



THE

Ideal CUT

ELINOR GRAY

THE IDEAL CUT

Clayton Gaumont, alias The Ghost, is one of the most skilled, least known diamond thieves in the world, and tonight is just another night on the job. The party is in full swing, the guests are all occupied, and a ten million dollar prize sits unguarded just over their heads. But bumping into sexy, mysterious Theo Edgeworth throws a wrench into Clayton's plans for a clean getaway, and Theo has an agenda of his own.

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

THE IDEAL CUT

By Elinor Gray

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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Photo Description

A solitary diamond glitters on a black field.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm a jewel thief—the best in the world and proud of it. The only reason I'm even at this party is to get the job done; find the £3 million diamond with my name on it, steal it and get the hell out as fast as possible. But the mystery man who's been making eyes at me from across the room all evening is making me lose focus, distracting me, but I'm a professional and it takes more than a pretty face to keep me away from my prize. So there I am, sneaking into the vault, when I see mystery man breaking into the safe! If he thinks he's walking out of there with my diamond, he's crazy. There's no way I'm letting it go without a fight, even though there's something about this guy that totally throws me off my game.

Note: No BDSM please, and I would love a HEA for these guys!

Sincerely,

Jaime

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: action/suspense/adventure, criminals, jewel thieves, public activity, competitors to lovers, humorous

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Clayton Gaumont surveyed the ballroom with satisfaction. The party was in full swing, the guests were on their way to drunk, and the hostess, heiress Sylvia Docker, was tied up (figuratively) with her social obligations. Everyone seemed to want a moment of the poor woman's time, and already Clayton could see the strain on her face. She was not the sort of wealthy socialite that thrived on attention, but that was to Clayton's advantage. He'd gotten a good look at the necklace she was wearing when they'd been introduced, and that told him everything and more about what was still sitting in the vault upstairs. If she wore *that* in public, what she kept hidden away had to be spectacular.

Straightening his tie, Clayton started to move away from the fruit end of the massive buffet table. Time to work the room a little, blend in, maybe rub elbows with a few bigwigs and give himself an alibi. He had a few hours to go until he could slip away and make good on his employer's challenge; until then, he'd have to entertain himself.

He'd only taken two steps, however, when he collided shoulder-to-shoulder with a man holding a champagne flute in one hand. They both took a step back, stared at one another, and Clayton couldn't help but be impressed at what he saw.

"Terribly sorry," the man said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. He was taller than Clayton—but that wasn't very difficult, if you stood taller than five foot six—with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, accentuated by the cut of his bespoke tux. He was brown-haired and brown-eyed with a sharp jaw and strong Roman nose, and he was looking Clayton up and down with undisguised interest, his gaze lingering somewhere below Clayton's belt, and then again on Clayton's throat. Silver cufflinks gleamed at the stranger's wrists, and his red bow tie caught the eye as an accent against all that black and white. There was a faint shadow of stubble on the stranger's chin and

upper lip, as though even shaving right before an event couldn't subdue his testosterone-fueled manliness.

Clayton shifted forward on his toes, turning the charm up a notch. "My fault," he said, smoothing down his own slightly unruly mop of curly hair, "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No harm done," the man said with a smile, and moved the champagne flute to his left hand in order to extend his right. "Theo Edgeworth."

"Jeff Cagney," Clayton said, taking Theo's hand and squeezing it, rather than shaking it. "Which charity are you with?"

"Lawyers Against Climate Change," Theo said, letting his touch linger. His hands were warm and dry, and his grip had the strength of a man who worked with his hands. Curious. "Sylvia has been very good to us this year."

"That's excellent." Rich people. Clayton wondered if they ever managed to make friends at even a fraction of the rate they gave away money.

"What about you?" Theo asked. He had angled his body a little, inadvertently blocking Clayton's way to the door, and to push past him at this point would be downright rude. Besides, Clayton didn't really mind the distraction. He let himself be drawn into Theo's space, plucking a champagne glass off a passing tray, and took a sip.

"Panda Population Revitalization," he said. "I'm on the board."

Theo smirked, and Clayton knew suddenly that he'd made a blunder. Damn it! Who actually cared about the panda population? This guy?

"Really?" Theo asked. "I don't remember seeing your name on the program."

Clayton looked down at his feet, and then back up, sheepish. "You got me. I'm not on the board. I work in Annual Giving."

Theo laughed, showing straight, white teeth, and Clayton felt a little thrill run down his spine. Theo had a gorgeous, rich laugh, and Clayton was already imagining what it would be like to kiss that mouth, have those lips on his skin. Then Theo licked his lips—deliberately? Clayton couldn't tell—and Clayton

was starting to feel a little light-headed. His stomach was warm with arousal, his heart rate already picking up. He'd been so busy lately, traveling, getting out of the way, that sex had been put on the back burner. Now his body was reminding him how long it had been.

He couldn't afford to be distracted tonight. Regardless of how much interest Theo was telegraphing, Clayton wasn't going to let himself do anything more than get this dude's phone number. He could fuck him stupid *tomorrow* night. Tonight he had a job to do.

"I could use some air," Theo said, leaning across Clayton to put his champagne glass down on the table behind him. He touched Clayton's elbow lightly on the way back up, and Clayton swore he could feel it straight down his spine into his abdomen. "How about you, Jeff from Annual Giving?"

"Yeah, that sounds great," Clayton said, before he could stop himself. His face was hot. He really could do with getting out of the suddenly stifling ballroom.

Theo flashed him another smile, coy and closed-mouthed this time, and took Clayton's hand. Clayton let Theo pull him through the crowd, skirting around the edge of the dance floor, and toward the French doors that opened out onto the veranda.

Clayton snuck a peek at his watch. It was eleven thirty, and this party was guaranteed to go on until at least three in the morning. Clayton's best window of opportunity would open up just after midnight, when the party would be at its height and sneaking away would not be looked upon with suspicion. He could be meeting someone for more intimate conversation; who would know?

Of course, he was being drawn into intimate conversation right now, as Theo squeezed between two knots of people and they emerged onto the veranda with a mutual sigh of relief. The late spring night was not yet heavy with the humidity of summer, and Clayton took a deep, grateful breath.

There was another bar out on the veranda, and Theo drew Clayton in that direction past a few other couples seeking respite from the crush in the ballroom.

“Gin and tonic,” Theo said to the bartender, and then to Clayton, “You?”

“Whiskey,” Clayton said, “neat.” One drink wouldn’t hit him very hard. Even after the champagne, he had enough tolerance to be able to pull it off. Normally he didn’t drink on the job, but turning it down would draw attention to him, and that was the last thing he wanted.

Drinks in hand, they drifted towards the edge of the veranda where the low stone wall separated the guests from the carefully manicured garden beyond. Its topiary and rose beds were lit by the full moon, but their details were lost beyond the brightness spilling out of the windows from the party. Clayton gazed in that direction nonetheless. Theo leaned against the stone wall and looked upwards.

“Isn’t that magnificent?” Theo said.

Clayton looked. The moon hanging just above the roof of the house had a silvery sheen and a faint ring of cloud around it. Clayton rested his elbows on the wall beside Theo. His glass was cool in his hands.

