every time they came there. He wasn't too fond of the other choices.

"Darling, I really need to tell you something."

Lillian stilled, giving him her full attention.

"Remember the dream I told you about?" He said watching her nod. "Look, maybe I should start by saying this: I was visited by a woman a couple of months ago. Yeah, she came to the office, but she didn't get the chance to come to *my* office," he said, trying to make sense to her, to himself.

"What do you mean get the chance? Why would it be a big deal that a woman would visit your office? That happens often. You work at a finance firm," she said, looking at him fully.

After the glorious two months they had had, being suspicious, or letting her imagination trick her, was the last thing on her mind. Her eyes were focused, trusting.

"It's a big deal that I tell you this, because she looked exactly...I mean, she was the spitting image of you."

Lillian didn't understand his American slang. How can someone be the spitting image? Does it mean they look like they spit you out? She stilled her mind and continued to listen. This happened many times when they talked and she accepted the fact that there were just some words and phrases she wasn't ever going to understand.

"She looked exactly like you, baby," he whispered when he noticed her confusion again.

"And she came to see you?" Lillian said, then looked at her plate. She remembered seeing a woman today in the park that looked similar to her. She thought of asking Michael to describe

her, but realized that would be useless...unless. "What was she wearing?" Lillian said, looking up.

"A cream colored dress with a couple of gree--" he was interrupted.

"...green flowers," she finished for him. She didn't realize she was standing up until Michael gently pulled at her wrist to sit down. "Wait," she said, laughing. "Why are you weirding me out?" She wanted to laugh. Michael always laughed when she used his American expressions, but today he did not laugh. "Is there something you're trying to tell me? Are you connected with this woman...in...some way?" she said, looking into his eyes as she cautiously returned to her seat.

She felt ashamed even asking, but anything was possible, even for them. *Wow, where had that thought come from*, she wondered. Why was she thinking that way? Didn't she have faith in their relationship? The last two months had been like heaven, she couldn't forget about that. She gathered her emotions under her control, and promised herself to never go there again.

Michael thought it was time they went home. He needed to talk with her about his dream. He only told her it was a dream, because she would have thought he was out of his mind had he told her he saw it happened. He hadn't believed in visions...until the Malechi incident. An incident he was still trying to convince himself never happened. However, Michael was a changed man, he believed. He questioned over and over how he was going to deal with the fact that his wife wasn't a believer of these visions.

As they rose from their chairs to leave, a woman bumped into Lillian. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's alright," Lillian told her.

The woman's expression changed. "Grow up," she said in a weird voice. And just as quickly, her face was normal again. "Excuse me," she said and headed to her table.

"That was so weird. Honey, that woman just--" Lillian changed her mind about telling him. She didn't even know how to describe what she just saw without sounding like she was out of her mind.

When they finally made it home, their moods had changed, from the light conversation they were having on the way, thoughts of work were temporarily forgotten. Michael put his hands on her waist and kissed her. He walked her backward until her back touched the wall.

"I've missed you. I thought about you all day," he said, leaning toward her ear. He whispered those favorite French words that he spoke so well, and Lillian tried not to rip the buttons off his shirt as she loosened them. It was Friday, and they were grateful. They could spend all night in each other's arms, and everywhere else in the house if they chose.

Morning came, and again, just like the last two months, they awakened wrapped in each other's embrace. Lillian was conscious first. She watched him as he slept for a moment thinking how wonderfully different he had been lately. Their relationship hadn't been suffering too much before the change, but a familiarity had settled in around them, and she had felt something come between them.

Her thoughts went to the woman at the park then, the one who had come to see her husband. She still didn't like it no matter how great she and Michael were getting along. She peeled his arms and legs away as gently as she could, and decided to take a shower.

For the first time in a long time, Lillian was conscious of her own body. She looked in the mirror to gauge her figure. Did her curves curve in all the right places? Were her breasts too small or too large for her frame? Was she pretty and sexy enough to keep her husband's attention, his devotion? How long would he be nice to her? Would he turn back to his old self? Question after question bombarded her until she almost screamed out of frustration. The voice in her head sounded as if it were standing behind her instead of subconsciously tormenting her.

