



TOP FLOOR

K.C. FAELAN

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At the age of sixteen, Sean O'Reilly started over in America after the influenza epidemic of 1919 killed his entire family back in Ireland. It has taken three years, but he's built a new life for himself in Manhattan, rising from Bell Hop to Room Service Boy at the Astraea, a hotel for the wealthy. He loves his job, and life is good, until the fateful day his manager discovers a secret—a secret that could ruin Sean and everything he's worked for.

Among the richest men in New York City, one Harrison Devaux, a cranky recluse, keeps secrets of his own in the penthouse of the Astraea. No one knows why he never leaves his suite, but rumors circulate about his constant state of drunkenness and his willy-nilly firing of employees.

Sean is assigned to attend Mr. Devaux, and events don't go well when the two men first meet. But Sean soon finds out that Mr. Devaux isn't exactly as the rumors portrayed. Maybe a Room Service Boy and a billionaire businessman have more in common than one might expect.

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

TOP FLOOR

By K.C. Faelan

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 these authors 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 is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two pieces of art, the first is of a smiling, redheaded Room Service Boy wearing a bright-red uniform and cap. He is reading a card and has pulled his penis out of his trousers laying it on a plate on his service cart. The second picture is of a handsome, and shirtless, dark-haired man looking off in the distance. Roses frame the man's image.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is Shane, I was born in Ireland. When I just turned sixteen, back in 1919, influenza killed my whole family. Our village Priest was a great help at the time and he assured me that his cousin, who lives in New-York, would take care of me and he did just that. He was able to find me a good job in a grand Hotel. I began as a Bellboy helping with the luggage and the deliveries. Now that I'm eighteen, I'm a Room-Service boy, and I love my red and shiny uniform so much!

I found out some men want a little 'more', and at first, I always said no, but now... now I've done it a few times. I don't take money. I'm not a whore. But there are men I feel like I want to please. I would die to please Mr. Beaumont! I didn't know that a man could be so 'beautiful'! I dream about him every night... He usually asks for Room-Service three times a day, drinks a lot, doesn't eat much and is always alone. He has never asked for 'more'; does he even see me...?!

This morning I was summoned to see the Assistant-Manager... he knows!!! Either I steal from certain clients or he tells my 'dirty little secret'. "Jesus, Marie and Joseph! What am I gonna do?"

Help me please!

(No paranormal, no fantasy, sci-fi – BDSM is okay only if it's light. You can change the names if you want. Many thanks).

Thank you,

Misty

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: Roaring Twenties, first time, age gap, slow burn/UST, hurt/comfort, grief, social class differences, public activity, frottage, rimming

Content Warnings: minor character suicide before story takes place

Word Count: 78,856

Acknowledgements

I first want to thank Misty for the attention-getting prompt; it captured my imagination immediately.

Originally I figured *Top Floor* would take about thirty-five thousand words to tell its story, but no, Harrison and Sean had other ideas. They dragged a good seventy-six thousand plus words out of me, making their story, the first novel I've ever written. Misty, I hope you end up loving Harrison and Sean as much as I do.

Next, I want to give a tremendous thank you to the wonderful people who helped whip *Top Floor* into shape. First and foremost, Alexis Woods, beta and brainstormer extraordinaire. Alexis scoured over my writing and bounced ideas around with me when I moaned that the guys had stopped talking. With her help I was able to get through the rough patches and create what I hope, is an entertaining read. Thank you, Alexis. I don't know what I would've done without you! Next, thank you to Debbie McGowan, for your great beta and editing skills, and for helping me keep Sean, Irish. To the awesomeness that is Jonathan Penn—but he already knows that—who helped tighten and clarify the story and writes the best notes ever. I learned a lot from his reasoning and explanations. Now if I could just remember it all. I'd also like to thank Shayla Mist, Susanna, and Gillian St. Kevern for giving some of their time to look over parts of the story, and Layla for helping with the French translations.

Last, but not least, I want to thank the MM Romance group, the DRitC mods, editors, proofreaders, formatters, and all those people who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make this huge, amazing event happen. Thank you!

Author's Notes on Historical Accuracy

Historically accurate to an extent, *Top Floor* also hints of the future. The story is set in the year 1922, a situation which created some factual dilemmas. Many of the period dances we're familiar with today, such as the Charleston, hadn't been introduced but were evolving. An early version of the Charleston was first seen by New Yorkers in the Ziegfeld Follies of 1922. But it wasn't until the fall of 1923 that it took the city by storm, when the dance as we know it appeared in the Broadway musical, "Runnin' Wild." In 1922, the Foxtrot was still all the rage. Likewise, jazz hadn't reached its heyday, but was slowly gaining popularity. The jazz we're familiar with came about in the mid- to late-twenties. In *Top Floor*, the music played at the Dionysus Club constitutes a blending of fact and fiction. The Foxtrot is true to its time, but the sultry jazz is from an era yet to come.

The history of fashion apparel also presented challenges. For instance, the Jimshirt—better known to us today as a "tank top"—didn't become a fad until much later and in 1922 was worn only when exercising. Also, while boxer shorts were available, they were a new item and had yet to gain traction as a standard undergarment. Harrison Devaux is intelligent, and he thinks outside the box. He's something of a Renaissance man. His willingness to experiment with new things, and his innovative approach to haberdashery—wearing clothes in a manner not accepted by his peers—demonstrate one of the more alluring facets of his complex personality. It is this nonconformist attitude that he passes on to Sean O'Reilly.

Additional Notes

Various pieces of music are listed throughout this book that indicate Harrison Devaux's mood or are part of a situation's atmosphere. The list of those specific pieces can be found at the end of the story.

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Chapter One

Sean

His hand shaking on the handle, Sean pulled the manager's office door closed behind him. He carded his fingers through his hair. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, what am I going to do?* How had he been caught? He didn't do it as often as the few employees who did; less than a half-dozen times in fact, and he never took any of the money offered; he wasn't a prostitute. He'd hesitated the first time he'd been approached, but he'd come to enjoy the give and take of releasing pressure with the men he'd pleased. *Now look where it's got me!*

He hurried to the converted supply room near the servants' entrance that served as the men's changing station and pushed aside the coarse, wool curtain covering the doorway. Men in various stages of undress stood or sat on the few chairs provided. He wove his way through his coworkers to the narrow wooden cabinet that housed his bright-red room service uniform, the matching cap sitting on a shelf above it. Without a word, Sean stripped, yanking at his clothes and tossing them in the cubicle where they hit the back wall and slid to the floor. He loved his uniform and took great pride in wearing it. It had taken him two years of hard work to earn the rank of "Room Service Boy" and the privilege of wearing this uniform. He loved his status and enjoyed interacting with the residents who lived at the hotel on an extended basis. Sean sighed. Not even his jaunty red cap could cheer him up just now.

"You're late, better hurry," said Patrick, standing next to Sean, "or you'll end up working extra hours." The tall, slim Irishman shrugged into his jacket, his nimble fingers running down the underside of the broad chest placket, fastening the buttons and hooks in place. He reached for his cap and halted. "What's wrong? You haven't said a word since you got here."

Sean ran his hand over his face. "I'm in trouble."

Patrick glanced at Sean and finished adjusting his cap over his auburn hair. "What's Trant upset about now?"

Should he wait to tell Patrick until they had their lunch break? No, it weighed too heavy on him; he needed to talk to someone. Sean shot a look at the covered doorway and lowered his voice. "He found out I was 'providing extra services' to some of the guests. And he..." No, he couldn't tell Patrick about the order to steal; it wasn't his problem, and he wouldn't be able to do anything anyway.

Patrick frowned, his gray eyes worried. “Damn. I was hoping he wouldn’t catch on to anyone else.” He placed his hand on Sean’s shoulder and gave him his full attention. “I wish I knew how to stop Trant, he’s nuthin’ but trouble. But the only thing I can do is offer my help if you ever need it. I’m sure he’ll give you extra shifts since you were caught. If you need a break, I’ll be glad to take them on for you.” Patrick eyed him with concern.

Sean gave a crooked smile. “Thanks, but it’s not your problem.” He stepped into his red trousers. “Does he know about you?”

“No, not yet.” Patrick shook his head. “I think he knows about Clara and Benji. Clara jumps at any little sound, and Benji’s looking over his shoulder all the time like he’s being watched,” Patrick asserted. “There’s something else going on with them besides just Trant knowing, but I haven’t figured it out yet. They aren’t talking.”

Sean sent a glance Patrick’s way. His friend clearly had his suspicions. From what Patrick said, it sounded like Trant was also ordering Clara and Benji to steal. Should he warn Patrick so he’d stop whatever he might be doing with the clientele? No, that wouldn’t work. Patrick wasn’t the type to back down because he might get caught. Besides, Patrick was the cleverest of them in figuring out how to sidestep trouble. Best not to worry him; it wouldn’t solve anything. “We’re always watched. It’s nothing new.”

“No, I mean...”

The door’s rough fabric swept aside, and into the room marched a short, rotund man. His bald head emphasized the wrinkles creasing his forehead and the frown between his eyes. “Listen up.” He stood, hands on hips, his short legs spread wide. He waited until all attention was on him. “There’s a change in who will be serving which floor. Mr. Whitman you’re to work the first and second floors.” There was an audible sigh from the corner where Henry was standing.

Richard Trant scowled. “If you’re unhappy with the arrangement, I can always find a replacement.”

“No sir,” Henry said. “First and second floors.”

“Everyone else will move up two floors.”

There was a shuffling of feet.

Trant sent a glare around the room until everyone stopped moving.

“Wonder who’s the unlucky one pulled from the rotation to serve Devaux this time,” Patrick whispered out of the side of his mouth.

Trant snapped a sharp scowl in Patrick’s direction. “Would you care to add something, Mr. O’Shea?”

“No, sir.”

“Then you will keep quiet.” Trant turned, focusing his cold, ice-blue eyes on Sean. “Mr. O’Reilly, you will work the top two floors and continue to assist with porter duties when needed.”

Sean’s eyes widened. “Me, sir?” His voice cracked in surprise. “The penthouse?”

“Yes, you.” Trant folded his arms over his dark-brown jacket and vest, their buttons stretched tight, straining to remain closed over his fleshy chest. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“Your duty is to Mr. Devaux. His needs take precedence over any other resident in this hotel. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When you aren’t attending to Mr. Devaux, your duties will remain the same. Your room service will focus on Mr. Devaux, and the guests on the seventeenth floor.”

“Yes, sir.”

Trant looked at his watch. “Now hurry up. You’re all late and will work an extra hour to make up for it.” He marched out of the room.

They stared in silence as Trant left.

“Sweet Mary! I can’t believe he’s letting you serve Devaux,” Patrick said, his voice a loud whisper.

“He doesn’t have much choice does he? You and I are the only two left who haven’t served Devaux yet.”

Sean felt a light tap on his arm and turned around.

“Congratulations, Sean,” said a short, dark-haired young man, his smile sad.

“Thanks, Henry.” Sean was torn. He liked the promotion well enough, but Henry couldn’t afford this demotion. Even though he was only twenty-one, he had a wife and child to provide for, and going back to the first floor would cut

fiercely into his tips. Sean hoped Henry had hidden away some of what he'd earned working for Devaux.

Patrick took a seat in one of the chairs and slid into his shoes. "Devaux doesn't seem to like anyone."

"He got along with old Mr. Todd," Henry said. "He served Mr. Devaux when Mr. Devaux moved to the top floor."