“Sometimes when I think the work I do is useless or extravagant,” Theo said, “I take a week off and hike to the remotest place I can get, and remember how fragile and amazing nature is.”

Oof, Clayton thought. *A real activist*. Well, he was going to have to play the Panda sob story card if he wanted to either get laid or get away easy.

“I know what you mean,” Clayton said, taking another sip of whiskey and lying through his teeth. “Working in an office doesn’t feel meaningful, I mean, all I do is answer phones all day and convince people to write checks. But I got to go on a trip once to China that the company sponsored and hold a baby panda.” Theo was looking at him with interest, as if he expected the story to get really exciting. “It was soft,” Clayton said, wondering if anyone actually let American tourists hold baby pandas. “I just think, you know, if we can do something to preserve the world we live in, we should do it.”

Theo’s brown eyes were wide and earnest as he said, “I absolutely agree. There’s nothing worse than standing idly by when things are going wrong around you and you have the power to change them.”

“How long have you been with LACC?” Clayton asked.

“Almost four years,” Theo said. “I went to law school right after college, and then spent three years working as an associate for a firm in New York, but something about it just felt wrong. I wanted to do good for the world, and here I was doing paperwork for corporate cases that were all about money. So I switched jobs, got into non-profits, and became a lawyer for a lawyer’s activist group.” He grinned. “It suits me, I guess.”

“I guess it does,” Clayton said. Something about Theo’s story felt off, but he wasn’t sure what. Being a consummate liar himself, he usually knew when people weren’t giving it to him straight. “Where did you go to law school?” he asked.

“Harvard.”

“Oh yeah? My sister-in-law’s cousin went to Harvard. You graduated, what, six, seven years ago? Do you know Sarah Baker?”

Theo shrugged and shook his head. “The name doesn’t sound familiar. Sorry. She must not have been in my section.”

“Sure, of course,” Clayton said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to play the do-you-know game with you.” He laughed, trying to sound embarrassed. “That’s not what you brought me outside for.” Maybe not, but Theo was definitely lying. He did it easily, without a pause, which made Clayton twice as suspicious. It also made him twice as interested in getting under this guy’s skin (or into his pants, whichever came first). Why was he lying? Who was he, really?

“It’s okay,” Theo said, angling closer to Clayton. “I did have an ulterior motive.” The coy smile came back, and Clayton flushed. “I hope I’m not being too forward.”

“No, no,” Clayton said quickly. “Definitely not.” He could feel the warmth of Theo’s body and he leaned into it. “In fact, I like that in a guy... willing to take a risk.”

Theo laughed and his free hand brushed against the back of Clayton’s. Then he turned his hand over and traced his fingers down the heel of Clayton’s

hand toward the tip of his thumb. Clayton felt it like a shock all the way through his body, just that gentle pressure of Theo's fingertips. He swallowed hard. Theo leaned closer and dropped his voice, speaking close enough to Clayton's ear that his soft lips brushed the shell. "I don't think you're much of a risk," he said.

Clayton shivered, blushed, and then scolded himself internally. This kind of behavior was going to get him noticed. He should have scooted past Theo when they first collided, made his apologies, and gotten out of there. Instead, he'd been sucked in by that appraising look and now he was wasting precious time. He needed to disappear.

He turned his head to make an excuse to Theo, say something about getting back inside, maybe hitting the head before the dancing really got wild, or maybe spilling his drink and going back for another one, but Theo was so close that when he did turn, Theo met him in the middle, pressing their lips together softly.

Clayton pulled back, surprised, and Theo raised an eyebrow at him. "Wrong impression?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Clayton said. "Just, timing."

"It was good, wasn't it?"

Clayton snorted. "It was pretty good." He could feel Theo's breath against his lips, smell the warm, slightly spicy smell of his cologne; like leather, or campfire smoke, with a hint of cinnamon. The rational part of his brain *not* currently soaking in sex hormones reminded him that: A, they were in public and B, Clayton was on a goddamn mission. The rest of his brain just wanted to cozy up to this guy and get more familiar with that smell.

"I'm so sorry to interrupt, gentlemen," a woman's voice said from a polite distance, "but Miss Docker is going to give her toast."

Clayton was prepared to let Miss Docker give her toast to an empty room, if it meant he could stay right here for another five minutes, staring at Theo Edgeworth, but Theo was already standing up straight and finishing his drink.

He tipped the empty glass at Clayton, standing there with his dick half-hard in his pants, and said, "I'm just going to run to the john."

"Right," Clayton said, mentally shaking himself. What was *wrong* with him? "I'm sure we'll find each other."

"I'm sure we will," Theo replied, and brushed another kiss across Clayton's lips. Then he turned away, and was gone in the crush of the party.

Clayton took a moment to gather his composure back up from where he'd spilled it all over the flagstones, and headed in after him. He needed a minute to recover. What had just happened? Theo was a liar, and a damn good one, but everything about him had raised Clayton's hackles (among other things). Theo didn't seem like one of the beef-heads Sylvia Docker had employed as her bodyguards, nor did he really have the air of an undercover guy, but Clayton had to be on his toes.

Briefly, he reconsidered even going after the diamond. It was only a ten-million-dollar job, and normally his dignity as a thief didn't allow for him to be a burglar for hire, but this was small potatoes compared to the job he was basically auditioning for right now. The employer, one Camilla Hendricks, had a lead on a shipment of blood diamonds from South Africa. Clayton wouldn't have touched it with a ten foot pole if she hadn't sworn they were going to get to them before their "legitimate" buyer had paid the paramilitary group supplying them, but even so. Having to prove himself before being contracted to lift a shitload of diamonds worth a shitload of money was questionable. But the cut... well. The cut Clayton would take as the organizer of the heist was enough to fund a retirement that could start the very next day, if he ever thought he would bother to retire.

But, no, Camilla had given him all the materials he'd needed to prep for the job: blueprints of the house, access to the caterers, a trial run of the safe. He could be in and out in twenty minutes. Clayton was here and he was doing the job.

With Sylvia giving her toast, and everyone occupied and most of them good and drunk, the upstairs would be empty. Clayton worked his way slowly

around the edge of the room, giving the buffet a casual glance. By the time Sylvia was actually at the microphone, to much applause, Clayton had slipped out the other side of the ballroom, into the hall.

There were two guys in five hundred-dollar suits standing on the main staircase. They were both also wearing earpieces that snaked down the backs of their collars, which confirmed their status as party security. Clayton lingered beside a column, watching them through narrowed eyes. They were supposed to be on the move, walking the halls, not stationary. He needed to get up those stairs. Sylvia's toast wouldn't go on much longer, and then there would be general revelry again.

Clayton took a quick step backwards as one of the men glanced his way. Invisible behind the column, he also couldn't see whether they were still there. Peeking out sideways like a cartoon burglar wasn't really his style. He slowed his breathing and waited for a count of five, and then stepped out again.

The two men were gone, and the hall was empty. Clayton darted for the stairs and hurried up them. Time was a-wasting, and Clayton had to get in, crack the safe, and get out again before security made another sweep of the second floor. The clock was ticking.