Later, she and Michael had breakfast. She hid her worries behind a smile, and sweet kisses. Michael could take one look into her eyes and see something was wrong, but she hid it by distracting him in other ways. They made it back to the bedroom to squeeze as much love from one another as they could before leaving the house. Another one of Michael's ideas that she had come to love.

It was such a beautiful day outside that he wanted to take her to the country. They were taking a boat ride, and she was determined to convince Michael, for the sixteenth time, that oysters were really good when they were eaten straight from the shell. The boat ride had been a real success. Michael tried to swallow the oyster without chewing it, but it wouldn't go down his throat. The horseradish sauce the captain dabbled on it made it taste worst. He ended up spitting it out, and begged Lillian to never ask him to do that again. Still, there was a lot of laughing and a lot of pleasure just being in each others' presence.

As they neared the dock, Lillian smiled at two men walking past.

"...and you know what I told her? I told her to grow up!" The other man laughed and Lillian looked in their direction. The man turned and looked directly at her, his face resembling the same look the woman gave her at the restaurant.

She blinked. It had to be her imagination...or just a bizarre coincidence. She laughed to herself.

Later that evening, when she and Michael were watching television, she noticed how mindful she was of the pretty women in the movie. What was that about? She had never given into jealousy before, and now found herself questioning how she looked, and who she was compared to those women. Before she knew what was happening, Lillian gave in to a bout of self-annihilation.

Maybe if I were that pretty he would be content to watch me the same way.

He does watch you, her rational mind said.

Not as intently, another mind stated.

Lillian sat up and looked around. That's it. She was losing her mind. She squeezed her eyes shut tight as a shiver went down her spine.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Michael said.

Lillian opened her mouth to say 'I'm just hearing things. It's nothing,' but ended up saying, "What is it about those women that make you want to watch them?"

Immediately, she felt uncomfortable for even asking.

"I like the show," a curious smile spreading across his face.

"You sure it isn't because you like that they are half-dressed?" she said moving away slightly.

"They are attractive women, but that has nothing to do with why I watch the show. And why are you asking me that? You don't see me getting all crazy with you drooling over the men with their shirts off," Michael said.

He frowned. *What just happened?* he thought.

There was a weird feeling in the room. He remembered this feeling. It was at the library when he discovered those things about Malechi, about him being a deceiver and a fraud. But what could have brought this on? He didn't have any answers just now, but felt as if something slid itself in between him and his wife. He was positive he had felt this same shift the day Lillian showed up.

"Honey, your imagination is toying with you," he told her.

She heard the wisdom in his words, but another feeling rose up in her body and she rejected them. "No, it's not. You just don't want to admit it," she said getting up and leaving the room.

Michael sat there incredulous. When the stunned feeling faded, he followed after her. "Admit what?" He really wanted to know.

"That you're attracted to other women. That you're getting tired of me. That all this niceness will end once you've found someone more exciting than me!"

Michael was dumbfounded. He didn't even know what to say. 'All this niceness?' He thought to himself. This was a lifestyle, and a choice that he would make again and again. It wasn't a seasonal thing. He had meant everything he had said, done, or thought since the Malechi incident. And to have her belittle his efforts the way she had hurt him far more than he could explain. He grabbed his jacket and left. Something he knew he shouldn't have done, but he wanted her to see what she was doing.

They hadn't been separated for over two months and now the bond they had built seemed to be weakening.

Lillian was in the bathroom when she heard the door close. It wasn't a slam, and it made her feel worse. Why did she railroad him like that? There had been a sincerity and intensity to her husband over the last couple of months that created a sense of security in her. And now, she had just made a fool of herself, at her husband's expense. She didn't feel like she won anything, just a loss of something important.

When he returned, she was ready to apologize. She had cried the entire time he was gone, feeling extremely alone without him there.

Michael walked into the bedroom where she was standing by the window. Lillian watched him silently cross the room, going right to her. When he was two inches from her body, he put his head on her shoulder.

