

# EPILOGUE: RECKLESS BOY

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LOLA WEST



## EPILOGUE

Leah

One year later

“**Y**ou are being ridiculous,” I sighed. Max and I were standing outside the Laurent Bakery, a fixture in Martha’s Vineyard. The bakery was the best. The best. It took up the first floor of the largest structure on Main St. and it was started by the Laurent sisters before any of us were born. Celine, Josette and Jaqueline Laurent, had semi-retired a while back so now the shop was run by Patrick Leroux, their nephew and Max’s nemesis.

“Perhaps,” Max snapped. “But, I’m not going in there. No way, no how.” She was fishing around in her purse, but she wasn’t actually looking for something. She was just avoiding eye contact with me.

“Oh, come on, today is Ryan’s first day working for Patrick. I want to show our support. It’s just a cup of coffee and a pastry, Max.”

She scrunched her nose at me and shook her head before she scolded, “Just coffee and a pastry? From Patrick Leroux? Please. As soon as I cross that threshold, he’ll be giving me a hard time.”

Patrick and Max had never gotten along. Even when we were kids playing on the beach, they were at each other’s throats. In Max’s defense, Patrick always teased her mercilessly and apparently, in our teenage years – when I was busily burying with my nose in a book and avoiding any and all social interactions – their rivalry had intensified. But honestly, we were adults now and she needed to put this nonsense behind her.

“Please, Maxi. When he left the house this morning, Ryan was a ball of anxious energy and I think having us visit will make him feel at ease.”

The tension that rode Max’s shoulders was palpable. Over the last year, she’d had totally changed her tune about Ryan. The two of them had become quite close, and both she and I had encouraged Ryan to pursue his love of food and cooking. But Max had no idea that his pursuit would lead him to working for Patrick. She’d been fairly quiet about the whole thing, but she was not pleased. Not one bit.

She huffed out a heavy sigh and then said, “I don’t know, Lee. I just don’t think I can.”

Above us a window was thrown open, and like a choir of crows, out popped, Celine, Josette and Jaqueline.

“Oh my,” sang Celine.

“Mon Dieu,” exclaimed Josette.

“As I live and breathe,” teased Jaqueline.

I loved the Laurent sisters. I’d played cards with them

many times over the years, and man, those ladies taught me a thing or two. They were in their seventies, youthful as all get out, very French, very elegant, very silly and excruciatingly nosey.

“Ladies, do you see who that is lurking just steps from our door?” Celine smirked.

Josette winked. “Well, I was expecting the lovely Leah, today – what with her burly beau baking baguettes down below, but I must admit her jolie ami is quite the surprise...”

Max rolled her eyes.

Jaqueline scolded her. “Maxaline, don’t be haughty.”

“Maxine,” Max said under her breath.

“What was that?” Josette called down. “We are old, Maxaline. Our hearing is going you know.”

“It is not,” Max said forcefully, but she couldn’t help but smile. Then, she turned her head up to the three women and sweetly called out, “Bonjour, vieille poitrine ridée, I have missed you.”

I was surprised by the exchange. I didn’t know Max spoke any French, and I certainly didn’t know Max and the Laurent sisters were close. Not for the first time, I wondered just how much life I’d missed when I was hiding from my grief.

Celine scrunched up her face and chided Max. “I don’t know about these other birds, Maxaline, but I am certainly not old and wrinkly.”

Josette joked, “No you are blind.”

While the three argued over how old and young they looked, I turned to Max and purely out of curiosity asked, “Why do they call you Maxaline?” I

Max smiled to herself and shook her head. Then, she said, “As a girl, I didn’t know Maxine was a French name. I thought French names all sounded like Claudine, Celine,

Jaqueline.” She emphasized the “line” syllable in each name. And then shrugged before adding, “I wanted my name to sound French, so I told them to call me Maxaline. They have not let it go.”

Jaqueline called down again, “Maxaline, tout de suite, get a croissant, a pain au chocolate, and something with apricots. We will make lattes.”

Max started to shake her head, but with a sneaky sparkle in her eye Celine sang out, “tout de suite, Mademoiselle,” and then she slammed the window shut.

“Oh Merde,” Max sighed as she mounted the steps and headed for the door to the Laurent Bakery.

I couldn’t help myself, I giggled and yelled up after the Laurent sisters, “Thank you.”



INSIDE THE BAKERY WAS BUSTLING. The Laurent sisters had converted the entirety of the bottom floor of their home into a cozy café with mismatched tables, chairs and little loveseats. Locals often hung out just to socialize, but the major draw was the baked goods. There were the usual French suspects, but Patrick had also upped the ante a bunch – creating inspired treats, like whisky and spiced apple tartlets, pain au chocolate with ancho chiles, and daily flavors of homemade pop-tarts. They also made take out sandwiches that were so so good. Goat cheese apples and turkey on fresh chewy baguette, anyone?

Max headed through the madness right to the counter, where it so happened Ryan was standing.

“Max,” he exclaimed with a giant smile on his face. He was smiling a lot lately and that made my heart pound in my chest like a puppy wagging its tail.

“Shhhhhhhh,” Max said, peering behind Ryan’s shoulder, obviously hoping to avoid a run in with Patrick.

Ryan looked to me, through up his hands and knitted his brow, silently asking, *wtf?*

Sidling up next to Max, I quietly said, “She’s hoping to avoid Partrick.”