Clayton glanced behind him towards the stairs at the noise of the party picking up again, and pushed the door to the study open. It squeaked once, which made him freeze and listen, but when nothing happened he slipped inside, unnoticed.

The study was dark, save the light on the desk that lit a haphazard scatter of papers, an open pen, and a black notebook on top. The desk was set diagonally so that it faced the study door and the wall of books to the immediate left of the entrance, and the occupant of the desk would have his back to the windows and the fireplace on the right wall. There was a door on either side of the fireplace, one of which Clayton knew from studying the blueprints of the house led to a bedroom, the other to a closet.

The safe was a large, black, metal box that sat on a reinforced bookshelf to the right of the door amid another impressive collection of first edition texts with leather spines. Inside that safe lay Clayton's prize, a diamond of such color, clarity, and carat that it deserved to be in a museum.

And kneeling in front of the open safe door, holding that very diamond in his gloved hands, was Theo Edgeworth. It glittered against the black leather: a single, robin's-egg-blue stone the size of a quarter, hung on a platinum chain.

"Motherfucker!" Clayton hissed. "I knew you weren't a lawyer!"

Theo shot to his feet, his face a mask of cold denial. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, taking the offensive. Clayton knew that tactic: the more forceful you were, the less likely someone was to question you. Theo was doing it well; his powerful body seemed to fill the room and demand respect.

Clayton stood his ground. "What are *you* doing with my diamond?"

"*Your* diamond?" Theo looked taken aback. "What—oh, hell no." He looked down at the diamond in his hand and then quickly shoved it into his pocket. "Don't tell me Camilla hired you."

It was Clayton's turn to be surprised (again). "You mean she hired *you*?"

"Hey, pal," Theo said, pointing a finger at the middle of Clayton's chest. "I'm good at what I do."

"Which is what, exactly?" Clayton asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "Getting caught stealing priceless family jewels?"

Theo narrowed his eyes and took a step towards Clayton. Clayton swallowed hard, suddenly unsure of whether he was angry or turned on right now, whether he should feel threatened or aroused. The latter option was winning.

"Oh," Theo said, dropping his voice, "because 'Jeff from Annual Giving' was such a good cover story. Come on, man. Maybe that can fool the plebs down there throwing money at each other, but a real confidence man can smell a fake ID from a mile away."

“Did you just say ‘confidence man’?” Clayton asked. “You sound ridiculous. I’m calling security.” It wasn’t the classy thing to do, but he needed to get out of here and fast. This job was smoked.

“How are you going to explain what you were doing up here in the first place?” Theo was advancing on him. “You just said *your* diamond, and I know for a fact you’re not Sylvia Docker or any of her nearest relations. Camilla hired you, just like she hired me, to get this job done. The question now is *why*.”

“What did she tell you?” Clayton demanded.

“What did she tell *you*?”

They glared at each other for a long moment. Clayton’s heart was thundering in his chest. His diamond, his job, his multi-million dollar heist—they were all in this guy’s hands. There was nothing he could do.

“Motherfucker,” he said eventually, which was not an answer to anything.

“I should have known you’d have a dirty mouth,” Theo said with a smirk.

“Okay, look,” Clayton started, but Theo held up a hand before he could say anything else.

“Wait,” he said, voice dropped to a whisper. “Did you hear that?”

Clayton knew better than to ask, *Hear what?* He held his breath and listened. The door behind him was ajar, and through it he could hear the sound of the party going on downstairs. But on top of that, there was the distinct sound of someone coming up the staircase. The footsteps were sure; not the drunken wandering of a party guest, but the deliberate stride of a security guard. They had wasted a lot of time being indignant. Rookie mistake.

“Through there,” he said, pointing to a door behind Theo. They had to get out of this room fast, but with the diamond in Theo’s pocket, Clayton wasn’t going to let him out of his sight.

Theo obeyed, darting across the room and opening the door. “A closet?” he hissed.

“Fuck,” Clayton said, “it’s the one on that side—just get in!” He hustled Theo into the tiny linen cupboard—not what he’d been hoping for—and closed the door behind them. There was barely enough room for the both of them. Theo was crowded up against Clayton in the darkness, chest to chest, his broad body firm in all the right places. He smelled warm and spicy. Clayton sucked in a breath through his teeth, cursing himself.

“Maybe I was wrong,” Theo whispered in his ear. “If this is how you do all your heists, you definitely should get the job.”

“Shut up,” Clayton hissed, feeling himself flush with an embarrassed, angry sort of heat. “This is thanks to your interference. I’d be out of here by now.”

“If you’d picked the right door,” Theo said, so Clayton punched him.

He didn’t have much room, though, so mostly he just pushed his fist hopefully in the direction of Theo’s midsection. It connected with a solid wall of flesh, but Theo made a satisfying *oof* noise.

The door to the study opened, creaking faintly on its hinges, and closed again, engaging the latch.

“Did you close—?” Clayton breathed. He felt Theo nod.

The carpeted floor of the study provided no information about the new occupant. They might have been standing by the bookcase, or pacing across the room, and all Clayton could hear was the silence that came from the door to the hall being shut. The silence extended until it was painful, and then it eased into a comforting quiet. If the theft had been noticed, there would be an uproar by now. On the other hand, whoever had entered the room might not be going anywhere for a long time. There was a creak of leather and springs: the sound of a body sitting down in the desk chair.

Theo shifted restlessly in the dark, his body moving against Clayton’s, and Clayton felt a hot spike of want deep in his gut. He could almost taste Theo’s kisses on his lips and feel the press of Theo’s hand on his thigh. He swallowed hard. His dick was getting mighty interested in this forced proximity, fattening up in his trousers. Suddenly he was imagining what it would be like to get

pinned to the door, to have Theo shove his thigh between his legs, to blow his load in his briefs like a teenager. Clayton's cock twitched. He closed his eyes in the darkness, begging for patience.

But Theo shifted again, and suddenly Clayton could feel the press of Theo's erection against his abdomen. Theo hissed through his teeth and pulled away, but Clayton's hands shot out without his permission and grabbed for whatever he could find. He pulled Theo back in by the pockets of his tuxedo jacket. Theo's weight pressed him against the door, and Theo's breath was hot against his temple.

"This is so not the place for this," Theo breathed. Clayton nodded. He was acting very inappropriately for a master thief. But fuck, he was horny. Theo felt amazing, all rock-hard muscles and equally rock-hard dick, and Clayton could feel him trembling slightly, as if he was still trying to hold back. Clayton flexed his hips, pressing his own erection against Theo's thigh.

He heard Theo curse softly, and then that thigh was sliding between Clayton's legs, just as he'd imagined it. Theo's quads were solid, defined, and the perfect height to press against Clayton's balls. Clayton let out a breath, shocked at how good it felt.

Sliding his hands up Theo's front, he found Theo's bow tie, shirt studs, and finally, the warmth of his bare skin above his jacket collar. Clayton wrapped one hand around the back of Theo's neck and pulled him slowly, inexorably, downwards, until he could press his mouth to Theo's. Theo parted his lips immediately, opening to Clayton's insistent tongue, and barely stifled a moan as Clayton plunged inside, licking as deeply as he could. As they kissed, Theo started to flex his thigh, and Clayton had to pull away to cover his mouth with his hand. He spread his legs, urging Theo to keep going, and Theo did, rocking his body against Clayton's and lowering his head until he could press an open-mouthed kiss just under Clayton's ear.

