

Parisian Woods

By Anne Swardson

Carmen was a dim figure in the fading moonlight as she clip-clopped down the dark road in her high heels. I padded about 30 feet behind her, far enough that she wouldn't sense me but close enough to act if needed. The trees on either side of the road leaned in menacingly.

Headlights appeared behind me; I faded into the forest. The car, a late-model Renault, pulled up to Carmen as the driver opened the window. She walked around to his side and leaned in. His hand emerged from the window and proffered two twenty-euro bills. She took them and beckoned him to get out and follow her.

So far so normal.

But then the supposed customer, a tall thug in a leather jacket, went off-script. He grabbed Carmen, snatched back the bills and pushed her up against a tree. Holding his hand over her mouth, he began fumbling with his zipper.

I was there in two seconds. An elbow around his neck and a kick to his knees and he was on the ground.

“That’s not how it works, *mon gars*,” I growled as I pinned his neck to the ground with my foot—also clad in a high heel. Grabbing his wallet, I extracted not just the forty euros but everything else in it. “Next time you better behave properly, or we’ll ban you from the park.” I let him go and enjoyed watching him race to his car.

“Oh Stefka,” Carmen wailed as she leaned into my embrace. “I sorry. I wish you no have to defend me. I know not how to see people like that.”

“You’ll learn, *ma cherie*,” I said, kissing the top of her head. At six feet, I towered above her. “It’s a tough business, and Boris doesn’t do anything to help. We’ll talk more tomorrow about how you can protect yourself. Now get back to work and I will too.”

With that, I straightened my bra, unbuttoned my blouse another notch, applied a new coat of lipstick, hiked up my miniskirt and headed into the forest, to take the path to my spot. It was time to dangle my own attractions before the passing cars.

#

When I left Bulgaria and arrived in Paris six years ago, I didn’t know that a huge park on the west side of the city was a hotbed of sex workers at night. Business guys, politicians, celebrities, and a lot of horny dweebs all took advantage of our uneasy truce with the cops. Also a plus: our convenient location, a mile from the Arc de Triomphe and two miles from the Eiffel Tower.

It quickly became my life. I made more money for Boris than any of his other girls.

But I was lonely. Funny thing to say about someone who makes a living selling her body, but I was.

Then I met Carmen. I loved her from that first second, standing on the curb at dusk in a micro skirt and a leather vest. She looked miserable in that getup. She'd been transferred to Boris from the coyotes who'd paid her way across the ocean from Guatemala, and they needed their money back.

I explained, in halting English, what her job was. "But I come here to work in hotel!" she'd wailed, in similarly fractured English. Back then, she spoke no French.

"So did half the girls in the woods," I said. I wasn't sure she understood everything, but she nodded.

I took her to live with me in my studio apartment in northeastern Paris. Even after selling our bodies all night, we still desired each other. Being with her touched something in me that had never opened up before. She was new to loving a woman, but quickly learned to receive, and to give pleasure.

On our rare days off, we'd shop at the produce markets, sip *café express* and walk in the Tuileries Garden, laughing when the pigeons flapped away from us. It was a good life, even if protecting Carmen at night cut into my own income.

#

Boris turned around and scowled as we clambered into the back seat of his ratty van, double-parked in front of our building. We were late. Carmen and I had wanted one more

snuggle in our single bed. One last moment together before we again began selling that warmth to strangers.

“Stefka, you need more eye shadow. Carmen, pull your boobs higher out of your bra. You both look like hell,” he snapped. We quietly obeyed.

Muttering under his breath, Boris drove into the park. His first stop was Carmen’s regular location, not far from the racetrack. She got out, looked into my eyes and gave my hand a squeeze. So tiny, almost like a child. Already, cars were on the prowl, slowing down as their unseen drivers assessed her and the others.

“Stefka, I heard what happened last night,” Boris said as he drove to my spot on a smaller road north of the tennis club. “You can’t be beating up clients. Carmen needs to learn to protect herself. I can’t keep her on if she doesn’t start bringing in more dough. And I can’t keep you on if you drive customers away instead of doing your own job.”

“Boris, she was in danger! The only reason I butt in sometimes is because you don’t. A dead girl is not a profitable employee.”

I could talk back to him because he was Bulgarian too. I just wished I could throw him on the ground like I had the man last night.

But Boris was our ticket out. Just a few more months of working for him and we could quit this wretched business. We’d talked about opening a flower shop, or a Bulgarian-food truck. Or maybe Guatemalan food, whatever they ate there.

We were making progress: At least nine thousand euros was stuffed into the old sewing box I kept under the bed at the apartment. Six years of savings, plus the odd

wallet-lifting when I was sure the client wouldn't notice. I hadn't told Carmen about it yet, but I was going to soon.

What Boris said worried me. When he wasn't happy with one of his girls, things happened. I'd never seen Marie again after he told her she needed to double her take.

I started my shift, walking on the path between the woods and the road, turning as each car passed to show my best angles. I could see the full moon as I skirted the trees along the berm, stepping out to wiggle a thigh-high boot in front of the passing cars.