"I find other women attractive, yes, Lillian. There are many beautiful flowers in the world, but you're the one I picked. You're the one I wanted...out of all of them," he backed away looking into her eyes, looking over her face. "Do you know how exquisite you are? You are a strikingly beautiful woman. You may think I'm crazy, but I'm in awe of your beauty. And I'm equally amazed that out of all the men in the world, I get to have you...anytime I want," he said smiling as he wiped the tears sliding down her cheeks. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bed.

The next few days, things had finally fallen back into place. They picked up where they had left off as if the bump in the road was nothing more than their imaginations. Michael went to work. Lillian went to work. They came home...and all was good in the world. Until the day Lalliin showed up at Lillian's workplace, striking an odd sort of fear into Lillian's heart.

"I've just come from your husband's place. You know, he gave me the same look," Lalliin said, smiling. Her eyes squinted, "Are you afraid of me, Lily?" she smiled, tossing her hair back.

"Get out of here. Leave me alone," was all Lillian could think to say, there was something weird about this woman, and the fact that she chose not believe that any of this was real, she could not see the resemblance between the two of them anymore. To Lillian she was just another woman poking around where she didn't belong.

"Fine, but I'll be back. I have faith in you...even if you don't." With that she left.

Lillian was angry. Why didn't Michael call her to tell her what was going on? He just allowed this lunatic to walk up into his office like she was his wife! She couldn't concentrate at work anymore. She couldn't keep her emotions in check at home. The tension was thick in the air. Michael felt it, and it caused him to withdraw again.

Lillian felt his detachment and it made her angrier. Everything Michael did drew her into a rage. He began leaving more often, and staying out longer. Lillian cried more, getting reprimands at her job for the dramatic phone calls between her and Michael. Day after day, their relationship was suffering. Both felt helpless to do anything about it. They didn't *know* what to do about it. They began having second thoughts about their reasons for getting married, and staying married.

"I knew it was foolish to marry a pretty girl without getting to know her, **first**," Michael had said one day.

"What? Are you saying you don't trust me? You don't know me?" Lillian asked. "Well, it was simply foolish to marry you...period!"

Michael turned around slowly. "What are you saying, Lill? Are you saying you shouldn't have married me? Is that what you're saying now after all this freaking drama?" Michael's voice was very low. He was walking toward her now.

All he could think about was the agony he had gone through when he thought Malechi would succeed in taking her away from him. Now all he wanted to do was get away from her. Her words were too hurtful. He couldn't figure out why she had changed all of a sudden.

"Why do keep allowing that **crazy** woman to come see you? You got something going on that I should know about?"

Michael balled his fists. He wasn't going to hit her, but he was furious with the accusation. The anger that had been boiling in him over the last week gave him strength enough to punch through a wall, which is exactly what he did after her last statement.

"I have to ask...I just don't know if I can trust you anymore," she said.

Michael walked the dark streets of Paris like a fugitive looking for trouble. He went to their favorite park thinking it would calm him.

"She isn't going to change, Michael. It's only going to get worse," Lalliin said coming out of the shadows of the trees.

Michael jumped up from the park bench.

At home Lillian was pacing the apartment. She felt like she was possessed or something. She could see what she was doing was wrong, very wrong, but she couldn't control herself. She let the anger infuse her. She let the words come through her. She felt like a spoiled little girl. Suddenly, those words: *grow up*, came to her mind in a still, small voice. Well, it wasn't that easy, she thought bitterly. She had a legitimate reason for being angry. Her husband was...was...she couldn't figure out how to finish the statement. Her head started spinning. This is crazy. I know I'm a sane person, but ever since that woman came near me and my husband...she stopped.

Her husband's dream. Lillian remembered he had told her that it wasn't just a dream, but a vision he had told her about before it happened. She remembered seeing that old man several times in the park before the change in her husband's behavior, but after that, there was no more old man.

She settled her mind so she could think this through. Yes, she thought, I will admit the woman does look like me. She didn't want to admit it in the beginning, because she didn't want to face the truth of Michael's revelations. There is a deceiver among them, and his plan was to destroy everything that is true about them. If she and Michael were not true, this would not be happening. When she thought of Lalliin, a shiver ran down her spine and she almost caved with fear. One of her hands unconsciously balled into a fist. She was fed up with being afraid. And she realized with a shocking certainty that the devil woman had not come for her. This Lalliin had come for Michael.