"Yeah, well it's too bad he croaked then." Patrick finished tying his laces and stood, walking over to the room's one mirror and checking his appearance.

Sean scowled. "You should be more respectful towards the dead."

"You know who I miss?" Henry continued.

"Who?" Sean asked, flipping closed the front flap of his uniform jacket. After eight months, he could put on his uniform in the dark. His swift fingers fastened the flap closed. He tugged the jacket's hem and smoothed his palms down the front. He still got a thrill every time he donned his uniform. The final touch was his pillbox cap, set perfectly on his head. Sean walked over to the mirror and elbowed Patrick to get him to move.

Henry followed and leaned around Sean to peek in the mirror, adjusting his red cap and brushing back the lock of dark hair falling into his eyes. "Mr. Ormsby. He was always nice and gave us part of the tips he earned from the guests."

"Quiet! You don't want Trant to hear," Patrick hissed, sending a quick glance at the door. "He'll take all our tips, and we'll end up with nuthin'."

Henry sighed. "Too bad Trant got Mr. Ormsby's job. I miss him. I wonder what ever happened to him?"

"Yeah, me too." Patrick leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "I heard he's livin' in the same place and workin' three jobs. I'd like to visit him, but I never have the time." He pushed off from the wall. "I never believed the rumors. Ormsby wouldn't steal."

"I don't believe it either," Sean said automatically. His mind was focused on Mr. Devaux. *How on earth will I deal with him?* Everyone said he was a hard man to please. "Henry?"

"Yes?"

"I need to know about Mr. Devaux. Anything you can tell me would help. Does he want his food left outside the door or brought in?"

“Since he lives on the top floor, no one goes up there except him. He leaves his door unlocked if he’s in, but locks it at night or if he goes out. He wants you to knock to let him know room service has arrived. Then just go straight in. You don’t have to wait for an answer. Sometimes he’s there, sometimes he’s around... somewhere. Set up the food on the small table by the window. Then leave.” Henry shrugged. “He isn’t bad, doesn’t say much. Just stay out of his way when he’s drunk. Which is all the time.”

“What does he do up there?”

“I don’t know. He stares out the window. Sometimes he’s on the phone, but he hangs up when I come in. He doesn’t like using the dumbwaiter except to have his glasses cleaned, and all his food goes half-eaten. And he’s *always* playing melancholy music on the piano or that music box thing of his.”

“Is he sick?” Sean asked, frowning.

“He doesn’t look sick, at least physically. Maybe in his mind?”

Sean mulled over the information. “Do you know why he let you go?”

Henry shook his head. “No. But it’s happened to everyone since Mr. Todd died. One day you’re serving Mr. Devaux, and the next you’re not.”

Sean shared a look with Patrick over Henry’s head. “Don’t worry. We’ll look after you, Henry. Won’t we, Patrick?”

“That’s right. Don’t worry. We’ll share our tips.” Patrick patted Henry on the back.

“Thanks, but I’ll have to find another job anyhow. Working the bottom floors won’t bring in enough money.” Shoulders slumped, Henry shuffled off to the kitchen to start his rounds.

Sean watched Henry leave. If only Mr. Ormsby was still in charge. He’d treated the employees fairly—everyone was like a big family. Working here in Manhattan at the Astraea was fine then, even if the hours got long on weekends. Now they worked for Trant, and he demanded everyone work overtime without pay whenever he felt like it. Customers thought the Room Service Boys kept all their tips, but they didn’t. They handed most of what they got over to Trant. Sean snorted. *We’re bribing Trant to keep our jobs.* All the employees now secreted a portion of their tips away for themselves, hoping that Trant wouldn’t notice. To make matters worse for Sean, now that Trant had found out about his favors with the guests, he was forcing him to steal from the residents and visitors if he wanted to keep his job. Sean was appalled. He liked the guests,

and they liked him. This wasn't the job he'd agreed to when he started working here—before Trant took Mr. Ormsby's job.

“Better get going,” Patrick said. “Don't want to give Trant any more reasons to kick us out on the street.”

Sean followed Patrick towards the kitchens, pulling his white gloves from his jacket pocket and slipping them on.

Chapter Two

Sean

Standing beside his service cart inside the ornate penthouse elevator, Sean eyed his appearance in the polished brass doors. He couldn't see himself clearly, just a vague form, and he wondered if he looked as nervous as he felt. He ran his gloved hands down the front of his jacket to smooth the nonexistent wrinkles. The *whoosh* of the rising elevator and the chime of the bell as it counted off each floor accompanied the rapid pounding of his heartbeat in his ears. The eighth floor was the highest he'd ever been assigned—he didn't have the seniority to work the higher floors yet. *Dear God, I hope I don't mess this up.* He glanced at his image again and pulled at his hem. Even in the muted reflection, he could see the flaming red of his hair. The brass needle inched its way over the numbers in a half-moon arc above the door, until it stopped at number eighteen. The bell chimed, and the doors slid smoothly open. Sean removed the key that allowed admittance to the eighteenth floor and pushed the cart out into the carpeted hall, halting at the sight that met his eyes.

Tall vertical windows, framed by rich cream-colored velvet curtains, graced the opposite side of the hall in front of the elevators. He'd thought the view from the eighth floor was impressive; the view from the eighteenth left him speechless. His appointment with Harrison Devaux forgotten, Sean pressed his forehead against the cool window, peering over the courtyard and out towards the automobiles and people crowding the sidewalk and streets. This must be what heaven was like for angels, far above earthly cares, floating on a cloud. He could stay here and gaze out on the city forever. The dark flash of bird wings flying past snapped Sean out of his daydream. He shouldn't dawdle; it wouldn't do him any good to be dismissed on his first day.

Sean turned right and at the end of the hall, made another right turn. Farther down the corridor, he spotted large carved double doors to his left. He pushed the cart in that direction and stopped in front of room eighteen-hundred. The bright brass numbers stared silently down at him from above the doorframe. He cleared his throat, tugged at the front of his jacket one more time, took hold of the lion's head-shaped brass door knocker, and rapped on the door.

"Room Service, Mr. Devaux. I've brought your breakfast." Sean counted to ten, and when he received no response, reached for the heavy solid brass door handle and pushed.

The door swung inward on quiet hinges, and Sean rolled the cart into the wood-floored entryway. He was immediately assailed by the most mournful piano music he'd ever heard. The sound had a scratchy quality to it, and Sean guessed it was a recording. He pushed the cart farther into the room, catching the scent of alcohol. He couldn't see a table near the windows immediately in front of him, so he continued forward. Gradually, a spacious living room came into view around the left corner, and a grand piano caught Sean's eye. It stood as a gorgeous focal piece along one windowed wall, a beautiful Persian rug spread out beneath it. To Sean's right ran a long hall he assumed led to an office, bathrooms, and bedrooms, but he didn't see Mr. Devaux anywhere.

He decided he should call out one more time, "Mr. Devaux, it's room service. I've brought—" Sean turned the corner and froze. Shards of glass from a broken tumbler lay scattered on the tiled floor. The smell of whiskey permeated the spacious living room from an open decanter that had spilled onto another intricately woven black, brown, and cream-colored carpet. A worn letter and a pocket watch were laying close to the sopping puddle of liquid. Sean walked over, avoiding the broken glass, and stooped to pick them up. He glanced down at the elegant writing, knowing he shouldn't read it.

My Dearest Harry,

By the time you get this letter, I'm sure you'll have already heard of my death. I don't know what I can say that will alleviate your pain when you hear the news, but I'll try. I am deeply sorry for what I will put you through, but it's for the best. I can hear you cursing my practicality. I know you'll have many questions why I did what I did, and the reasons are explained in the second letter, which I've placed in my wall safe with some items I've left you. But know this: In no way is it because of anything you did, or didn't do. This, was my choice.

I never thought I could find someone to love as deeply as I have loved you. Over the five years we've been together, I have never experienced such joy and pure happiness. My life took on meaning when I met you, and I was only truly alive when we were together. You are my heart and soul. My love for you won't end at death, my dearest Harry, no matter where I end up.

Now, promise me not to slide into one of your dark, sulking moods after I'm gone. Find some nice, strong, young chap who

will make you as happy as you made me. I want you to fall in love again. Find someone who won't take no for an answer when it comes to looking after you because you know how you get when you're distracted by business. Will you do this for me?

I don't have much left to my name except for my watch, a bit of cash, and of course my love, but they are all yours.

I love you, you cranky bastard.

Forever yours,

Andy

A hand grabbed Sean's bicep in a viselike grip. He gasped, his heart thundering in his chest. A sharp jerk yanked him around eye to eye with the scowling, red face of Harrison Devaux, who swayed unsteadily and clutched an empty crystal tumbler in his free hand.

Bloodshot, blue eyes glared at him from beneath a furrowed brow, and muscles clenched tight in Devaux's chiseled jaw. "Find something interesting?" he snarled.

Sean wrinkled his nose at the odor of alcohol reeking on Devaux's breath. "I-I'm sorry, sir," he said hesitantly. "I was going to clean up." Devaux's fingers dug into Sean's arm, and he winced at the ache. A yank brought Sean chest to chest with the man. Devaux's other arm wrapped around Sean, trapping him against a firm body. Sean gasped in surprise, his mouth dropping open.

"Maybe you can help me forget him." Devaux crushed his mouth over Sean's.

Shocked, Sean's eyes grew wide. He couldn't move. The sharp taste of liquor drowned him as Devaux shoved his tongue forcefully into Sean's mouth. Strong as Sean was, he'd been caught by surprise. Even drunk, and his other hand occupied, a determined Devaux was stronger. Sean leaned back and broke contact, jerking his head to the side just in time to avoid a second lunge for his lips. Devaux's mouth missed and slipped past Sean's cheek, landing next to his ear.

"What's the matter?" he slurred. "I've heard rumors about room service in this hotel." He pushed Sean to arm's length, his gaze sliding over him. "How good are your services? I want to make sure I tip appropriately." His lip curled in derision.

Sean cringed, his skin prickling with the heat racing up his neck and into his face from Devaux's leer and harsh words. How much did he know? Or was he merely guessing?

Releasing Sean, Devaux lifted the empty tumbler to his lips. He tilted his head back and swayed, almost toppling over backwards. Sean grabbed for him, guiding him around the broken glass to the sofa.

"Sir, please sit down before you fall or cut your foot."

"I don't need you to help me, or tell me what to do." Devaux waved his arm and lost his balance, flopping sideways onto the sofa. "Get me some more Scotch." He held out his tumbler towards Sean.

"I think you've had enough, sir." Sean lifted Devaux's limp legs and rotated his body onto the long, velvet sofa. He spotted blood on the bottom of Devaux's right foot. "Let me clean this for you."

"Leave it," Devaux ordered. "I want to feel the pain. It lets me know I'm alive."

"I can't do that, sir." Hoping the layout of the penthouse was similar to some of the other hotel rooms, he searched for a bathroom and located one not far down the hall. Not finding any medical supplies, he gathered bath towels and washcloths. Returning to the living room, he watched Devaux attempt to sit up. Sean left the towels on the large black leather ottoman and pressed a hand to Devaux's broad chest. "Lie back down, sir, please." He settled without a struggle, and Sean placed a towel under the injured foot. Sean walked to the cart and removed the red ribbons tied around the vase holding the rose. Next he went to the liquor cabinet and pulled out a glass. Which liquor should he use? He shrugged—he guessed it really didn't matter—and grabbed one of the decanters, pouring some alcohol into the tumbler.