Clayton removed his hand and replaced it with the stiff fabric of Theo's jacket. He bit down on the wool, feeling a little guilty about marring a really nice tux, but mostly overwhelmed with the forbidden, bad-decisions pleasure of it all. Theo's hands shifted from the door behind him to the curve of his ass,

pulling Clayton firmly against him, and Clayton almost shouted aloud. He couldn't hear above the rough sound of his own breathing and the thundering of his heart. The room beyond them didn't exist.

Theo kissed his throat again, then the corner of his jaw, then bit down lightly, gauging Clayton's reaction. Clayton's reaction was to stiffen all over, like he'd been touched by a live wire, and almost come in his pants. He felt Theo huff a laugh, and that was all the warning he got before he was bitten again, more firmly.

He couldn't come, he couldn't! Not here, not now. He squeezed his eyes shut, struggling to stay in control.

The desperation subsided as Theo went still, and then Clayton realized he was listening to what was going on beyond the door. Jesus H., Clayton was a mess. This was the worst job he'd ever pulled.

The desk chair gave a squeak as the occupant of the study stood up, and Clayton could hear the sound of things, papers, being moved about on the desk. He pushed Theo away, his cock aching, his whole body thrumming with need. *Pull it together, Clay*, he told himself, wiping a hand over his face.

Clayton and Theo stood in silence for a minute, waiting, and then the outer door opened and shut.

Clayton launched himself from the closet, gasping lungfuls of fresh air that didn't smell like cologne and his own desperation. Theo was right behind him though, and Clayton's diamond was in his pocket. Clayton wheeled around to face him.

"We need to get out of here," he said.

Theo raised an eyebrow, visibly unimpressed. "You can do whatever you like," he said, "but yes, I'll probably be leaving shortly."

"You're not going anywhere," Clayton said, jabbing a finger into the middle of Theo's chest and suppressing a shudder at the way he smelled, especially from this distance. "Not with that, not without me."

Theo's other eyebrow went up. "Then let's get the hell out," he said. "If you're going to come with me, you're not going to slow me down." He pushed past Clayton and headed for the door, but at the last moment he caught Clayton's hand in his own and pulled him along. Clayton was stunned into silence, and for a moment he followed Theo down the hallway without protesting. As they reached the end, he came to his senses.

"Who are you?"

Theo snorted. "Can we have this conversation anywhere but in a house full of people who don't like their property redistributed?"

"If we leave out the back door," Clayton said, "we will be noticed."

"Obviously." Theo cocked his head towards the end of the hallway, where a narrow staircase led both down and up. "The best way to avoid detection is to get caught." He started down the stairs.

Clayton followed. His diamond wasn't getting more than ten feet from him if he could help it. Better if he could pick Theo's pocket and get away on his own.

The stairs led down to the floor of the party, which could be heard at the other end of the hall, in the ballroom. Theo paused at the bottom and poked his head around the doorway, and then crept out. Clayton hurried after him, looking both ways for witnesses.

Then he was being swept into Theo's embrace, pressed against the wall, and soundly kissed. Theo's body covered his from knee to shoulder, and Clayton melted into it.

"There's someone," Theo said, between deep, thorough kisses, "at the end... of the hall..."

Clayton turned his head to look, and Theo dipped his mouth to Clayton's neck.

"It's a woman," Clayton reported, his voice shaking.

"Is she watching?"

“She wasn’t,” Clayton said, “but now she is.”

“Good,” Theo said, and captured his mouth again. Clayton slid his hands up the front of Theo’s suit jacket, arching his hips forwards. Theo was hard; his cock pressed firmly into Clayton’s belly.

The diamond dug into Clayton’s thigh.

Clayton moaned, suddenly on high alert. Even with his eyes closed, he could pull this off. Theo’s arms around his middle made it even easier. He wriggled again, pressing himself closer to Theo, and Theo’s embrace tightened. Clayton kept as much of his attention on the kiss as he could, licking into Theo’s mouth, even as he stroked his hands down Theo’s arms and back, down over his ass, digging his fingers in. He squirmed some more, and the diamond shifted in Theo’s pants pocket. He had to be stealthy; his pickpocket skills were a little rusty.

Moving slowly, deliberately, Clayton worked himself against Theo’s body. It wasn’t easy, keeping a cool head like this, with an impossibly sexy man kissing the brainpower out of him and grinding on him where anyone might see. When Theo broke the kiss, Clayton sighed gratefully and tipped his head back. Theo began to nip again at his throat. Now that Clayton wasn’t sucking the breath out of Theo’s hot, insistent mouth, he could focus. A little squirming, a little groping, and he had the diamond between his fingers.

Theo stopped abruptly, and Clayton panicked, letting the diamond go. It slithered on its chain back down into the recesses of Theo’s pocket. *Fuck*. This *so* wasn’t his forte!

Glancing at where their voyeur had been, Theo said, “She’s gone, let’s move,” and stepped away, practically dropping Clayton from his arms. Clayton stumbled, caught himself on the wall, and glared daggers at Theo’s back. He had an embarrassingly prominent erection again, blue balls that would make even the most celibate wince, and still no diamond. All of his very real, very urgent desires lay in Theo’s hands. Quite literally.

Theo started down the hall. Clayton hurried after him. Again. He felt like a puppy, and he was no god damned puppy. This was *his* score, and he was

going to finish the job. Let Theo think he was the one in charge, and maybe he'd let his guard down again; this time, long enough for Clayton to lift the diamond off him.

He was giving his claim stub to the girl in the coat room. When Clayton sidled up beside him, he slipped his arm around Clayton's shoulders and started to press little kisses to the tip of Clayton's ear as Clayton handed over his own stub. Clayton could feel himself blushing all the way up to there, and when the girl came back with the two coats over her arm she stifled a smile, looked away, and said, "There you are, gentlemen. Have a pleasant evening."

"Oh," Theo said with a leer, "we will."

She covered her mouth with her hand, flustered. Clayton shoved Theo away from the coatroom door.

"I wish I could say my limo was waiting outside," Theo said, "but I'm afraid we'll have to get a cab."

Theo gave the driver an address without consulting Clayton, and then settled back into his seat, looking smug. Clayton refused to ask where they were going. Part one of the night's mission had been accomplished, though it had been a colossal mess, and now all that remained was to get the prize from Theo, who wasn't nearly as dangerous as a scorned debutante. In fact, Clayton reflected, his situation had improved significantly from being stuck in a closet half an hour earlier. They were practically home free.

He started to say something, but Theo cut him off with a quick shake of his head. Clayton bit his lip and read the taxi's fare policy to pass the time. The radio up front was playing a late night talk radio program and the whole cab smelled like curry. Beside him, Theo was vibrating with barely suppressed impatience, bouncing his knee rapidly and chewing on his thumbnail. Every red light seemed interminable.

Finally, Theo leaned forwards and said through the window, "Here on the corner is fine," and the cab came to a stop. Clayton watched him pass a fifty

dollar bill over the console, then he was being hurried out of the car and into the night air.

