

Barb Goffman Presents



*The **Barb Goffman Presents** series showcases the best in modern mystery and crime stories, personally selected by one of the most acclaimed short stories authors and editors in the mystery field, Barb Goffman, for Black Cat Weekly.*

RIVER SECRET, by Anne Swardson

She took one tiny step toward me. Another—then hesitated. Her mother leaned down and murmured a few words in her ear.

Reassured, the girl toddled forward more confidently, then, halfway to where I was playing, stopped again.

She wore a white wool coat that reached almost to her knees. A few strands of curly brown hair escaped from the fur around her hood, which had been carefully tied at the neck. By her sleek-haired mother, probably. Those dimpled hands were too little to tie anything.

Fortunately for me, they could hold a two-euro coin.

The child looked at her mother again. It was time to reel her in. I ended “*Sous le Ciel de Paris*” a verse early—kids never went for the melancholy material—and put the accordion down on its stand with a click. The girl turned her eyes back to me. I transitioned into 2/4 rhythm with the foot pedal on the bass drum. Picking up the trombone, I launched into the “*Bayrische Polka*,” keeping the oompah with the drum, adding a cymbal stroke to each downbeat with my other foot, and bobbing forward each time the slide came out with a wailing *mwaa-mwaa*.

A big smile appeared on the little girl’s face. She walked confidently to the beret lying upside down on the bricks in front of me and dropped in the coin. I grinned too and gave her another duck, almost a half bow, with a forward slide of the trombone. The girl looked amused, then beckoned her mother to come as she held out her hand for another coin.

“*Maman!*”

A few more spectators peeled off from the stream of Paris tourists who were coming down the steps of the Solférino footbridge, over the Seine, on their way to the Tuileries Garden. They joined the gaggle of Americans in tracksuits around me

and my drums, horns, and stands, attracted by the polka lilt and by the exquisite little girl standing before me.

My location, at the entrance to the underground passage between the bridge over the Seine and the stairs up to the gardens, was the best in the business. When I blew a long note on the trumpet, the tones reverberated off the rounded tunnel ceiling. The cymbals were sharper, the drums crisper because of those acoustics. The river's flowing water gave a sense of space and openness. And with my back to the passage wall, I could spot the oncoming Italians in high-heeled sandals, the rotund British, and the tall Dutch wearing backpacks and then adjust the musical selection accordingly.

Still, each day I needed something special to get an audience going, something to lure a real crowd around me. I needed that more than most, since I never sang, only played. The more people, the more likely I could pass the hat at the end of a set. It was always more lucrative than just waiting for the coins to drop in one by one.

If I was lucky, that moment had arrived.

But Maman wasn't about to chip in another coin. She was distracted by a squat woman wearing a kerchief over her hair. In her grimy fingers, the woman held out a dull gold-looking ring as she sidled closer to her target.

"Mais, madame, see voo play, madame, madame..." The woman didn't pronounce the words properly. Half her teeth were missing. Even though it was March, she was wearing only sandals, without socks, along with a moth-eaten sweater and a long skirt with faded yellow flowers.