Having assembled his supplies and returned to the sofa, Sean placed the bath towel on his lap and rested Devaux's foot on top. He wet part of a washcloth in the liquor and proceeded to clean the blood and glass from the man's sole.

Devaux hissed and tried to jerk his foot away. "What are you doing? That's good liquor. Don't waste it."

Sean held tight to Devaux's ankle, ignoring his comment. He continued to clean the foot while the man flinched and grumbled about the waste. Once finished, Sean folded a clean washcloth over the cuts and secured it in place

with the ribbons. He lifted Devaux's foot from his lap and stood up, setting it gently back down on the sofa. He moved to sit on the ottoman. "You need to see a doctor, sir. I can't clean out all the pieces."

Devaux acted as if he hadn't heard him. "What's your name?"

"Sean O'Reilly, sir."

"Have you ever been in love, Mr. O'Reilly?"

Sean opened his mouth to answer but Devaux cut him off. "No, probably not. You're only what?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Eighteen," Devaux murmured to himself, lifting the empty glass to peer inside. "Too young to be in love. But I know about love." He stabbed his forefinger at his own chest. "He was the love of my life, but he's gone." Devaux covered his eyes with his hand.

Even if he hadn't fallen in love yet, Sean knew about grief. He'd seen it—lived it—back in Eire. Too many families had lost loved ones to the influenza that had swept the country a few years ago. For a while he'd been one of those walking dead, and he hid from the world in his family's home, surrounded only by memories and the echoes of voices. If it wasn't for the church and the kindness of those who survived, he might've ended up as bereft as Harrison Devaux. Sean sat quietly, lending his silent comfort.

"We were inseparable," Devaux said, hand still shielding his eyes. "But the stupid ass wouldn't let me help him. He thought he did the best thing. He was always like that. Practical." He spat out the last word then sunk to a whisper, "Tell me how that was the best thing? Leaving me alone with nothing to live for?" He removed his hand and stared at Sean, his blue eyes glistening with unshed tears, pleading for any answer that would make sense of what had happened. "Can you tell me?"

Sean's chest constricted at the pain in Devaux's question. The urge to comfort him was overwhelming, but instead, Sean tucked his hands beneath his thighs and sat on them.

"I can't forget, and I can't let go." A choked sob broke from Devaux. "When I sleep, I see him watching me. But then... I wake, and he's not there." His chest rose on a ragged inhale. "Sometimes, I think I hear him laughing, and I turn around, but... nothing. I'm going mad."

"Grief can fool our minds," Sean offered quietly.

Devaux mumbled incoherently, his eyelids drifting closed. His fingers loosened their grip around the tumbler, the alcoholic haze pulling him into oblivion.

Sean stood and lifted the glass from Devaux's hand. He returned it to the cart on his way to the hall closet where he found a blanket and carried it back to the living room. He stared down at dried tears, their tracks leaving salty traces on Mr. Devaux's fair skin. Unfolding the blanket, Sean covered Devaux's sleeping form and brushed strands of dark, sweaty hair from his face. Once he had the man tucked in, Sean cleaned the spilled liquor from the floor and threw away the glass, broken and scattered like poor Mr. Devaux's heart. He'd need to inform housekeeping that the Persian rug and floor required cleaning, and remind them to call Mr. Devaux before they arrived.

He tossed the used towels and dirty glasses in the dumbwaiter before he scanned the living room, looking for a table that was near the windows. He found it in between the piano and the fireplace. Afraid the noise of the cart might wake Devaux, Sean carried the trays and juice over and set what by now was sure to be a cold breakfast on the wooden table. Mr. Devaux probably wouldn't eat it, but it would be there for him if he so chose. Sean would come to collect whatever was left of the meal when Mr. Devaux called the kitchen for his lunch. However, he had a feeling the man wouldn't want anyone, except for the cleaners, visiting for the rest of the day.

The *snick-snick-snick* of a phonograph needle at the end of a vinyl record caught Sean's attention, and he went to settle the arm back into its cradle. Shutting off the player, he read the title on the record's label: "Shubert Sonata D. 959 *Andantino*." He didn't know anything about classical music, but it had sounded sad, angry, and lost all at once.

On his way back to the sofa, Sean spied the letter he'd dropped on the carpet, along with the abandoned pocket watch. He picked them up, surprised the watch hadn't broken.

Sean examined the dark-blue and gold trim and caught a glimpse of himself reflected on the glass surface as he recalled Trant's words.

"I'll inform the cops, your landlord, and priest about your perverted behavior with the residents unless you do as I say. The residents will never notice a few missing pieces of jewelry."

"The residents enjoyed it. They won't let you turn me in." Sean's tone was defiant.

Richard Trant threw back his head, a loud guffaw erupting from his throat. He leaned his thick forearms on the desk. "Three years in New York City, and you still carry your naïve mick attitude with you." Trant shook his head. "Let me straighten you out, boy. You're nothing more than a quiff to them. They haven't got one reason to stick their necks out for someone with no family or influence. They're rich, you're poor, end of story. No one will believe you."

Anger conflicted with Sean's fear, and he clenched his fists behind his back. He wasn't a prostitute. He never took money, and the men enjoyed it as much as he did. But if he didn't go along with Trant's scheme, he'd lose this job and disappoint everyone who'd placed their faith in him and helped him build a new life. He was trapped.

"You either steal money and a few items now and then, or I turn you over to the cops and let your reputation be known. Understood?"

Sean ground his teeth. He had no other choice. "Yes, sir," he said, his voice a choked whisper.

Sean ran his thumb over the glass surface, watching the almost invisible movement of the minute hand on its journey around the face. How could he steal from a man who'd lost so much? Folding the note neatly into quarters, Sean placed it on the end table and laid the watch on top, where Devaux would find it later in the morning. Wheeling his cart out of the room, he gave one last look over his shoulder at the dark-haired man to find he had drawn up his knees tightly to his chest, his arms clasped around his head as if protecting himself from blows raining down upon his skull. Bleak sorrow rolled off Devaux, its gray fingers reaching out and tugging at Sean's heart. He folded his arms over his stomach and hunched over, protecting himself from Mr. Devaux's anguished emotions, pulling at his own memories from a dark time in his life. Sean's heart went out to him.

Closing the penthouse door quietly behind him, Sean pushed his cart towards the elevator and pressed the down button. He didn't know if Mr. Devaux had anyone to help him like Sean had back in Eire, but if he would let him, Sean would do whatever he could to help Mr. Devaux find his way again.

Chapter Three

Sean

Sean stepped off the elevator and pushed his cart down the carpeted hallways to Devaux's suite. He lifted a gloved hand to knock, and froze. There were voices coming from inside the penthouse. It sounded like Devaux had a visitor, which was odd, considering what Henry had told him about the solitary man. Sean strained to listen through the heavy, carved door, with its ornate scrollwork around the top and at the handle. All the doors in the hotel were thick and heavy to afford tenants' privacy, but the doors in the penthouse were much fancier and thicker still. It was no use. Sean couldn't make out a word they were saying. Shrugging, he grabbed the brass knocker and rapped it against the plate, calling out more loudly than usual, "Room service, Mr. Devaux. I've brought your breakfast." Silence descended, and before he could count to ten, the door was opened by an older gray-haired gentleman in a dark-gray pinstriped suit. "Thank you, sir," Sean said, entering. The man nodded, closed the door after Sean, and walked back around the corner to the living room. Sean followed.

"I don't know how many times I've told you, Harrison, you need to cut back on your drinking. The type of hangover you have can't be cured by modern medicine." The man crossed his arms over his chest.

Sean headed for the window table, the two men continuing their argument as if he weren't there. He hadn't had a chance to look around the place yesterday, but now he did. He'd seen many of the other rich-looking apartments belonging to society's upper crust while bringing in luggage. None of them could compare to Mr. Devaux's penthouse. It was mind-boggling.

The living room was not a separate room but part of one long, wide rectangle with the formal dining room at the farthest end, where the octagonal window layout gave an almost panoramic view of the city. In the center sat a full-sized billiard table, its balls and cues neatly displayed on the wall. There was also a table set up for chess, the pieces made of white, and black marble, the board of beautifully inlaid wood. A grand piano stood before one of the many windows between the entertainment area and the living room, serving as a sort of divider. The smaller table Devaux preferred for his meals was within the living room space, between the piano and the fireplace. There were Persian rugs everywhere—not just under the living room furniture, but under the dining

and billiard tables, the piano, even the little meal table. Surprisingly, not one spark of color decorated the room, not even in the carpets. Everything was in shades of white, cream, gold, brown, or black. Small touches in shades of red showed in the rugs, but they tended towards the dark and muted. Sean draped a white cloth over the tabletop and set up the china, eavesdropping while the men continued to argue.

“I don’t need your advice on how often I should or should not be drinking, Charles,” Devaux grumbled.

Sean sneaked a quick look in Devaux’s direction and saw him limping over to the liquor cabinet, his foot bandaged inside a slipper. He hadn’t paid attention at the time, considering the situation, but seeing it today, it had to be the largest liquor cabinet he’d ever seen. Made of dark wood, it reached almost to the ceiling, with center cabinets for the liquor and a buffet shelf for preparing the drinks. Doors on either side held the glasses and more liquor.

The older man snorted loudly. “Not only are you my patient, Harrison, you are my friend, and I will mention it as often as I need until you cut back. You’re killing your liver. For God’s sake man, if you have to drink, do it in the afternoon and evening. Give your body a rest, and skip the morning cocktail. Sit down, and have a decent breakfast with juice and tea. I’m not asking you to give it up completely.”

“Excuse me, Doctor?” Sean said. “I’ve brought ginger and lemon tea along with a breakfast of toast, mushrooms, tomatoes, and smoked salmon.” He snapped his mouth shut, groaning inwardly. What on earth was he doing speaking out of turn? *Please, don’t let me get in trouble.* The doctor and Mr. Devaux turned to focus their undivided attention on him. He squirmed, feeling like an ant under a magnifying glass.

“That’s the kind of breakfast I’m talking about, Harrison,” the doctor said, turning back to address Devaux. “Listen to the boy.” He moved to the ottoman where his medical bag sat and reached down to snap it closed. “I’ve left tape, gauze, and mercurochrome in your bathroom. Clean and change the wrapping one more time tonight, then let your foot air out tomorrow. If you notice any remaining shards, call me.”

“Thank you for coming over on short notice, Charles.”

“Short notice?” Charles’ voice rose, his eyebrow arching. “You injured your foot yesterday morning. It’s now eleven o’clock—far past your normal breakfast—and you didn’t call me until an hour ago. Bah. You’re as stubborn

as ever.” He waved Harrison away. “I can walk myself to the door.” He placed his bowler on his head and left the living room. “And lay off the morning drinks,” he called out as he rounded the corner to the entry hall.

Sean waited patiently by the table, his hands clasped behind his back, ready to serve Mr. Devaux. He watched as the man stood in front of the liquor cabinet, reached for a tumbler, paused, and sighed. He turned around and limped over to the breakfast table. Sean rushed to pull out his chair, but Devaux waved him off.

“No need to do simple things for me. I’m not that hungover.” Devaux sat down and arranged the linen napkin on his lap. “Serving my tea and food is enough.”

“Yes, sir.” Sean lifted the silver-domed lids covering the breakfast plate and smaller plate of toast and placed the lids on the cart. He next poured the tea into a delicate white-and-black china cup, its gently scalloped edge trimmed in gold. Checking to see that Mr. Devaux was set with his breakfast, Sean stepped to the cart. “Is there anything else, sir?” He waited for an answer. When he didn’t receive one, he started to push the cart away.