“This is your place?” Clayton asked, impressed. They were standing in front of a four-story townhouse with white steps and a huge bay window, lit from inside by a single floor lamp.

“No way,” Theo said, taking him by the hand. “My place is three blocks from here.”

Clayton let himself be pulled down the street. The diamond was barely a bulge in Theo’s front pocket. “You didn’t want him to take us right to your front door.”

“Bingo.” Theo grinned at him and squeezed his fingers. “Someone will notice our little prize has gone missing sooner or later, and at some point that driver will be tracked down and questioned.”

“Just three blocks, though?”

“It’s enough. Come on.”

The apartment Theo let them into was on the third floor of an even more impressive townhouse on the edge of the park. Clayton took a few steps into the middle of the living room and then turned in a slow circle, taking it in. There was a picture on the mantel of a young family; mom and dad and two kids, all smiling broadly on a beach.

“This isn’t your house,” Clayton said, when Theo had locked the door again. What was he getting into? *Who* was he getting into?

“I’m house sitting,” Theo said. “The Millers are in France. They go every year. They don’t notice a few extra charges on their cable bill.” He grinned, shrugging off his tux jacket and draping it carefully over the back of an armchair. “I clean up after myself, do the laundry, restock the cupboards. It’s a win-win, okay?” His waistcoat joined the jacket on the chair.

Clayton stifled a grin. “Okay,” he said, sitting down on the cream-colored sofa that dominated the small living room, “here’s what we’re going to do.”

Theo obligingly took the diamond out of his pocket and laid it on the coffee table. In the light from the foyer, it glittered primly on the dark wood. The blue was as striking now as it had been in Theo's hands an hour ago, and Clayton could have stared at it for days. That was the danger of being an aesthete living a life of crime—distraction by shiny things. The platinum chain it hung on was almost hair-thin, and Clayton marveled that it could hold the weight of the diamond. *Fantastic.*

“First,” Clayton said, picking it up to look more closely at it, “we’re going to figure out what the hell is going on. Second, we’re going to decide what to do with this damn thing, now that we have it.” He glanced up at Theo, who was watching him with dark eyes, his hands shoved back in his pockets. “Third, we’re going to have sex, because if I don’t get a repeat performance of what happened in that closet, I might actually die.”

Theo snorted and relaxed visibly, his hands coming out again to start undoing his bow tie. He left it draped around his neck and said, “Yeah, all right.”

Clayton put the diamond down and made short work of his own jacket and tie. “Okay,” he said. “Item one?”

“Camilla Hendricks,” Theo said, shaking his head. He started to undo the studs on his dress shirt. “That woman is a force of nature.”

“Commanding presence doesn’t really begin to cover it,” Clayton agreed. He pulled his shirttails out of his trousers.

“She told me I was being sourced for a bank job in Budapest.” Theo unbuckled his belt and pulled it out of his belt loops to lay it on top of his waistcoat.

“She told me I was going to be stealing blood diamonds from arms traders,” Clayton said, undoing his collar studs. “Who the hell *is* this woman?”

Theo was fuming, pacing back and forth across the floor in front of the gas fireplace. “She said this job was just to see if I could follow directions and think fast under pressure. *Me.*”

“What else have you done?” Clayton asked. It was rare that he got to compare notes with a compatriot. He sat forwards on the seat, linking his fingers together between his knees.

Theo regarded him for a moment with narrowed eyes, and then sighed and said, “What the hell,” as he sat down beside Clayton on the sofa. “I mostly do bank jobs, actually, which is why I thought it was ridiculous to have to audition for one. Camilla said it was a crazy tough one to get into, though, and the money sounded almost too good to be true.” He scrubbed a hand through his short hair. “I used to be part of a crew that was based in Boston, but we kind of... came to blows over a job that went south a few years back, and I’ve been flying solo ever since.”

Clayton had a vague recollection of a bank robbery in Cambridge that had been interrupted, resulting in one of the robbers being shot dead and the rest scattering in the wind like so many loose dollar bills. Nothing had ever come of the investigation, and although the conspiracy theorists on the forums Clayton followed had speculated for months afterwards, the general public had quickly lost interest.

Theo was staring at his hands. “Anyway,” he said. “What about you? Why’d she pick you?”

“Jewels are kind of my specialty,” Clayton said. “I work alone. I don’t usually do domestic grabs—not enough payoff for the risk. I don’t like putting people in danger.”

“Very noble,” Theo said, smirking.

“Shut up,” Clayton said, giving him a shove on the shoulder. “You never know who might be home. Now, jewelry stores, those are a different story. Once you’ve cracked one security system, you’ve cracked them all.”

Theo laughed, nodding in agreement. “So what was your best one?”

“Once, I walked out of a store in Chicago with twenty million dollars’ worth of stones in my pockets, and nobody noticed for two days, because—”

“It was a long weekend,” Theo interrupted. “Holy shit, I know who you are.”

Clayton froze. “Pardon?”

“You’re The Ghost, aren’t you?” Theo said. He put his hand on Clayton’s knee and gave him a little shake. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

Clayton couldn’t. The newspapers had started calling him that back in 2004, when the news of his first big heist had hit the headlines. That was Chicago. Five years later, a job Clayton pulled at a bank in Paris had also been attributed to The Ghost. INTERPOL had put together a few clues and patterns and rightfully given him credit for yet another job, this time at a hotel in Zurich. But his real name had never been linked, and Clayton enjoyed all the fame without any of the misfortune.

He shrugged, but his insides were all twisted up. Working alone had its downsides, and one of them was never getting to tell anyone the whole story. But Theo *knew*. “I didn’t pick the name,” he said.

Theo let out a hoot of laughter. “You’re not even kidding me right now,” he said, slapping Clayton’s thigh. Then he bit his lip and that hand began to inch higher on Clayton’s leg. Clayton let his knees fall open, encouraging Theo’s progress. Theo’s expression got serious, his smile fading into a look of determination. He shifted his seat on the sofa and leaned in, and by the time his mouth met Clayton’s, he was bearing Clayton backwards onto the sofa arm and covering him with his body.

Without the separation of their jackets, the heat from Theo’s body bled through their shirts where they were pressed chest to chest. Clayton opened his mouth to Theo’s deep, slow kiss and wrapped his arms around Theo’s torso, running his hands eagerly up and down Theo’s broad back.

“I don’t want that stupid job,” Theo said, barely breaking the kiss to speak. “Whatever it was.”

Clayton had a sudden thought that was like a cold bucket of water thrown over his desire. “You think it was a trap?” he asked.

Theo half sat up, pushing himself onto his hands above Clayton. Their hips were still locked together, and Clayton could feel the obvious press of Theo's erection against his pelvis. Theo didn't look embarrassed by it at all.

"Could there have been more of us?" Theo asked. "More people she had *audition*?"

"Fuck that job," Clayton agreed. "What are we going to do with the diamond? We kind of skipped item two on my agenda." He didn't regret it very much. He wiggled his hips and found a nice place on Theo's waist to rest his hands.

Theo grinned down at him. "You wanna split it?" he asked.

"It's a diamond, not a pile of cash," Clayton said.

"Not yet."