A Peugeot came to a slow stop. I walked to the driver's window.

"Bonsoir, cheri. Forest or car?" I had two twenty-euro bills sticking out of my bra, just like Carmen had the night before. He nodded to his passenger seat and I got in. If I was lucky there'd be many more like him before the night was done.

It was about two o'clock when, on the prowl again, I heard footsteps behind me. Even at my size, I didn't like being followed. Especially in the woods and especially at that hour.

I slowed my steps until my tracker was right behind me. Then turned swiftly.

He was a slim man with black hair, kind of oily. He held up his hands, palms forward. His outfit was pure Eurotrash: skinny pants, linen jacket, black T-shirt.

"I mean no harm," he said, a Spanish accent tingeing his French.

"You're harming me by scaring off my customers," I said. "Besides, the gay section of the park is to the south of here."

"Oh, I'm not a prostitute," he said. "But it's a good business. I want to see if we can work together. You could leave Boris and keep a bigger share of your earnings. I know

your, um, friend, Carmen. If you two come work for me, I can help her get out of the trade.”

Dump Boris, who would no doubt hunt me down, for some little Spanish creep I didn't know? And how had he met Carmen? The thought of them speaking Spanish to each other, of Carmen being able to say everything that was on her mind, filled me with rage.

“That is not going to happen,” I said. “Move on before I call Boris.”

“Who are you to answer for Carmen?” he sneered.

What *had* the two of them talked about?

I moved closer, towering over him. “If you ever speak to Carmen again, you'll have me to deal with.” I lifted my hands up toward his neck. He got the idea and fled. I turned back to seek out the next passing car. But I felt uneasy for the rest of the night.

#

Early the next afternoon, when Carmen and I awoke, she took my hand.

“Steffia”—that was what she called me in intimate moments—“man come last night. He says can help me.”

“Spanish-type guy?”

“Si! Alfonso. Very nice, from Venezuela. I am so happy to speak my language with him. He say he will put us in hotel for clients, take less money than Boris. Please!” She

was sitting cross-legged on the bed in front of me. She reached out her hands to hold mine.

“He’s a liar, trust me. You can see by looking at him he has no connections. Boris may be an asshole, but he keeps us in business. Besides, if we dump him he’ll make our lives miserable.”

“Steffia, we are together! We are for each other. If I say Alfonso is good, you must think about it.” I could tell she was angry.

“Ok, you have a point,” I said, though I had no intention of giving in to this sleazebag. “We’re partners, sure. I’ll consider it, OK? For now, let’s do a little window-shopping on the rue de Rivoli. Hermès scarves, right? I’ll call Boris and tell him to pick us up there for tonight.”

She understood Hermès. Now I just had to figure out how to tell her to shape up before Boris shipped her out. And I had to find a way to ship Alfonso out.

#

“Faster, please,” Police Commander Jacques Bassin said to his driver as their police Renault Mégane roared through the park, the Bois de Boulogne.

He hated this place. The entire forest, a den of sin and filth. It was divided into sections: The spouse-swappers drove around the traffic circle at Porte Dauphine, checking each other out before hooking up. The watchers stationed themselves along the streets near Auteuil racetrack, waiting for a car to park with a load of exhibitionists inside. The homos were in the south, the transies were in the west and the female sex workers were near the symbols of wealth: the racetrack, the polo field and the tennis club.

Jacques had despised this grim commerce since he was a junior lieutenant. What kind of society allowed this to happen? They all ought to be thrown in jail—clients, pimps, *putes*. The girls weren't even French, most of them. The worst of Eastern Europe and Africa, come to defile France's sovereign shores.

His internal tirade ended as the car came to a stop. A plainclothes officer was standing on the curb, signaling through the dark with a flashlight. "Follow me, *monsieur le commandant*," he said. He led the way along a path in the woods to a small clearing. The body of a man lay crumpled in the center. The forensics team had already cordoned off the area and begun taking samples.

"*Et alors?*" Bassin said to a white-coated woman examining the body, which lay on its stomach.

"Knifed, *monsieur le commandant*. One expert thrust to the abdomen. From close enough that the victim probably knew his attacker."

"Who is he?"

The police officer who had met the car spoke. "A small-time pimp here, only runs two or three girls at a time. Perhaps one of his larger competitors decided to take over his operation?"

Bassin shuddered in disgust. He shouldn't even be here; a junior officer could have handled this killing of a nobody. But he had happened to pick up the call on his way home from dinner with the deputy justice minister.

He knelt down in front of the body, adjusting his suit pants so the knees wouldn't stretch out. "Turn him over, please." The forensic examiner did so.

“Our victim appears to have been engaging in the very activity he sells,” Jacques noted drily. “What’s his name?”

“Boris Georgiev,” the officer said. “Bulgarian.”

“Of course,” Bassin said. “Aren’t they all. Well, question some of the girls and pimps. But don’t spend a lot of time on it.”

#

At first, I was glad Boris was late. I could hold it over him next time he scolded us. Then I started wondering what was going on. He wasn’t answering his phone, which never happened.