“Where are you going?”

Sean halted, surprised. “Sir?”

“I asked you where you were going,” Devaux repeated, buttering his toast.

Was this a trick question? How should he answer it? Truthfully, he supposed. “I’m leaving you to your breakfast, sir.”

Devaux bit into his toast and chewed. Sean waited, unsure of what to do next. He stood silently and watched the dark-haired older man methodically eating his meal. First he finished the toast, his long elegant fingers lightly balancing the bread. Then he ate the smoked salmon and, finally, the vegetables. He drank his fresh orange juice and two cups of tea all while not speaking a word. Once the plates were empty, he folded his napkin and tossed it on the table. He poured himself another cup of tea, pushed back his chair, and stood. Carrying his cup and saucer, he turned to stare out the window.

“Now, should you happen to see him again, you can tell my good friend the doctor, that you supervised me while I drank my tea and ate my breakfast like a good boy.”

“Y-yes, sir,” Sean stammered. They stood close enough that he could see Devaux was a few inches taller than him, and his skin was pale and flawless.

When the silence became awkward, Sean wondered if he was being dismissed now. Should he ask? He hesitated. “Would you like me to remove these, sir?”

Devaux glanced back over his shoulder at the table and nodded.

Sean moved quickly to clear off the table. He’d readied himself to leave when Devaux spun and approached him, setting his cup and saucer on the cart.

“Do you eat breakfast?” Devaux asked, his tone flat.

“Sir?” It was disconcerting, these strange random questions out of nowhere. Sean needed some time for his brain to catch up.

“Do you eat breakfast? If so, what do you eat?” Devaux asked again, his blue eyes boring into Sean.

Sean swallowed, his mind going blank. He hadn’t noticed how intense Mr. Devaux’s eyes were yesterday. Of course how could he, when Mr. Devaux could barely keep them open? But today his features appeared sharper, clearer, without the taint of alcohol to mar his handsome face. *Did I just think “handsome?”* Sweet Jesus, yes, the man was handsome. His perfectly gelled hair, brushed back from his forehead, emphasized his bone structure—especially his high cheekbones. His jaw was not that of a weak man, but strong and sure. His lips were not too full like a woman’s but just enough to make a man’s mind wander to what they could do wrapped around...

Sean shook himself from his fantasy. Prickly heat crawled over his skin beneath his now uncomfortably hot wool uniform. It worked its way up his neck and into his face until he knew it matched the color of his hair. His face flamed hotter as Devaux crooked an eyebrow, waiting for his answer.

“Yes, sir,” Sean said, his voice squeaking in betrayal. “I eat breakfast.” He could kick himself; he was sure Mr. Devaux thought him a fool as he continued to wait in silence. “Porridge and tea, sir. I eat porridge and tea for breakfast when I have the time, sir,” he stammered out once his muddled mind remembered the second question Devaux had asked.

Devaux nodded and stepped back.

A long exhale escaped Sean’s lungs. *Breathe*, he told himself, *breathe*. He licked his dry lips and watched Devaux follow the motion.

“From now on you will eat breakfast with me,” Devaux said, reaching into his trouser pocket and pulling out a silver cigarette case along with a match safe.

“Sir?” Sean’s voice rose in surprise.

Devaux sighed and eyed Sean again. “I’ll repeat my statement more clearly. From now on you will join me at breakfast.” He lit his cigarette, pulling in a lungful of tobacco then slowly let it out, tossing the match on the cart. “If I’m to follow my doctor’s advice, I require someone who will keep me ‘honest,’ as they say, and you—” He pointed his cigarette at Sean. “—are it.” Devaux took another deep drag.

Sean watched in fascination as Devaux blew out three, perfect smoke rings. He remembered the older boys back in Eire attempting to make those rings but never succeeding. This was the first time he’d been close enough to see someone create them. He brought himself back to the moment. “Yes, sir,” he replied.

Devaux reached into another pocket, dug out some coins and counted out four mercury dimes into Sean’s palm. “I’ll skip lunch today but will eat dinner.” With that, Devaux turned his back and headed for his piano.

“Thank you, sir,” Sean called after Devaux. Taking Devaux’s retreat as a sign he was dismissed, he rolled his cart away. Just as he reached the door he stopped to listen to the beginning strains of a piece of piano music, its melody not quite as sad as yesterday’s record. He exited the penthouse and closed the door behind him. The morning had a surreal quality to it. He’d have to ask Henry if Mr. Devaux had ever acted this way with him. He definitely had to ask Henry about how he portioned out his tips to Trant. He didn’t want Trant getting suspicious if he handed over too much or too little.

As odd as the morning had been, Sean was looking forward to dinner and whatever surprises it might hold.

Chapter Four

Sean

“That’s all?” Devaux snapped into the phone.

Sean closed the door quietly behind him and headed for the living room. He directed his cart around the long, velvet sofa, shooting a quick glance at Devaux who was listening intently to the earpiece of his black-and-gold phone, a deep scowl on his face. Arriving at the table, Sean reached under the top level of the cart for the clean tablecloth.

“He would know?” Whatever answer Devaux received must have pleased him, because Sean saw Devaux’s frown smooth out. “How long? Good. Follow that up. Call me within the week.” He dropped the handset back onto its cradle and stared at it, pulling at his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger as he did so. He took a step towards the liquor cabinet.

Sean cleared his throat. “I’ve brought your dinner, sir.”

Devaux halted and reversed direction for the table, all the while seemingly preoccupied with the news he had received. He pulled out his chair and sat, his eyes unfocused on what he was doing.

“Tonight is fillet of beef, à la Wellington, fingerling potatoes with herbs, garlic and green beans.” Sean lifted the silver-domed cover from the meal, pretending nothing was out of the ordinary. The rich, complex aromas of seasoned meat, mushrooms, and garlic wafted up with the steam, bringing Devaux out of his thoughts. “Do you have a wine you prefer with this meal?” Sean asked.

“Yes, please bring me the bottle of Burgundy from the liquor cabinet,” Devaux said, picking up his knife and fork.

Uncorking and serving wine was one thing Sean knew how to do. Even though Prohibition was in effect, and it was illegal to drink, the majority of the hotel clientele had wines and other liquors somewhere in their rooms. Blatant disregard for the law was so rampant no one thought anything of it. Mr. Devaux’s status likely kept him readily supplied with whatever liquor he wished to partake. Sean carefully poured the wine and set the bottle on the table. “Is there anything else you’d like me to do before I leave? Or would you prefer I stay, sir?” he asked after Devaux had finished chewing. That was one

lesson all the staff had learned from Mr. Ormsby. Never ask a question while the customer had a mouth full of food. It was one sure way to annoy them.

Devaux blotted at the corner of his mouth with his napkin and pointed at the chair opposite with his fork.

“Sit.”

The order didn’t surprise Sean after Devaux’s odd behavior at breakfast, so he pulled out the chair and sat, his hands folded in his lap. Earlier that day, when he’d had a chance to speak with Henry, he’d asked about Mr. Devaux and if he’d ever had Henry hang around to watch him eat. Henry was surprised and said the only time Mr. Devaux asked him to stay was to dust the furniture or polish the windows and doors. He thought it was odd since it was a housekeeping responsibility, but maybe Mr. Devaux was lonely and didn’t like maids doing the job. Sean suspected with as much money as Mr. Devaux seemed to possess, eccentricity was to be expected. Maybe he treated each server differently.

Devaux downed his first glass of wine and refilled it before he spoke.

“Mr. O’Reilly, isn’t it?”

Sean was surprised Devaux remembered his name considering how ossified he’d been yesterday morning. “Yes, sir. Sean O’Reilly.”

Devaux let out a huff of breath, lifted his wine glass and drank down half in one go.

Sean kept a straight face.

Setting the glass back on the table, Devaux gazed out the window at the descending dusk and cleared his throat. “I must apologize for my ungentlemanly behavior yesterday.” His fingers nervously twirled the stem of his glass. “I don’t believe in forcing unwilling companions. Unfortunately... you caught me at a bad time, but that’s still no excuse.” He finished off his wine and poured himself another glass.

Sean sat stunned. He’d never received an apology from someone of Mr. Devaux’s status. Ever. Men like Mr. Devaux didn’t need to give apologies. Sean was the one who needed to apologize for his nosiness. Shifting in his seat, Sean took a deep breath. “I’m the one who should apologize, Mr. Devaux. It was wrong to read a letter that wasn’t addressed to me.”

Blinking rapidly, Devaux nodded and downed more of the wine. “Apology accepted,” he said, his voice hoarse. “We can now move on and talk of more

pleasant things.” Except he didn’t talk; he finished his meal in silence while Sean watched the clouds change from pink and orange to gray.

Devaux pushed away from the table and picked up the wine bottle and his glass. “Clear the table then join me in the living room.”

By the time Sean finished clearing the table, Devaux had stretched out, his glass and the bottle sitting on the wood floor next to the sofa, the rug not yet returned from its cleaning. Sean’s gaze settled on the leather ottoman where a mixture of supplies for changing Devaux’s foot dressing rested. He gathered them up and sat at the opposite end of the sofa by Devaux’s sock covered feet and covered his lap with a towel.

“I assume,” Devaux said, swinging his arm towards the dressings, “since you wrapped my foot the other morning, you know how to use those.”

“Yes, sir.” Sean removed his gloves and slipped them into his pocket. He set Devaux’s foot on his lap, unhooked the garter, and rolled the silk sock carefully off. Next he peeled away the tape and pink-tinged bandages. He lifted Devaux’s foot and examined the pale, wrinkled sole. The one gash that bled badly yesterday was already healing nicely. The other cuts were minor. He pressed lightly with his thumbs over the wounded areas. His heart thudded rapidly under the man’s watchful gaze. “Do you feel any remaining glass, sir?”

Devaux shook his head. “No.”

Sean opened the small bottle of mercurochrome and, using the glass dropper, dabbed some of the bright pink liquid over the large cut. Devaux winced, but he didn’t withdraw.

“I don’t mean to be impolite, but you weren’t born here in America, were you?” Devaux asked.

“No, sir. I came over from Eire,” Sean said, adding some of the antiseptic to the smaller cuts.

“And how long have you been living here in the city?”

“Almost three years,” Sean answered, surprised by Devaux’s friendliness.

“Your English is quite good, barely an accent. Do you like your job with the Astraea?”

Sean paused, casting a glance at Devaux. How was he supposed to answer that? He supposed a partial truth was the best way. “Any job has its good... and

not so good parts.” Like the problem of Trant ordering him to steal from the clientele. Sean’s stomach clenched. He’d have to think of a way to avoid stealing, but he didn’t want to worry about it now, maybe later, after he got home. He recapped the bottle, placed it on the ottoman, then proceeded to snip lengths of tape, setting them aside.

Devaux snorted. “Spoken like a politician.”

“I have no interest in becoming a politician, sir.” Copying the way the bandages had appeared when he removed them, Sean cut a length of gauze and folded it down to size.

“Do you have any ambitions besides providing room service, or is this all you wish to do?”

Was Mr. Devaux implying there was something wrong with being a Room Service Boy? Probably not, it was just his gruff manner. Sean enjoyed helping and serving customers. Just because his position wasn’t of high status didn’t mean it was useless... or worthless.