"We can't just sell it right away." Clayton sighed. "But you wouldn't know that, since you're a bank robber."

"Hey, fuck you," Theo said, jabbing Clayton in the side with one finger and making him yelp. "I'm an expert safe cracker, *and* I got us out of that house with my brilliant escape."

"You felt me up against a wall. *That* was your escape."

Theo's smile spread slow like honey across his face. "I'd do it again," he said, "even if it wasn't part of the plan."

Clayton's breath caught in his throat. He said, "Let's skip item two; we can come back to it in the morning."

They did manage to make it to the bedroom for item three, leaving a trail of tailored clothing behind them. Clayton was doing his best to climb Theo like a tree, and Theo was doing nothing to discourage him, even going so far as to lift him by the thighs and carry him the last few steps across the floor. Clayton locked his legs around Theo's hips, linking his heels behind Theo's thighs.

Theo's hands on his ass were huge and strong, and his abdomen against Clayton's cock and balls was rock solid.

Clayton felt him hit the edge of the bed, and then he was being dumped unceremoniously onto the duvet. He bounced, letting out his breath on a huff, and then Theo was crawling on top of him and kissing his way up the middle of Clayton's chest. Clayton slid his fingers into Theo's short hair and tipped his head back to give Theo room. Theo's mouth was hot and gentle against his skin, little nips of his teeth being soothed by the warm, wet swipe of his tongue. He found a spot on Clayton's throat that made Clayton moan aloud, and began to suck and bite harder, sending startled pleasure tingling across Clayton's skin. Clayton smoothed his hands up and down Theo's broad back, digging his fingernails in to hear Theo hiss.

Theo's cock was barely contained by his gray briefs, and if Clayton tilted his hips up he could rub their dicks together through the fabric of their underwear. Theo's already had a little damp spot on it where the head of his cock was outlined obscenely, making Clayton's mouth water so hard his jaw cramped. Theo was worrying the underside of his Adam's apple, and he tightened his hand in Theo's hair to drag him up for a kiss.

The kisses in the hallway, Clayton discovered, had been about as real as they got. Theo kissed with the same intensity as before, only now Clayton could moan into his mouth and get his lip bitten. Theo, propping himself on his right hand, ran his left up Clayton's side and chest, pinching at his nipples and rubbing appreciatively at his skin. Clayton squirmed, too hot, even down to his briefs. He pushed Theo away just long enough to squirm out of them, and then he was laid out under Theo, totally exposed, staring him in the eye, daring him to go on.

Theo rose up on his knees, towering over Clayton, and pushed his own underwear off his hips and down his legs to get kicked off the side of the bed. His dick was thick and long and jutting out from his body, and Clayton wrapped a hand around it in awe. It was a dark, dusky rose color, its plump, exposed head wet and gleaming, and when Clayton gave it a squeeze Theo moaned and spread his thighs apart. His balls were heavy, hanging down

between his legs; Clayton rolled them in the palm of his hand and Theo grunted, his cock jerking and blurting another fat drop of pre-come.

“C’mere,” Clayton said, pulling on the back of Theo’s thigh. Theo shifted up the bed until he had his knees in the crooks of Clayton’s underarms, bracing himself on the bed beyond. Clayton lifted his head, licking his lips, and slid his tongue around the tip of Theo’s dick. The thick, salty flavor filled his mouth, and he groaned despite himself, eager for more. He tipped his head back and found Theo looking down at him, mouth half-open and eyes soft with desire. Clayton winked.

“Fuck,” Theo said. “You just—Jesus, get on with it.” His voice was rough.

Clayton wriggled a little lower on the bed and angled Theo’s cock towards his face, opening his mouth again. He could get the head and half of the thick shaft into his mouth before he had to stop, the ache in his neck pinching tight. He dropped back with a moan and pushed and pulled at Theo’s hips until Theo was kneeling directly over his head, his balls brushing Clayton’s chin. The view from that angle made Clayton’s stomach tighten with desire; looking up at the underside of Theo’s dick, up the ridged plane of his abdomen to the bulging muscles of his chest, and then at the expression of sheer want on Theo’s face as he watched Clayton run his tongue up and down the length of his cock. Theo was having trouble figuring out where to put his hands, so Clayton guided one to the top of his head and the other behind Theo to Clayton’s own straining erection.

The first touch of Theo’s fingers made Clayton shiver, and then he was cramming as much of Theo’s dick into his mouth as he could as Theo petted and stroked him, rubbing his thumb over Clayton’s sensitive head. The angle was awkward—Theo’s shoulders were twisted around in order for him to reach, but he didn’t seem to be complaining. Clayton spread his legs and dug his heels into the mattress, trying to thrust into Theo’s loose grip even as he bobbed his head up and down, slicking the shaft of Theo’s cock with his spit. Theo was leaking like crazy, making the slide easier, and soon he was rocking into the wet of Clayton’s mouth, his cock head bumping against the back of Clayton’s throat.

Clayton didn't have any lube on him, so he wrenched himself off Theo's dick for a second to stick his fingers in his mouth and get them as wet as he could. Then he went back to mouthing at the underside of Theo's cock as he slid those fingers behind Theo's balls to the tight pucker of his asshole.

Theo groaned and pushed back into the touch, his grip on Clayton's hair tightening. Clayton pressed firmly against the resistance and his middle finger sank in to the second knuckle.

"Fuck, yes," Theo said above him. He let go of Clayton's cock, much to Clayton's chagrin, but then he was falling forward on his hands to give Clayton room to finger him. His dick hung fat and heavy in front of Clayton's face, the perfect height to lick and suck at the head, and he spread his thighs wide to give Clayton room for his hand.

He was tight and hot as a furnace inside, and Clayton pressed a finger deeper to find his sweet spot. Theo jerked and swore when Clayton touched it, rubbing the pad of his finger over the tender little bump, Theo's cock twitching and smearing pre-come across Clayton's lips. Clayton caught his cock again in his mouth and ran his tongue around the head as he eased a second finger into Theo's body alongside the first.

"If you keep that up," Theo warned, breathless, as Clayton worked his fingers shallowly in and out and took Theo's dick deeper, "I'm gonna blow."

"Mm," Clayton said, not stopping. He knew the feeling. All that dancing around one another, all that groping and kissing and teasing, and he was about ready to come apart himself. But if he could make Theo come, then maybe he'd be able to take a good pounding without it being over too soon. He could feel the tremors in Theo's thighs and hear the way that Theo's breathing was getting ragged. Theo's dick was dripping, stiffening in Clayton's mouth, and his body was clamping down on Clayton's fingers.

"Fuck," Theo said, more urgently, "you're gonna make me come!"

Clayton pulled away long enough to say, "Do it," and wrapped his free hand around the base of Theo's cock. He stroked it firmly, like he could squeeze the come right out into his mouth, and rubbed at Theo's prostate,

urging him on. Theo's hips started to rock, pushing down into Clayton's mouth. He was moaning through his teeth, as if he couldn't help himself.

Clayton closed his eyes and got lost in the rhythm, the urgent thrust of Theo's hips echoed in his heartbeat. He felt Theo start to shake, his cock swelling impossibly, and then Theo was groaning aloud, swearing and shuddering as he spurted, hot and thick, so much it overflowed past Clayton's lips, dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. Clayton held his breath and pressed harder on that spot inside Theo's body, eliciting another jerk and pulse of come.