Ryan teeth clenched and he made a total yikes face, right before a deep voice resonated from low down behind pastry case, “Well if Maxine wants to avoid me, then she should stay out of my bakery.”

Max huffed, “Technically, it’s your aunts’ bakery, isn’t it?” It was a low blow.

Rising from his crouched position, Patrick stood. He was handsome, quiet tall with thick strawberry blond hair and a burly but well-groomed beard. He crossed his arms over his chest, and his biceps pulled tight under the fabric of his T-shirt.

“Technically,” he said hautly, and then snidely added, “That newsstand of yours, your father owns that, doesn’t he?” Max’s nostrils flared. She ran a bookstore on Main St. that was owned by her father, but in the three years she’d been running it she’d taken what had been a fledgling passion project for her family and made it one of the top fifteen independently run bookshops in the country. She also hated when people called her store a newsstand.

With her teeth clenched she looked at me and said, “Should we order. Let’s just order.”

I nodded and completely ignoring Patrick, Max turned to Ryan prepared to ask him for what she needed. Unfortunately, Patrick wasn’t letting her off that easily. He narrowed his eyes and said, “You know. I might just be out of whatever you’re looking to purchase, Maxine.”

Max spun at him, and her absolutely unhinged rage was

layered in her voice as she spat, "Fine then, you go upstairs and tell your aunts that you wouldn't sell me their snack."

Patrick smiled, almost like he loved the heat of her nastiness on his skin. Then he pulled a paper box from the pile on the top of the pastry case and using a pair of metal tongs went about collecting a croissant, a pain au chocolate, an apricot danish and a pistachio éclair.

"Did they ask for an éclair?" I questioned looking to Max. With a pinched brow, she shook her head, but Patrick was turned away and didn't realize I was seeking her response.

So, he bluntly answered the question. "The éclair is for Maxine. It's her favorite." Then he turned and handed the box of pastries to Max. Ryan and I both quirked our heads trying to decipher the strangeness of their interactions.

Max's voice was quiet and almost shaky when she said, "What do I owe you?"

Patrick waved it off, and then said, "My aunts own the place. They don't pay."

Max gave a curt nod, and then turned, and strode off towards the staircase, heading to visit the Laurent sisters. Patrick watched her walk away. After a beat of silence, he squeezed Ryan's shoulder before saying, "You got this? I'm gonna...." He paused as though searching for something to say before coming up with, "use the restroom."

Ryan nodded and Patrick disappeared just as silently as Max had.

Ryan looked at me, waiting seeking an explanation for what had just happened. I just shrugged and offered, "No idea. None whatsoever."

"But it was odd, right?" Ryan asked. "Chaotic almost?"

"Mmm-hmmm," I confirmed, turning to look in the direction Max went as she made her escape. Mentally



vowing to look into what we'd just witnessed, I turned back to Ryan. Putting my hands on the counter, I leaned in towards him and said, "You look mighty sexy in a white apron with flour on your nose."

He laughed. "Oh yeah."

I popped my eyebrows at him with a silly deep voice crooned, "Oh yeah."

"Maybe later, I'll model it for you..." He paused for effect, but I knew where he was going. "...Naked."

I smirked and probably blushed and then boldly commanded, "Make me a sandwich, chef."

He stood tall and saluted. "Yes, my queen!"



MY MAN WAS nothing if not good to his word. Later that evening in the glow of candlelight, there was an apron in a puddle on my floor, and post orgasms, Ryan and I were lying naked in bed, pawing through a box of pastries he brought home from the bakery.

I was sucking sugar off my fingers when he said, "We're gonna get fat."

Giggling, I asked, "Why?"

"These were free. Patrick was going to throw them out. No day olds at Laurent apparently."

"Oh my god, really?"

"Really."

I shrugged, "Well then, we're gonna get fat."

"Totes." He confirmed.

Leaning over with sticky sweet lips, I kissed him and then said, "Don't worry. I'll still love you when you look like Santa Clause."

Ryan was quiet for a minute and then serious, with every

ounce of his soul, he said, "I'm going to love you forever, Leah."

The pastry in my mouth got thicker and I chewed quickly, trying to swallow it away, but even when it was gone it felt a little like my mouth was glued together. Still, I managed to say, "Yeah?"

He nodded. And then he turned reaching for his night table and pulled out a little black box. Everything in my chest started to shake.

He cleared his throat, but he didn't look up. Instead, as he spoke he stared at the little box, spinning in his fingers. "I have an elaborate plan. A festive engagement fiasco on Jaws Bridge. Everyone is going to be there. My parents, your parents, our friends. Everyone. And it's gonna be great, Lea, but I can't wait." He looked up. He stared at me. I was stupid smiling with little tears rolling down my cheeks. "I want to ask you now. Can I ask you now? Here, in the candlelight in the bedroom of your mother's cottage? Can we begin our life together quietly, just the two of us – and then still celebrated with everyone next week?"

I nodded my head manically.

He cleared his throat again and then smiling he nonchalantly asked, "Hey Lea, you wanna be my wife?" As he glowed, I bounded into his lap, wrapping my arms around his neck and peppering his face with kisses, each one punctuated by a yes.

Together, we would never be ghosts again.

INTERESTED IN MAX AND PATRICK? Learn more about their connection in *The Christmas Tart* - coming from Lola West in November 2021