Sean held the gauze in place on Devaux’s sole and secured the tape around his foot. “Is this too tight, sir?” When Devaux shook his head, Sean reached for the sock, rolled it back on and fastened it to the garter. “If I could, I would like to become a manager of a hotel like this one, or manage people at a store, but I doubt that will happen.” He set Devaux’s foot in his lap and rested his hands on it.

“And why’s that?” Devaux retrieved his wine glass from the floor.

“I’d need more schooling, and I don’t have the money for that nor the connections.” Sean shrugged. “I’ll probably end up working whatever job comes my way.”

Devaux was silent as he finished off his wine. “What if someone mentored you?”

“Mentored me?” Sean scoffed. “That’s a fairy tale, sir. I don’t dream of things like that. I’m grateful for what I have and try not to give people reasons to be disappointed in me.” Easing the slipper onto Devaux’s foot, he lifted the foot from his lap and lowered it to the floor. “Would you like me to check the other one too?” He glanced up to find Devaux’s intense blue-eyed gaze boring into him.

Devaux was silent for a moment then nodded, placing his foot in Sean’s lap. Sean unhooked the other garter then rolled the top of the sock down and off

Devaux's foot. Devaux shifted, scooting down the sofa and rotating his hips. He reached into his pocket for his cigarette case and matches and pulled them out. Flipping onto his back again, he repositioned his leg.

Sean sucked in a breath. Devaux's heel rested directly on top of his flaccid cock. It quickly took an avid interest in the situation, rising and hardening at the touch. He ducked his head, thankful for the towel draped over his lap. He lifted Devaux's foot in his shaky left hand and ran his right thumb carefully over the soft pale underside. A faint shuddering breath sounded from Devaux, and Sean lifted his head, watching Devaux for any expression of pain. "Does this hurt?" Devaux gave a sharp shake of his head.

Sean massaged the sole harder with his thumbs, intent on finding any cuts in need of attention. Satisfied with its appearance, he moved to the sides and top. There didn't appear to be any cuts on this foot. "It looks fine, sir." He rolled the sock back over the long attractive toes, over Devaux's ankle, and up his leg, which was peppered with dark hairs. He fastened the sock to the garter, reached for the slipper on the floor, and sneaked a look to find Devaux watching him from behind hooded eyes and a cloud of smoke, his cheeks flushed a faint pink. Sean slid the slipper over the sock and rested Devaux's foot on the sofa. "Is there anything else you'd like me to do before I leave, Mr. Devaux?" he said, surprised to hear his voice waver.

"No," Devaux rasped.

Sean rose, holding the towel in place until his jacket covered the top of his trousers. He was more aroused from Mr. Devaux's stare and close proximity than he'd expected. Gathering the supplies and trash, he deposited them in the bathroom. He retrieved his gloves from his jacket pocket and tugged them on. When he walked back to the living room, he found Devaux sitting up, flicking ashes into an ashtray held in his hand.

"That's all for tonight," he said, without looking up.

"Yes, sir. Good night, Mr. Devaux."

Chapter Five

Harrison

“Your advice leaves much to be desired, Charles. I’m in a perpetual state of anger, and my nerves are on edge.” Harrison picked up the tumbler, only to slam it loudly down on the shelf of the liquor cabinet before turning and glaring at Charles.

“You’ve always been a bit cranky, Harrison.” The doctor’s lips curled in a teasing grin as he sat on the sofa, his arm draped casually along its back.

“I have not,” Harrison protested, scowling at his friend. “It’s only since I’ve started foregoing my morning drink.”

“Face it,” Charles said, “you’ve forgotten how grumpy you can get because you’ve numbed yourself with alcohol and secluded yourself away in here.” He waved his hand around the expansive room. “You’ve always felt better with something to do and people to see.”

Harrison paced back and forth in front of the cabinet and the phonograph. “I’m only grumpy with certain people—you, for instance. Besides, Mr. O’Reilly visits numerous times each day.” Harrison halted and focused his attention on the young man standing by the window. Mr. O’Reilly was the only one he could tolerate despite their inauspicious first meeting. Harrison couldn’t help smiling at the red-haired, freckle-faced Irishman who could blush like an ingénue but looked every bit the healthy man and carried himself as such. Harrison was a quick study when it came to men. He had to be when he conducted business. For instance, Mr. O’Reilly was on the quiet side, with infrequent acts of impulsiveness. He was humble, dependable, and had a pride in his work that overshadowed the random flashes of sadness that appeared on his face, which, Harrison suspected, Mr. O’Reilly wasn’t even aware of.

“I-I...” The young man struggled to find his words, and his brilliant blue-green eyes widened in surprise. That bright flush Harrison had started to enjoy seeing began to creep up his neck again. It was amazing how easily he blushed. And Harrison wouldn’t admit it to anyone, let alone Mr. O’Reilly, but sometimes he deliberately tried to induce those blushes. He turned back to Charles.

Charles shook his head. “That isn’t who I’m talking about, and you know it. He doesn’t spend all day with you. He has his work with the other residents and customers. He can’t hand hold you through this.”

No, he couldn't keep him company all the time... unfortunately. Mr. O'Reilly had only been serving him for two weeks, but in that short time, Harrison found himself growing bored when the young man left for his other duties—even if the only thing he had Mr. O'Reilly do was dust and polish or eat a meal with him. Just his presence helped calm the impotent anger and banished some of the dark clouds hovering over his head.

"Your body is acclimating itself to the lower dosage of alcohol in your system, and that's a good thing," the doctor continued. "Let me ask you, do you feel you have more energy? Are you thinking more clearly?"

Harrison clenched his jaw and nodded. "But *I* don't think that's necessarily a good thing."

"Trust me. It is." Charles got up and poured himself a soda water. "Find a hobby, *other than drinking*. You won't notice the symptoms as much." He sat back down on the sofa and crossed his legs.

"Hobby?" Harrison's voice rose. "What do I need a damn hobby for?"

"You've shuttered yourself away in your penthouse for three years," Charles replied evenly. "Your friends beg to see you, but you rarely allow it. The world is passing you by. Find something to do. Get out. In fact"—Charles shifted on the cushion—"I'm going to take you out to lunch today."

Harrison glared at his friend and turned away. He saw Mr. O'Reilly near the hallway waiting to leave and, ignoring Charles, walked over to the young man. He fished out five one-dollar bills and handed them over.

"Thank y—" Mr. O'Reilly's eyes went wide. "Sir, this is too big a tip. I can't accept this."

He stretched out his hand to return the money, but Harrison waved him off. "Keep it."

Mr. O'Reilly stepped forward. "Sir, I can't. Really, it's too much."

Harrison shook his head and reached up, folding Sean's fingers around the money. "Buy yourself lunch. Take your friends out. At least one of us can enjoy our day while I'm stuck with this tyrant." He scowled, glancing back over his shoulder, and caught Charles chuckling.

"Yes, sir." Sean continued to look at the bills in his hand. He lifted his head. "I wasn't expecting this," he said quietly.

"I know."

“Thank you, sir.” Mr. O’Reilly’s eyes shone gratefully.

Harrison nodded. “I obviously won’t need lunch. Have the chef cook up a light dinner for both of us. I expect you here at the usual time.”

“Yes, sir. Have a good afternoon.” Mr. O’Reilly turned and steered his cart from the penthouse.

Harrison strode over to the liquor cabinet. He wanted a drink, but poured himself a soda water instead.

“You’re going to spoil that boy.”

“Mind your own business,” Harrison grumbled.

“Unless... you *want* to spoil him?” Charles’ voice rose in surprise.

Harrison downed the water. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” But in the back of his mind a little voice wondered if that was exactly his intention.

Sean

The hairs stood up on the back of Sean’s neck, and he turned around. Mr. Devaux was staring at him again, but turned away when he looked. It wasn’t the first time he’d caught Mr. Devaux scrutinizing him that evening; it wasn’t even the second time. He sensed Mr. Devaux watching him while he dusted and polished the furniture. It reminded him too much of when he was a child, and he’d follow a beetle to decide its fate. Under Mr. Devaux’s eyes, he felt like a beetle, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Mr. O’Reilly.” Sean jumped, and the vase he was polishing slipped from his hands. He made a quick grab and caught it before it hit the floor, carefully setting it on the buffet. Devaux’s deep voice had sounded from directly behind and scared the daylights out of him. He’d been so caught up in his thoughts he hadn’t heard Devaux walk up. His heart hammered in his chest, and heat rushed into his face. He hated the way he blushed so easily, just like his mother always had. It was fine for a woman, but it was ridiculous in a man.

He turned around to face his employer.

“My apologies if I frightened you.” Devaux inclined his head.

Sean nodded, his heart slowing its rapid beat.

Devaux motioned towards the living room. “Would you sit with me?”

Sean looked at the cleaning supplies left on the dining buffet. "I should put these things away, Mr. Devaux."

"Leave them." Devaux turned and headed for the liquor cabinet. "I'll have someone come up later and finish."

Sean followed along and sat down. He put his gloves back on, ran his hands down the front of his jacket, and tugged at the hem. He'd gotten used to Devaux's mannerisms in the last two weeks, but this was entirely new. His stomach sank. What had Henry said? *One day we're serving Mr. Devaux and next we're not.* This was it; Mr. Devaux was going to fire him. He sighed, his shoulders slumping. It was only a matter of time, he supposed, but losing this penthouse job was small compared to what had happened in his life so far. He'd survive. He sat up straighter, and when he looked up, he found Devaux eyeing him. If he was going to get fired, he may as well ask Mr. Devaux some questions. Was his work unsatisfactory? If it was, he needed to know so he could improve. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his knees, stood, and clasped his hands behind his back. "Sir, if you're going to fire me, may I ask a question first?"

Devaux raised his eyebrows. "Ask."

"If I haven't performed my duties well, could you please inform me where I went wrong so I may do better in the future? I don't wish to repeat my mistakes with any other guests."

"Why do you think I'm going to dismiss you?" Devaux asked, tilting his head to the side.

"You've been watching everything I do very closely today. It must be something I've done."

"Ah, I see." Devaux crooked up the corner of his mouth in a lopsided smile. "No, it isn't anything you've done. I've been told I get that look when I'm deep in thought. But I can assure you, it has nothing to do with dismissing you."

Tension fled Sean's body. His position was safe, at least for the moment. But still it didn't answer the question of why Devaux was staring at him so hard. He decided not to push his luck and to just listen for now.

"I've been quite pleased with your work, especially these last weeks while I'm on this morning 'diet.'" Devaux snorted. "In fact, I think you deserve an extra tip for putting up with my behavior." He dug into his trouser pocket and pulled out a couple of Peace dollars. "Despite what my friend the doctor thinks,

I'm not completely oblivious to what happens in the world, nor in this hotel." He approached and dropped the coins in Sean's gloved hand. As if an afterthought, he slowly drew his fingertips along Sean's palm and wrapped his fingers around Sean's, closing them around the coins.

Sean brought his other hand to his mouth and coughed into his fist. *Please, Mr. Devaux, don't make me offer you "extras."* Two weeks ago he would have jumped at the chance, but now he didn't want Devaux to think of him as a prostitute. He wanted to continue to serve him but not like that. He'd come to enjoy Devaux's attention, although it was infrequent. He wanted his respect, and he wasn't going to get it with random sexual favors, even though he was more than interested—too interested if he was honest with himself. But this money, disguised as a tip, only insulted him, burning his palm with its implication.

"Despite what you may have heard, *sir*, I haven't been participating in any of the actions of which you're hinting, and I certainly wouldn't take money for it. You can keep your coins." He had stopped all dalliances with customers, since working for Mr. Devaux, so he wasn't exactly telling a lie. And even if he hadn't, it wasn't Devaux's place to judge him.