Lillian panicked. She had sent him storming out, right into a trap.

Just then, a face flashed before her. It was the old man, laughing. She grabbed her jacket and ran out the door.

"She isn't worth getting all crazy over. She doesn't believe you. Your devotion means nothing to Lillian. I know what you've been through, and I understand," she said moving closer to

Michael. This time, he didn't move away. She wasn't close enough to touch him, but she was inching her way over. Michael held up his hand for her to stop, but dropped it, suddenly, when she placed a small kiss upon it. He felt empty. Weak. Maybe he could find Lillian in this woman. She didn't frighten him anymore. And she looked just like his wife, he reasoned.

"It's not like you'll be leaving her. You can even call me...Lillian," she said touching his chin and turning it to face her. "If you like..." She moved in closer, her lips inches from his.

"Get away from him, you Witch!"

Michael looked up at Lillian. She had never seen that kind of terror and fatigue in his eyes before. It made her cringe, but she held her ground.

"Why should she?" He said angrily, tears filling his eyes. "This is what you wanted...to push me away. Every time you open your mouth lately all I hear is one thing, no matter how many different things you say, I only hear: *get away from me, Michael*," he said. "You don't trust me. You don't believe in me. You don't want me. So," his lip trembling, knowing he didn't want to speak what he was about to say, "why can't I be with her? Why can't I have someone who wants me?" He sounded foolish, and he hated it. He did not want this woman, only what he thought she would give him, no matter how false or evil it would be.

Lillian's heart was breaking so hard that her chest hurt. "Michael, I'm sorry, sorry I ever doubted you. That wasn't fair. I allowed Malechi to put fear in me, and it made me suspicious of you. That was wrong. I trust you...I do," Lillian stated sincerely. "I don't want to live this life without you near me," her voice breaking, tears filling her own eyes.

Michael didn't speak. Lillian knew it was too late.

"He belongs to me now, sweetheart. You've lost him, so just give up," she said.

Lillian ignored her.

"Michael...Malechi sent this woman. He hasn't given up trying to destroy you. He's tormenting you by trying to sever our bond. You said he was a trickster. This is a trick, Michael, and she is it," she said, desperately.

Michael slowly looked up at her again at the mention of Malechi's name. His eyes were clearing up.

"I do believe that, honey. And I believe you. I want you to know that you are the man I was meant to marry. I will never doubt that again," Lillian said, her eyes silently pleading for him to understand, to forgive her.

Lalliin laughed. She looked at Michael's wife, grinning, as she bent down slowly to envelope her husband in a possessive kiss.

Michael cut his eyes from his wife to the other woman standing before him. Lalliin stood back, confidently waiting for him to choose her. He stared at her for a long moment before his gaze went back to Lillian. No doubt she was wondering what he was thinking. Would he choose her? she thought. Did he believe her? To her surprise, Michael slowly stood up and walked toward Lalliin. It was too late for her to fight for him, she had lost her husband. She covered her mouth, willing herself not to cry. Lillian watched with tears in her eyes as he cupped Lalliin's face

with his hands, and slowly caressed down her shoulders. His hands came back up then, suddenly grabbing a handful of her collar into his fists. He watched that confident look on her face dissolve into a frown of confusion as he pulled her closer to his face.

"Get away from me, and don't ever show your face around me or my wife again," he whispered deeply. "And just so you know, I would choose her...*every* time," Michael pushed her backwards with no amount of remorse as she stumbled to the ground.

Lillian watched with hidden satisfaction. She could tell it was hard for Lalliin to accept the fact that she been rejection, that her plan had failed. She looked up at the young husband and wife, malice and revenge filling her eyes. Michael reached out for his wife, and she moved quickly into his arms. It had only been a moment or so that they ignored the woman on the ground, for when they looked again...she was gone.

They walked home, weary, but relieved. This time, Lillian looking over her shoulder, making sure they were not being followed. At home, in bed, Michael and Lillian were silent for a long time listening and enjoying the sound of each others' breathing.

"You know he'll be back, don't you?" he said.

She stared at the ceiling, knowing precisely who the real trickster was her husband was referring to, and replied, "Yes, I do. But next time, we'll face him together."