Theo sagged, going down on his elbows even as he lifted his hips away from Clayton's face. Clayton kept his fingers pushed deep as Theo rolled to the side, and then he was sitting up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, and kneeling up between Theo's legs.

"Condom," he said, snapping Theo out of his post-orgasmic lethargy. "I'm gonna fuck you blind."

Theo scrambled just behind his head for the drawer beside the bed and then had a condom and a bottle of lube between his fingers. Clayton took the packet and tore it open with his teeth, groaning with relief as he rolled it down over his dick. Then Theo's hand, slick with a veritable puddle of lube, was squeezing tight around him, working his cock until it was so slippery it was dripping.

"Come on," Theo said, spreading his knees and pulling Clayton close by the backs of his knees, "come on, fuck me. I need it."

Clayton moaned, all his ignored desire welling up and pooling in his gut. He pushed Theo's knee to his chest and lined himself up with the fingers that had just been inside Theo's ass. Theo tossed his head back, exposing the long line of his throat, and Clayton pressed inwards, rigid cock spearing deep into Theo's body.

He bottomed out and paused, panting, trying to get his bearings. Theo reached up and pulled him bodily down for a kiss, rocking his hips up to take Clayton half a millimeter deeper, enough to make Clayton cry out. Theo ate at

his mouth, scrunching his hands in Clayton's hair, and then jerked his hips and said, "*Fuck me,*" with such imperative force that Clayton couldn't do anything but obey. He began to move, bracing himself on either side of Theo's ribs, and shuddered at the pleasure that roared through him.

Theo's body welcomed him, squeezing tight and eager for his dick. Theo grunted as Clayton fucked him, breath punched out of him on every thrust, and against his belly his cock hadn't ever gone fully soft. He was fattening up again already; Clayton's dick must have been rubbing him just right inside, because he slipped a hand between them and swore under his breath.

"Wow, okay," Theo said, looking up into Clayton's face. His eyes were still dark with want and his face was flushed.

"Can you come again?" Clayton panted.

"It's been known to happen."

"Jesus," Clayton said, his breath sticking in his throat, "what do I need to do?" He *had* to see that.

"Slow down a bit," Theo said, and Clayton did, slowing the push and pull of his hips to an almost gut-wrenching crawl. Theo squirmed, jerking himself gently, and Clayton took the opportunity to lean down to kiss him again. He imagined he could taste gin on Theo's tongue, even though it had been hours since they were on the balcony at the party when he'd first tasted it on Theo's lips. Theo moaned deeply, his hand working his dick a little faster.

The lube was laying open at Theo's elbow, and Clayton broke the kiss to fill his palm with it. He sat back and replaced Theo's hand with his own and began to stroke him in time with the slow, upward thrust of his hips. Theo moaned and stretched his arms over his head, grabbing for a hold on the side of the bed. The muscles in his arms bulged and Clayton reached out to squeeze one. Theo grinned at him, looking genuinely delighted at their current situation.

"Little faster," he murmured, arching his back and pushing his hips against Clayton's pelvis. Clayton picked up the pace, his thighs burning, holding onto

Theo's triceps and his dick. Theo was breathing heavily, squirming on Clayton's cock, and he closed his eyes, his face creased with pleasure.

"What if you turn over?" Clayton asked, coming to a reluctant halt and pulling halfway out.

"Yes," Theo said, scrambling to do that. Clayton sat back on his heels, his cock throbbing between his thighs. Theo got up on his hands and knees and pushed his ass back at Clayton. His hole was wet and pink, well stretched, and Clayton had the urge to lick it.

So he did, just for a moment, working his tongue in where his cock had been. Theo muffled his shout into the duvet and Clayton released him with a laugh. Then he was sliding easily back into Theo's ass and Theo was pushing back against him.

"Fuck, yeah, this'll do it," Theo said, even before Clayton had started to thrust. On the first push of Clayton's hips he moaned loudly and groped beneath himself for his cock. Clayton pushed his hand out of the way again and took over, fucking Theo into the grip of his hand. Theo went crazy, squirming and groaning and writhing so hard he interrupted Clayton's rhythm, so Clayton smacked him on the ass, nice and hard.

Theo made a noise like he was biting the duvet. Clayton smacked him again.

"You better be close," Theo said, turning his cheek to the blankets and glaring over his shoulder at Clayton. Clayton nodded, not trusting his voice. "Tell me your name," Theo panted.

"Huh?"

"I can't keep calling you Jeff in my head, it's fucking ridiculous."

Clayton paused, grinding deep, and pondered the request for half a second before he said, "It's Clayton."

"Clayton," Theo said, half-laughing, half on a moan. "Jesus, fuck me."

Clayton wanted to ask the same thing, but he was getting too wound up. He tightened his grip on Theo's dick and started moving again, hard and fast.

“Clayton,” Theo said again, and it snagged something deep in Clayton’s gut, shoving him towards his orgasm. “Come on, Clayton, give it to me.”

“Fuck,” Clayton said, the heat in his body turning liquid, the pleasure rising. “Oh, fuck!”

Theo said, “Oh, god, I’m coming,” and did, with a powerful shudder that made Clayton gasp.

He held on for the ride as Theo’s hips jerked, fucking Clayton’s fist, and was drawn inexorably over the edge with him. It was as if Clayton’s whole body had been lit up from the inside, a hot, pulsing glow that went on and on until he was panting helplessly against the back of Theo’s neck, utterly drained.

Theo lifted his head and Clayton pulled away, drawing his hands down the sweat-damp length of Theo’s back. Theo smiled at him over his shoulder, his eyes a little hazy, his lips bitten red. Clayton swallowed hard and fumbled to grip the base of the condom.

When it had been wrapped up in a tissue and discarded, and Theo had half-heartedly mopped at the wet spot on the duvet, Clayton lay back and covered his face with his hands. He’d never been so careless, telling someone his real name in the middle of sex. Even if it was really *good* sex. Fucking seriously.

Beside him, Theo said, “Theo is my real name.”

Clayton took his hands away. “Seriously?”

“Edgeworth’s not real,” Theo said, “I made that up.” He was lying on his back beside Clayton, staring at the ceiling. When he sensed that Clayton was looking at him, he turned his head. “Quid pro quo. You should stay here tonight.”

Caught off guard once again, Clayton just blinked at him. Theo grinned.

“Come on, you know you want to.”

“For safety’s sake, we should really split up,” Clayton said.

“You are so full of shit.” Theo rolled over and slung his arm across Clayton’s hips. “You’re not going anywhere, and you’re not taking the diamond with you, jewel thief.” He snuggled down against Clayton’s side, his chin on Clayton’s shoulder.

“We’re going to have a long talk in the morning,” Clayton said.

Theo’s grin went crooked, genuine. “Fine,” he said. “I look forward to it.”

Clayton woke up to the sunlight coming through the window, its soft, honey-gold light spilling across the hardwood floors and pooling on the navy duvet. Clayton could see the tops of the trees beyond the sheer curtains, swaying gently in the morning breeze. The sky above was a pristine, empty blue. Beneath him, the bed was soft and warm, cradling him in pillows. It was also empty of any other occupants.