Devaux scrutinized him, watching him like a fox stalking a chicken.

Sean drew himself up to his full height, which was only a few inches shorter than Devaux, and looked him square in the eye. He held out the coins for Devaux to take. He wasn't ashamed of anything he'd done with other men, and he wasn't going to let anyone cow him into thinking that way.

As if coming to some sort of conclusion, Devaux nodded. He reached over and wrapped his hand around Sean's, closing his fingers around the coins again.

"It appears I've insulted you, and for that I apologize. That wasn't my intention. This tip is for putting up with my eccentricities and nothing else." Devaux removed his hand and went to refill his tumbler. "As for what manner of activities you participate in with the other guests—if you do—that is entirely your own business. I believe humans cannot live without pleasure of some kind, and I am hardly a saint." He lifted his refilled tumbler in example before turning around and leaning against the cabinet.

Another apology? Mr. Devaux was turning into quite a contradiction in regard to the rumors he'd heard about him. "Thank you, *sir*. I apologize for jumping to conclusions." Sean deposited the coins in one of his trouser pockets, warm sparks lingering on his skin from the touch of Devaux's hand.

Devaux smiled into his glass. “It seems we are developing a habit of apologizing to one another.” He took a sip, motioned for Sean to sit, and continued. “To put your mind at ease, I am not firing you. I, in fact, have a proposition I would like you to consider.” Devaux joined Sean on the sofa. “I will come straight to the point. I’m going to take my doctor’s atrocious advice once more and ‘get out’ as he put it. For that I will need an assistant to manage the smaller details of my reemergence into public life. This is an official job position, which you are free to take or refuse. If you accept, your job as my assistant will be part-time. You will continue to serve my morning meals, but when breakfast is over, you will return to your regular hotel duties until you report here each day at three o’clock. My noon and evening meals will be served by other hotel staff, which I’ll arrange with the manager. If you decide not to accept, you will continue to provide room service, but I will look elsewhere for an assistant.”

Sean’s heart pounded in his ears, and a loud rush of blood drowned out Devaux’s voice. He couldn’t have heard right, could he? “But I don’t have any experience, sir. I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“I’ll teach you what you need to know. You can take a day or two to think it over.”

His mind reeled from the offer, but he didn’t need to think about his answer. Sean swallowed and looked at Devaux. “I’d like to take the job, Mr. Devaux.”

Mr. Devaux’s expression didn’t quite change except for a quick upturn at the corners of his mouth before returning to his normal somber expression. “Very well. In that case, I’ll need to make some calls tonight to work out the details. I’ll talk to Mr. Trant and have him send someone up tomorrow morning after breakfast so that you may return to your regular duties. Your first afternoon with me will be tomorrow—we’ll have things to discuss and forms to sign. You’ll report here at three in your regular clothes.”

Devaux stood, and Sean did too. “We’ll meet with Mr. Trant tomorrow evening to work out how to rearrange your floor duties. Then you’ll have dinner here with me.”

“Thank you, sir. I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Mr. O’Reilly,” Devaux said dryly. “There’s a lot for you to learn, and I expect you to learn it quickly and well.”

“Yes, sir.”

Devaux walked over to a window and stared outside. “Before you go, I have a few questions I would like answered.”

“If I can, sir.”

“I have heard through the hotel rumor mill that Mr. Trant is not exactly the most scrupulous of men.”

“Who told you that?” Sean blurted out, his stomach tightening. *He hasn’t heard about Trant’s demands has he?*

Devaux waved his hand. “It might appear that I am friendless, but I know a few residents here who’ve heard ‘talk.’ Mr. Trant would not be the first manager to collect his employees’ tips, leaving them with nothing.” He turned around to face Sean. “If I am to do business with him, I need to know what kind of man he is.”

Sean let out a sigh of relief. Thank God, Mr. Devaux didn’t know about the order to steal. Should he mention the hiding of tips by his coworkers? If he did, that could get him and everyone else in trouble if Mr. Devaux spoke, or even hinted, to Trant about their actions. Sean looked at Devaux who waited by the window expectantly. He had a hunch he wasn’t like Trant, so Sean took a chance.

“Mr. Trant takes most of our tips, but we try to hide some of it as best we can. We, I mean the Room Service Boys, pool together what tips we have left and split them. Some need the money more than others.” *Like Henry and his family.*

“Some need money more than others?” Devaux frowned, pulling out his cigarette case. “Who would that be?”

Sean hesitated and hoped he wasn’t making a mistake. “Henry for one. He has a family and was demoted to the first floor so his tips are a lot less now.”

“Henry?” Devaux struck a match, cupped it around his cigarette and took a few puffs. He flicked out the match. “Ashtray.” He pointed at the one beside Sean on the end table.

Sean handed it over. “Henry was the Room Service Boy who served you before me. He’s got a wife and young son. Since he doesn’t make enough now, he’s looking for a second job, but it hasn’t been easy.”

Devaux frowned, took a drag on his cigarette, and blew it out in a long slow exhale, his eyes never leaving Sean.

“Inform Henry I want the morning paper delivered to me from now on as soon as it’s available. Have him come in and leave it on the table in the waiting area. I’ll leave a tip for him there.”

Sean gaped at Devaux. “Mr. Trant won’t let me tell him that, sir.”

“Don’t worry about him. I’ll give him a call. I want to make sure Henry gets the correct message from someone I trust and that Mr. Trant knows nothing of the tip.” Devaux turned back to the window.

Did Mr. Devaux just say he trusts me? Sean grew light-headed, his mind grappling with the idea that a man of Mr. Devaux’s status felt that way. He took a few deep breaths to still his pounding heart and the room returned to focus, warmth filling his chest. He had an opportunity to prove his worth; his parents would be proud of him. Both his parents, especially his father, had emphasized the importance of trust when doing business with a man. A man’s word and handshake would seal deals back in Eire.

“That’ll be all for tonight, Mr. O’Reilly. Remember, tomorrow at three in your regular clothes.”

“Yes sir, and thank you, Mr. Devaux.”

Devaux nodded and left the room, heading off down the long hallway.

Sean closed the penthouse door behind him. His mind whirled in a hundred directions at once. This was the longest Mr. Devaux had ever talked to him, and he almost never asked questions. He was thrilled Mr. Devaux wanted to hire him as his personal assistant, but scared at the same time. Trant was not going to like it, Sean was sure of that. Despite his worries about Trant, Sean wasn’t going to let anything ruin this strange and wonderful evening.

Chapter Six

Sean

He stood staring at the large, formidable wood and metal door, his heart racing. Standing there without his uniform on felt surreal. He peered down at his *regular* clothes. St. Bartholomew's Church charity group had donated the brown-on-brown-striped suit in exchange for one of the suits he'd worn at sixteen. He wasn't growing as fast as he used to, but hopefully his landlady could lengthen the trousers and cuffs when needed so he wouldn't have to buy another one anytime soon. She'd appreciate the extra money. The cream-colored shirt, brown-striped tie, and green pullover vest had been purchased from a secondhand shop. He'd polished his scuffed boots, but it hadn't done much good. They were the same ones he'd worn over on the boat from Eire, his Sunday best. But it looked like he'd need a new pair soon; these were worn out. The laces had broken recently, and he'd bartered for a fairly new set to replace the torn and knotted ones in exchange for helping a neighbor move. Still, the scrapes in the leather were noticeable, and no amount of shoe polish would fix them. He sighed. Someone dressed like him didn't belong up here on the penthouse floor. He ran his hands nervously down the front of his jacket. His clothes weren't going to get any better, no matter how long he stood out here. Sean removed his cap, praying Mr. Devaux wouldn't regret hiring him once he saw him out of uniform.

Sean knocked and waited, twisting the cap in his hands. After a minute of no response, he knocked again. This time the door swung open, and Devaux stared at him, a frown on his face.

"What are you doing standing out there?"

Sean shifted from foot to foot. "I didn't know whether I should come inside or wait, sir."

Devaux crooked an eyebrow. "And why would things change?" he asked, stepping aside to let Sean inside.

"I thought since I wasn't in my uniform..."

"Ah," Devaux said, looking him up and down. "Procedure doesn't change." He shut the door. "Follow me."

Sean followed Devaux down the hallway, and an unfamiliar fragrance drifted back to him. He inhaled deeply, not recalling if he'd ever noticed

Devaux wearing scent before. They stopped one door down from the bathroom. Devaux stepped inside, and Sean slowed his pace, taking in what appeared to be Devaux's office. Wood. There was wood everywhere, and that included the walls. He didn't know much about the different kinds of wood, but he knew pine when he saw it. Narrow pine planks covered the floor with two narrow darker lines of inset wood running parallel near the edges. What looked like a deep-red, cherry-stained desk sat in front of a window facing the open door, resting on one of the numerous Persian rugs Devaux seemed to love so much. The window was framed with cream-and-gold-striped curtains drawn back with black ties, allowing a stunning view of Manhattan below. Inset cabinets and shelving held books upon books on one side of the window. On the other was a beautiful cream-colored marble fireplace. Along the right wall hung a large painting of what looked like water, people, and grass. It was one of those landscapes where everything appeared out of focus close-up, just little brush strokes, but the farther back one stood, the more it made sense. Underneath the painting sat two cream-and-gold-striped chairs, their frames made of dark wood, and on the left side of the room were more bookshelves.

"Bring one of those chairs and sit over there." Devaux sat down behind the desk, pointing opposite him.

Sean grabbed a chair and took a seat. He perched on the edge, not wanting to soil the soft, silky fabric with his shabby trousers. A leather folder sat on the desk, and Devaux flipped it open with the tip of his forefinger, removing the top four sheets, and lining them up in front of Sean.

"These are the papers I had my lawyer draw up for your employment. It stipulates the terms, times of work, wages, and duties. One copy is for my records, and one is for you. The other two are for Mr. Trant and myself to sign, agreeing upon the contract for you as my employee. I will essentially be hiring you from the hotel to work for me, and I will be paying them for your service. I will also be paying you for your service with our separate contract.

He leaned forward and locked his blue eyes on Sean. "Since I'm paying Mr. Trant for your services, he is required to pay you some wages for hiring you out. He's the middleman for your employment to me from the hotel." He waved his hand at the other contract. "The other contract is between us and doesn't concern Mr. Trant or the Astraia."

Sean opened his mouth to speak. Trant would never allow that.

Devaux held up his hand. "I know what you're thinking. Mr. Trant won't go along with it. But, I think he will. The amount he is to pay you is small in

comparison to what the hotel is receiving, which is impressive to him, but is quite negligible to me.” He leaned back in his chair. “Your primary wages will come from me.” Devaux clasped his hands over his dark-chocolate, single-breasted vest. “I asked the lawyer to keep the wording simple since most people aren’t fluent in legal verbiage. Take your time reading it over. If you have any questions, ask.”

Reaching out, Sean took the first sheet and started reading. It was simple enough to understand even with the little education he had. During his morning shift, until two thirty p.m., he’d work for the hotel doing his normal duties. He was not to come in earlier to make up for time spent with Mr. Devaux. From three to nine at night he’d work for Mr. Devaux and could not be called in to work another hotel shift after. Sunday was his rest day, which was good for him because it allowed him to attend Mass in the morning or afternoon at the little church across the street. There was to be a month’s probation—time to prove he could do the job. He could either eat his meals with Mr. Devaux or receive a set amount of monies for lunch and dinner. His breakfasts would continue with Mr. Devaux. If he decided he no longer wished to retain the job, for whatever reason, he was required to give a two-week written notice. However, if Mr. Devaux found it necessary to release him from his contract, he could be let go immediately. Any changes to the contract could be brought up and discussed by either party at any time, and the contract could be amended. Finally, he read the amount of his weekly paycheck and gasped. He looked up at Mr. Devaux and found him smiling.