I hailed a taxi instead, and ignored the leering looks from the driver as he dropped us off. Our take was good that night. I couldn’t help thinking how much more money Carmen and I could stuff in the sewing box if we didn’t have to give Boris his share.

Two men were waiting for us as we walked out of the park about six a.m.: a cop in a uniform and a thin man in a suit who looked like he wanted to be somewhere else.

Merde! So much for a truce.

“*Mesdames*, I am Commander Jacques Bassin and this is Officer Fourcade. We are here about M. Boris Georgiev,” said the suit guy. “When did you see him last?”

Carmen looked at me anxiously. I nodded at her reassuringly and answered.

“When he took us home yesterday. But he didn’t pick us up this morning. Has something happened?”

“Like what?” Bassin asked.

“Anything that would explain him not being here,” I snapped. “Look, we don’t know anything and you don’t have the right to hold us. We want to go home.”

“And you, young lady?” Bassin asked, turning to Carmen.

She began to shiver. “Everything Stefka say be true,” she stammered. “Know *nada*, me.”

Bassin sneered. “So you say. Give us your fingerprints and your phone numbers and we’ll let you go for now.”

“Do we have to?” I asked. I didn’t have a record, but I didn’t know about Carmen.

“Well, the alternative would be to show us your immigration papers.”

He didn’t need to say another word. I held out my hand. The uniformed officer pulled out a portable fingerprint kit. When it was Carmen’s turn, her hand was shaking so badly he had to hold her fingers down to get a clear print. When they were done, Bassin nodded. “You can go.”

Carmen started crying as we walked to the Métro. “I so scared, Steffia! Never saw policeman in France before. Will they deport me?”

“No, baby,” I said as I put my arm around her. “They don’t care about us. I’m legal, anyway. When we get out of this racket, we can open a real business and apply for your papers. We could get married, even, and you’d automatically have the right to stay here.”

“You’ll always protect me, Steffia?”

“Always. How do you say forever in Spanish?”

Married! I'd never thought about it before. But why not? Truly together. Bonds no one can put asunder, like they said.

It was time to start sharing. As soon as we walked into our studio, I sat Carmen on the bed.

"I want to show you something." She cocked her head. I leaned down, reached underneath, and pulled out the sewing box.

"This is why we don't need Alfonso," I said. I opened the box. Rolls of fifty-euro bills were neatly layered inside. "I figure that all we need is another thousand euros and we can get out of this racket."

"Rack-et?" Carmen asked. Her hypnotized eyes didn't leave the money, and her hand stretched out to stroke the bills.

"The business. We can't work for long without some other pimp trying to take us over, but one more month should be all we need." I gently took the box and slid it back under the bed.

"Yes, Steffia," Carmen said softly. "We are partners. Like sisters, right?"

I nodded even though I didn't even know if I still had a sister. Last I'd seen her, she was begging for coins on the streets of Plovdiv.

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Only a few nights later, Alfonso showed up again. Same way, sneaking up behind me. The moon had set and I was in an area where the streetlights weren't working.

“Where is your darling Boris?” he sneered as he stepped a little too close.

“You tell me.”

He looked satisfied. “I have a pretty good idea he won’t be back.”

“So? Like I said, you don’t have the contacts or the savvy to compete in this business. Carmen and I will be fine on our own. For as long as we work in these woods.”

“Will you now?” His eyes looked over my shoulder.

I spun around, but not fast enough.

#

Carmen and Alfonso looked down at the bulky corpse in the road. Blood ran from a huge hole in Stefka’s stomach to the drainage channel by the curb, and down the street.

Carmen leant down and wiped the knife on Stefka’s miniskirt, then gave it to Alfonso, handle first. She had a slight sneer on her face.

“Now you’ll never have to sleep with a woman again,” Alfonso said cheerfully.

She gave him a sharp look. “All part of the plan. Now tell me how long I’ll have to work in a hotel before we can go live in Malaga?”

“I’m all over it, *carina!* Did you bring the money?”

Carmen pulled the sewing box from her bag and handed it to him. He counted the contents and shoved the roll of bills in his pocket. Beckoning to her, Alfonso started walking toward the park exit.

She grasped his arm, without turning around to look at what she was leaving behind.

“We’re partners, right? You’ll protect me?”

“Something like that,” Alfonso said, fingering the knife in his pocket.

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Jacques Bassin looked at the body with disdain. The big blonde woman lay in the road, in an enormous pool of blood.

He turned to the forensics officer. “Was it the same weapon that killed the Bulgarian pimp?” he asked.

“Probably, *mon commandant*, based on the size of the wound,” she said. “But the hand holding it was not. M. Georgiev was killed in a clean and professional fashion.. This victim was slain by someone who appears to have been in emotional distress, whose hands must have been shaking badly, based on the wound. What do you want us to do next?”

Jacques shook his head. “Who cares? They were asking for it by getting into this disgusting business.” He turned to the uniformed officer.

“Make the usual inquiries and shake a few trees. But don’t waste much time on it.”