“Fuck!” he yelled, leaping out of bed and running for the living room. His diamond had been right there on the coffee table, and Theo had *tricked* him—Theo must have drugged him, to have gotten away without waking him up—Theo—

—was in the kitchen in a clean pair of briefs, standing over a frying pan with a mug halfway to his mouth, staring at Clayton.

“You okay, there, cowboy?”

“Jesus,” Clayton said, pressing a hand to his jackhammering heart.

Theo took a sip from the mug and grinned. “You thought I’d *left*,” he teased. “Come on man, after all that? You think I’m the type to love ’em and leave ’em?” He looked even better in the morning light, his bronzed skin warmed by the sun and his sleep-tousled hair just spiky enough to be charming rather than ridiculous. The muscles in his arms and body reminded Clayton of just how eager Theo was to be pinned down and fucked.

“I don’t know what type you are,” Clayton said, very aware of how naked he was. The diamond was sitting on the countertop. “What’s that doing there?”

“Sparkling,” Theo said. “Looks nice, huh? Oh, do you eat meat? I didn’t ask.” At Clayton’s baffled expression, he said, “Bacon,” and pointed to the frying pan.

Clayton was out of his depth with this guy. “Uh, yeah, I eat meat.” *Fuck it.* “Is there more coffee?”

Theo beamed from ear to ear and pulled a mug down from the cabinet. He poured a cup, sneaking glances at Clayton out of the corner of his eye, and handed it over. The rich, warm aroma filled Clayton’s nose and he took a slow, grateful sip. He felt Theo take a step closer to him and he opened one eye to glare at him over the top of the cup.

“Normally I’d suggest clothing before breakfast,” Theo said, reaching out to skim his hand down Clayton’s side, fingers just brushing the curve of his ass, “but I’m pretty into this look for you.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Clayton said, taking another sip. He didn’t step away, though, and he turned into Theo’s next caress that skated up the length of his spine, facing the window with Theo behind him. Theo inched closer until he was pressing his body against Clayton’s, his arms wrapped around Clayton’s middle. The street below had a few morning joggers, a dog walker, and some light car traffic zipping past. Clayton knew that they *probably* couldn’t see him, but the thrill that went through him at the thought made him shiver all the same.

Theo brushed a kiss to the curve of Clayton’s neck and nosed at the tender skin behind his ear. “So, how long do we have to wait to make good on this diamond we’ve got?”

“Nine months to a year,” Clayton said. “It’s a one-of-a-kind piece, Sylvia Docker’s not going to let it go without a fight, an investigation, a big to-do. Even if she does hate the public eye.”

“We can’t even sell it to a fence for a year?” Theo huffed his disappointment into Clayton’s hair. He was tall enough that his mouth was against the back of Clayton’s skull and he could see over the top of Clayton’s

head. “Get a cash advance, let someone else sit on it for a while and take off with the spoils?”

“This is why I don’t have a partner,” Clayton said.

Theo gave him a squeeze. “Come on, you’d love a partner. Having someone to rely on during a job, count on to have your back—it changes things.”

Clayton shrugged his way out of the embrace. “I’m going to put something on,” he said. He left Theo standing in the kitchen and headed for the bedroom, where last night’s clothes waited rumpled on the floor.

“Shit,” Clayton muttered to himself, bundling his clothes up in his arms. They would need to be cleaned and pressed, and morning-after dishabille wasn’t a look he really wanted to present, but it was all he had. He pulled on his briefs, trousers, and undershirt, and let his shirt hang open in the front.

The bacon was done by the time he got back to the kitchen, and Theo was cooking eggs in the grease. There was toast sticking out of the toaster and plates laid out on the table. Clayton’s chest felt too tight. His own New York apartment was nothing to scoff at—a penthouse on the Upper West Side, thank you very much—but it had none of this: the gorgeous man in the kitchen, the dishes in the sink, the bedsheets rumpled by two bodies. Clayton never stayed there more than a few weeks, always eager to move on to somewhere exotic, expensive, enviable. He had a one-bedroom in Paris he liked, and a villa in Cairo that had a frankly outrageous view of the Nile, and a few other places scattered around the globe. But, like the penthouse, they weren’t quite right.

Shit, Clayton thought.

Theo was humming to himself as he scrambled the eggs in the pan, and Clayton put his head in his hands to wait it out. Better not to look. Having a partner was beyond him, it just wasn’t the way he operated.

“Well,” Theo said, a few minutes later, bringing the pan over to the table and filling a plate. “If we can’t give it back, and we can’t get rid of it, we’re going to have to hang onto it.” He went back for Clayton’s abandoned coffee cup and the diamond.

“I can talk to a few people soon,” Clayton said, “maybe get the ball rolling, but if it’s in the news, we’re fucked for at least three months. No one’s going to want to touch it.”

Theo sat down across from him, put the diamond in the middle, and pushed the plate of eggs in his direction. “Eat,” he said.

Clayton took a helping, and then accepted the pieces of toast and strips of bacon as well. It smelled amazing—hot and fresh and wholesome. Clayton took one bite and then he was trying to shovel it into his mouth as quickly as possible. The eggs were warm and salty, the bacon was crispy and just a little greasy, and the toast was perfectly golden. The coffee was hot, enough to make him blow on the surface before his first sip, but it filled his mouth with a rich, slightly bittersweet taste that made him close his eyes in appreciation.

Clayton decided then and there that he ate at restaurants too often. No brunch could ever compare to this moment. He was going to have to learn how to cook.

Or, something inside him said, he was going to have to have Theo to cook for him every morning. Clayton glanced across the table to find Theo watching him eat, a smile on his face. When Theo saw him looking, he blushed and grinned.

“Look,” Clayton said, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “I’ve never had a partner before. I don’t know what I’d do with one. I’ve always worked alone.”

Theo jabbed a finger in his direction. “There is no way you managed Monaco alone.” Clayton shrugged. “Seriously?”

“I plan ahead.”

“Jesus. Not even a driver, or anything?”

“I don’t take more than I can carry,” Clayton said. “It keeps things simple.”

Theo made a face, but then he said, “Things aren’t so simple now.”

“No,” Clayton agreed. “I might have to change my ways for a little while to account for this mess.” He looked around the apartment, and then at the diamond sitting on the table, bouncing little light beams all over the room. A

few of them scattered across Theo's bare chest. Clayton cleared his throat. "You know what city's really gorgeous this time of year?" he asked.

Theo looked at him with barely concealed hope in his eyes. "Tell me," he said.

"Cairo," Clayton said, reaching across the table to brush his fingers over the back of Theo's hand. "You should come with me to Cairo. They have a real appreciation for diamonds there. I think you'd like it."

THE END

Author Bio

Elinor is a writer from Baltimore, Maryland. She came to romance writing through fandom, and will always be glad for the training she received there, as well as the more formal education that was the result of a Creative Writing minor. Elinor writes primarily short, contemporary gay romance, but is working on expanding her repertoire to longer stories and more exciting genres. She moonlights as a professional knitter and office administrator to support her writing habit.

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