“Yes, that’s correct. I hope it will be satisfactory?”

Sean nodded, too stunned to speak. He tore his eyes away from Mr. Devaux and moved on to read the contract between Mr. Devaux and Mr. Trant. His mouth dropped open in surprise at the amount of monies to be paid to both the hotel and himself. That, in combination with what Mr. Devaux would pay him, was unheard of for a man his age.

“Is there anything you’d like to add to the contracts?” Devaux asked.

“No, Mr. Devaux,” Sean said, his voice hushed. He was still awed at what he was to earn.

“Very well.” Devaux collected the papers. He reached out and took his fountain pen from its black-and-gold marble stand and proceeded to sign the documents, his signature neat and elegant, a flourish to the “H” and “x.” Once finished, he motioned for Sean to come around the desk and add his signature.

Sean approached, and Devaux pointed to a line above Sean's name. He handed him the pen, and their hands brushed, setting Sean's hand to shaking. He leaned down to sign and, as he did, caught the scent of talcum powder again but much stronger this time. Warm and woodsy, it wafted up from around Devaux's collar, and he wanted to steal closer to inhale more of the intoxicating scent. It reminded him of the plants and the earth in Eire after a refreshing rain. He stared, watching Mr. Devaux's Adam's apple as it slid up and down below the surface of his skin.

"Is there something you wish to change in the contract, Mr. O'Reilly?" Devaux asked, his gaze searching Sean's face.

Sean cleared his throat, briefly meeting Devaux's gaze before quickly looking at the sheets of paper to hide the heat building in his face "No, Mr. Devaux." He signed both sheets.

Once signed, Devaux sealed both in separate envelopes and labeled one with Sean's name. He placed his own copy in the top drawer of the desk and held out the envelope with Sean's name to him. Sean slowly reached up to take it. "Don't forget to take this home with you tonight when you leave. And"—he reached back into the drawer—"here is a personal elevator key so you don't need to ask Mr. Trant for one." He held the key between his fingers and dropped it into Sean's outstretched palm with a smile.

"Thank you, sir." *My own elevator key!*

Devaux pushed his chair back. "Now let's pay a visit to Mr. Trant. Please wait for me a moment in the living room."

"Yes, sir." Sean headed for one of the windows. He stared down at the crowded streets and the black cars dodging pedestrians and other vehicles. It was a miracle there weren't more collisions with the way people drove. He'd only ridden in a car a few times with his landlord. Most of the time, he took the coach or trolley around the city or walked. The farthest place he traveled was to Central Park, which he hadn't visited in a while since Trant had him working longer hours, even on Sundays. Sean grinned. Maybe, with his first paycheck, he could purchase a lunch and have a picnic there some Sunday afternoon.

"Harrison, is that really you?" called a feminine voice after they'd left Trant's office.

Sean saw an elderly woman waving at Mr. Devaux from the lobby.

“Hello, Miriam,” Mr. Devaux called in greeting. “It’s been a long time. How are you and Gene doing?” Mr. Devaux turned to Sean. “Wait here. I won’t be a minute.”

“Yes, sir.” Sean watched Mr. Devaux stride across the lobby—his head held high, shoulders back, exuding confidence—towards the woman and her tiny white dog. He was enjoying the view when he winced at an unexpected tight grip on his bicep and was pulled into a nearby alcove.

“Don’t forget our deal,” Trant hissed. “Don’t think because Mr. Devaux’s hired you, you’re better than us. You’re not long off the boat and still wet behind the ears. You bring something back by the end of this week, or you know what will happen.” He stepped closer to Sean, his cold eyes glinting.

Sean’s mouth dried, and his stomach clenched. He gazed frantically around the area, hoping Mr. Devaux wasn’t within earshot. Good God, Trant didn’t mean stealing from Mr. Devaux, did he? He couldn’t do that. “I can’t steal from Mr. Devaux,” Sean whispered back, hoping Mr. Devaux didn’t walk back into sight. “If he found out, I’d lose the job, and you wouldn’t even get tips from him.”

Trant narrowed his eyes, appearing to think over what Sean had said. “That still leaves the other clientele. Bring me something by this weekend.”

“See you again soon, darling,” Miriam said nearby. Trant hurriedly stepped back from Sean.

Mr. Devaux walked back to where he’d left Sean and looked around. He found him in the alcove and frowned. His gaze shifted between the two. “Is there a problem, Mr. Trant?”

Trant plastered on his fake smile. “Not at all, Mr. Devaux. I was clarifying Mr. O’Reilly’s hours for tomorrow.”

“Then if you’ll excuse us, he’s on my time now.”

Mr. Devaux headed for the elevators, and Sean followed deep in thought. The day had started out so well too, until Trant reminded him of their deal.

“Are you all right, Mr. O’Reilly?” Mr. Devaux asked with concern as he punched the up button for the elevator.

“Yes, sir,” Sean said quietly as the doors opened. He could sense Mr. Devaux watching him so he gave him a small smile. His first lie to his new employer. He sighed inwardly. He’d go to confession, if the priest was hearing them, after he got off work.

“Very well,” Mr. Devaux said after a long moment. “I hope you know if you have any trouble with Mr. Trant, you can come to me?”

Mr. Devaux’s concerned gaze willed Sean to speak, but he couldn’t get the man involved in something as unseemly as Trant’s scheme. Besides, what would Mr. Devaux think of him if he found out what he was ordered to do? He’d likely think Sean would steal from him too. No, as good as Mr. Devaux was to him lately, he couldn’t get him involved. “Yes, sir.” Sean nodded, hoping Mr. Devaux would change the subject.

“Are you ready to start work after lunch?” Mr. Devaux asked, stepping into the elevator and inserting the key into the panel.

Sean grinned. “Yes, Mr. Devaux. I’m looking forward to it.” He didn’t have to fake that answer for it was very much the truth.

Chapter Seven

Sean

Shutting the taxi door behind Mr. Devaux, Sean circled around to the other side and hopped in.

“Abis Tailors on Madison Ave,” Mr. Devaux told the driver, settling back in his seat.

The taxi driver maneuvered into traffic. Sean gripped the tops of his knees, his insides fluttering wildly in excitement and nervousness. Where he was going, and what Mr. Devaux planned, had shocked him—he had yet to complete his probationary period.

The taxi stopped and started through the congested paved streets, dodging the pedestrians rushing across the vehicles’ paths. The driver jerked the steering wheel to the left to avoid an automobile cutting into his lane, and Sean lost his balance, tilting and sliding into Mr. Devaux’s side. “Sorry, sir,” Sean mumbled as Mr. Devaux helped him right himself. He glanced at Mr. Devaux.

“Can’t be helped,” Mr. Devaux said, the corner of his mouth quirked up in a small smile.

Sean slid back to his side of the taxi and hung on to the door handle. He stared out the window at the men strolling down the sidewalks in their business suits and hats and the women in their calf-length dresses and coats. Sean peeked over at Mr. Devaux and his attire. Except for the disastrous first day they met, Mr. Devaux was always impeccably dressed at home. Today he looked even more handsome in one of the outfits Sean had laid out for him—a white shirt with a silver-and-gray-checked silk tie and a medium-gray vest and jacket and loose trousers. Sean decided to match a chocolate, silk pocket handkerchief with it and completed the outfit with Mr. Devaux’s favorite pair of shoes, his brown tri-toned wingtips. Mr. Devaux didn’t like to wear straw hats unless on an afternoon drive, so he wore a gray fedora instead. Sean snorted lightly. Three weeks ago, dressing a gentleman was something he never thought he’d end up doing, but learning valet duties was one of the first lessons Mr. Devaux taught him. At first, the rules of what to wear when and with what confused him, but the color pairings came easily enough. He’d thought today would be like any other day, with Mr. Devaux reviewing and quizzing him on color coordination and suit choices for events, until this afternoon when Mr.

Devaux laid his warm hand on his shoulder and said, “Well done. It’s time to fit you with your own wardrobe.” Sean was pretty sure he still hadn’t completely recovered from the surprise by the time the taxi pulled up in front of the shop.

Hopping out of the vehicle, Sean walked around to the sidewalk and waited for Mr. Devaux to pay the driver. Once done, they approached the tailor’s, which was located in a red-brick building. Sean quickly scanned the front of the shop. Just the look of it spoke money. The entrance was framed by dark polished wood where it met the brick façade. The door was inset from the street, allowing for shallow display windows arranged neatly with ties, premade shirts, and a few fabric samples. More dark wood framed the windows in the double doors. White half curtains covered the lower portion of the glass panels.

Sean hurried to open the door for Mr. Devaux and a bell jingled lightly over their heads as they walked in. He didn’t know where to look first—shelves and racks lined the right side of the shop, holding premade shirts and jackets along with a multitude of ties in various colors draped over wooden rods. Along the left side, long dark-wood counters stretched almost the length of the room. A dark-haired man, only slightly older in appearance than Sean himself, stood behind the counter writing in a ledger. He was dressed in a black suit and tie with a white shirt. He raised his head and smiled when they entered.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Devaux, and Sir.” He nodded at Sean.

“Good afternoon, Yosef,” Mr. Devaux said.

“I’ll get my father.” Yosef crossed over to the right side and opened a door.

Sean removed his cap. *Sir?* He felt uncomfortable being called sir.

Soon, a middle-aged man, his hair peppered with gray, appeared. His suit attire was exactly like the young man’s. “Mr. Devaux, how are you today?”

“Very well, thank you,” Mr. Devaux said, turning to face him and shaking the man’s proffered hand. He stepped to the side and motioned towards Sean. “Mr. Abis, I’d like you to meet Mr. O’Reilly, the young man I told you about.” Mr. Devaux turned to Sean. “Mr. O’Reilly, this is Mr. Abis, my tailor.”

“Welcome, Mr. O’Reilly. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Mr. Abis extended his hand and smiled, his gray eyes steady and calm over the edges of his gold-rimmed spectacles.

Sean wiped his sweaty palm on his pants. “It’s nice to meet you too, sir.” *Sweet Mary, Mr. Devaux’s personal tailor is going to make my suits.*

“Please follow me. I have everything set up in the fitting area.” Mr. Abis led the way through the door he’d emerged from. When Mr. Abis turned away, Sean spotted the small white circular cap on his head. He hadn’t known Mr. Devaux’s tailor was Jewish.

Sean followed Mr. Devaux, only to halt upon entering the room. It was like walking into a gentleman’s club, or what he imagined a gentleman’s club might be like. Plush, dark-green carpeting cushioned their footsteps. A pair of brown, leather club chairs sat on the rug, a mahogany table positioned between them. On the table lay a silver serving tray. Sitting neatly atop the tray were silver spoons and a pair of gold-rimmed, floral cups and saucers with matching sugar and creamer. A teapot sat beside the tray, and cookies finished off the refreshments. In the middle of the room was a low circular dais also covered with the thick carpeting. On it stood a small end table, a pencil, and a card. Next to the dais was a display table covered with a variety of cloth, and behind it, a metal rack with shirts, jackets, and trousers.

“Mr. O’Reilly?” Mr. Abis broke into Sean’s survey of the room.

Sean started. “Yes, sir?”

“The changing room is this way.” Mr. Abis motioned with his hand.

Sean looked and spotted a shuttered door that led to a small room with wall hooks and a padded leather bench inside.

“Please remove all your clothing, socks included, except for your drawers. You’ll find a new Jimshirt in the room which I’d like you to put on. It’s easier to take measurements if you wear it. When you’re ready, step onto the platform.”

It didn’t take long for him to undress; he was used to changing quickly for his job. He was glad he’d followed his mother’s advice to always wear clean undergarments and to never skimp on the quality. At least he wouldn’t embarrass himself that way. Sean looked at himself in the mirror, at his shock of red hair and the overabundance of red freckles peppering his face and body. His heart hammered in his chest at the thought of how he might embarrass himself rather awkwardly. It was one thing to stand almost nude in front of his male friends and coworkers, but another thing to stand almost nude in front of Mr. Devaux. Sean gazed at his form—his sculpted arm muscles shapely from lifting heavy luggage, and his long, strong legs. He was in good condition. Would Mr. Devaux notice? Would he like what he saw? Sean ran his palms over the Jimshirt that hugged his torso, a nervous gesture he had yet to break. Oh well. He couldn’t stay in here forever.

Taking a deep breath, Sean opened the door and stepped out into the room. The plush carpet caressed his soles, and he dug his toes into it. He glanced over to where Mr. Devaux sat drinking a cup of tea and looking through a thick book containing what appeared to be squares of fabric. Sean walked to the dais and stepped up. As soon as he did, Mr. Devaux raised his head and paused, his teacup halfway to his lips. Sean faced forward and watched as Mr. Devaux's gaze swept slowly up and down his body until it reached his face again. He could feel the heat bloom on his chest and back, spreading its flames up his neck and into his face. He didn't need a mirror to know that all of him was now as bright as his hair. Mr. Devaux swallowed, then took a sip of his tea, his eyes never leaving Sean's.

"I see you're ready, Mr. O'Reilly," Mr. Abis said, returning to the room, a tape measure draped around his neck. "Have you ever been fitted before?"

"No, sir."

"Then I'll explain what I'll be doing." He stepped up next to Sean on the wide platform. "First, I'll take and record your measurements on this measurement chart." He held up the card. "Next, I'll have you try on a variety of shirts and drape you with fabric. I have a pair of casual suits I'd like you to try on that I believe will be a close fit." Mr. Abis removed the tape measure from around his neck. "Now if you will follow my instructions, I will take your upper-body measurements."

Sean stood still, only moving or repositioning his arms when Mr. Abis requested. He worked swiftly, chatting with Mr. Devaux at the same time. Sean investigated the room further and spied a set of three mirrors farther along the wall that he hadn't noticed before.

"Upper measurements are taken, Mr. O'Reilly, now for the lower." Mr. Abis knelt on the floor. "Please lift your hands slightly away from your body. That's it. Thank you."

Sean peered over at Mr. Devaux and was met with an intense stare. Mr. Devaux sat with his legs crossed, the book set on the table and replaced by a linen napkin. His forearm rested across his lap. His elbow propped upright on the chair's arm, and his hand lingered near his mouth, his forefinger stroking slowly across his lips. Sean ran his tongue over his own lips, and Mr. Devaux's eyes narrowed. Sean's heart jumped, sending his pulse racing under the focused attention. The rushing blood beat in his ears, and that's when he felt it. *No. Please, Lord, no!* He pinched his lips together and closed his eyes as his cock lengthened and thickened. His body burned, and despite his embarrassment, he

was hard and fully erect. He slowly opened his eyes. Had he shamed Mr. Devaux with this improper public display? Sean blinked. Mr. Devaux no longer sat back in his chair, but had shifted slightly forward, his eyes on Sean's groin. He stifled a groan as his cock pulsed and leaked moisture onto his clean nainsook drawers. Closing his eyes again, he crossed his hands in front of his groin. If this had happened in the privacy of the penthouse, it would have been one thing. But here in public, in a respected establishment, it was wrong.

"Mr. O'Reilly. Mr. O'Reilly," Mr. Abis repeated, breaking into Sean's thoughts. Sean opened his eyes. "Could you please remove your hands?" Sean shifted his feet. He couldn't, not until his cock went down. Mr. Abis' kind eyes looked up at him. "I have three sons, Mr. O'Reilly. There is nothing that I have not seen with them. You are not the first young man, nor will you be the last, to experience this situation. Therefore, there is no need for embarrassment. We are all men here." He smiled. "Now please, hands on your hips while I take the inside leg measurements."

Sean hesitantly removed his hands, glancing up at Mr. Devaux, grateful to see him pouring himself another cup of tea and no longer looking in his direction. Soon Mr. Abis had finished the measurements and rose to his feet.

"Excellent. Please sit and take a few moments for refreshments. I'll have Yosef bring in fresh tea." Mr. Abis left the room.

Sean took a seat on the leather chair opposite Mr. Devaux, reaching for the other napkin to cover his lap. He nibbled on a cookie, but barely tasted it.

"My apologies if I embarrassed you, Mr. O'Reilly. I seem to be developing a habit of it," Mr. Devaux said, his voice rough. He glanced up as Yosef entered, exchanged the teapots, then left the room.

Sitting this close, Sean could see a faint tinge of pink on Mr. Devaux's cheeks and the darkness of his eyes. Sean stared closer; the blue was almost gone, hidden by his dilated pupils. He shot a glance down at Mr. Devaux's lap and found it strategically covered by the tented napkin. *Oh, Lord!* Mr. Devaux was as excited as he was. Sean's eyes widened, and he licked his lips. Mr. Devaux's eyes immediately tracked their motion.

Mr. Devaux cleared his throat. "Would you like some tea?"

Sean could only nod, watching as Mr. Devaux poured, his hands shaking. *He's nervous too.* Sean lifted up his cup and expelled a slow breath. If he dressed well, would Mr. Devaux like him better? If he did, was there anything

other than his looks to keep a man like Mr. Devaux interested? Mr. Abis walked back into the room, and Sean no longer had time to think about it. He put down his cup and stepped back up on the dais.

Chapter Eight

Sean

He stood motionless, resting his hands on his hips like one of those mannequins he'd seen in the shop windows. So far he'd tried on several shirts, each fitting him perfectly. Currently, he wore a plain white one while Mr. Abis draped different weights and colors of fabrics over his shoulders. He discussed the fabric contents with Mr. Devaux and decided which ones enhanced Sean's body and looks. Not that he paid much attention to his looks, at least not until he'd started working for Mr. Devaux.

Sean learned from their conversation that Mr. Abis had shown up at the penthouse with the fabric catalog, and the two had decided on color choices beforehand. That led to what he was trying on now. Mr. Devaux had borrowed his room service uniform from Mr. Trant, and Mr. Abis had taken his measurements from that. Sean would've loved to have heard that exchange. He smiled to himself. From those measurements, Mr. Abis had created two casual suits, which Sean would take back with him today.

The men finally settled on two fabrics, a gray flannel for the three-piece suit with a matching bowtie, the other a dark-blue check paired with a solid medium-blue fabric for the shirt and a smoky-gray silk tie and matching handkerchief. Sean was scheduled for another fitting for those suits in two weeks.

Mr. Abis had just finished selecting the fabrics when Yosef, knocked on the door. Mr. Abis chatted discreetly with him before he turned to them. "Would you excuse me for a moment? There's an urgent matter I must attend to."

"Of course. Take your time," Mr. Devaux said. "I'll select some ties for Mr. O'Reilly."

Mr. Abis thanked him and left the room.

"Mr. O'Reilly, would you please put on the white-and-blue-striped shirt," Mr. Devaux said.

After all the changing of clothes, Sean had lost most of his anxiety and inhibitions and simply removed the white shirt, laying it neatly on the table. He slipped into the dress shirt and buttoned it up, watching Mr. Devaux select a medium-taupe tie from the rack.

“How many ways do you know how to tie a necktie?” Mr. Devaux asked, walking towards him.

“Only one, sir.”

“Show me.” Mr. Devaux moved to stand in front of him and handed him the tie.

Sean flipped up his collar, slid the tie around his neck, and knotted it. He waited for Mr. Devaux’s approval.

Mr. Devaux nodded. “The four-in-hand. Simple, but it works. I want you to learn the Windsor also.” He stepped back off the platform and walked towards the mirrors farther down the right-hand wall. “Come with me.”

Sean followed, still barefoot, dressed only in his undergarments, shirt, and tie. Mr. Devaux stepped aside and motioned for Sean to move in front of him, facing the mirror.

“I will first demonstrate by tying the knot while you observe. Then you’ll try it yourself,” Mr. Devaux said, looking at Sean in the mirror. Sean nodded. Mr. Devaux stepped up close behind him, reached around and over his shoulders, and unknotted the tie. “Watch closely. I will go slowly,” he said, his voice lower and quieter than normal. Mr. Devaux’s body radiated heat, seeping through the shirt into Sean’s skin, joining his rapidly climbing pulse rate. He looked in the mirror, and it confirmed his suspicions—he’d surpassed his usual shade of blush and rocketed into flaming red. His resulting gulp sounded sickeningly loud in his ears.

Sean stared into the mirror and tried to focus on Mr. Devaux’s hands, but it was useless. In fact, it only made matters worse. Mr. Devaux’s long fingers and sure hands confidently manipulated the tails. His arms brushed along Sean’s, sending tiny sparks radiating along his biceps.

Sean imagined those dexterous fingers wrapped around a certain appendage, tugging and squeezing, until his mind shut down, and his body took over. Blood rushed straight to his groin, and he filled and hardened until it felt like the weight of an iron pipe rested between his thighs. It throbbed to the beat of his heart, deepening his hunger for Mr. Devaux. Sean quickly gave thanks that the shirt hem came down low enough to hide his raging erection. He glanced up, instantly captured by Mr. Devaux’s intense gaze.

“Are you paying attention?” Mr. Devaux asked, his voice husky. He inserted the long end of the tie through the neck opening, down through the

knot and pulled it tight, positioning it in place. He flipped the collar down and adjusted it, running his thumb and fingers along the inside and outside, leaving trails of fire behind, where they touched Sean's skin. Mr. Devaux fingered the tie, straightening it. He locked eyes with Sean in the mirror. They stared at each other, their harsh breathing the only sound. Mr. Devaux glanced away first and cleared his throat. "I want you to try it now." He gestured to the tie and took a step back.

Just that one step back, and Sean ached for Mr. Devaux's touch. He swallowed and reached up for the tails, his hands shaking as he undid the knot. All he could do was wonder if Mr. Devaux was as hard as he was. He lifted his eyes and stared in the mirror, straight into Mr. Devaux's smoldering gaze.

As if in answer, Mr. Devaux stepped closer, wrapped his arms around Sean's shoulders and placed his hands over Sean's. He pressed his warm body up along Sean's back. A steel rod pressed against Sean's ass, and Sean stifled a moan. Again, he caught sight of Mr. Devaux's heated gaze in the mirror.

Mr. Devaux turned his head slightly, his lips grazing Sean's ear. "Let's try this again," he whispered, sending a shiver down Sean's spine. With his hands over Sean's, he directed his motions.

Soft puffs of air caressed Sean's cheek as Mr. Devaux gave directions. He inhaled the lingering scent of the perfumed talcum powder Mr. Devaux used after he'd shaved. He wanted to bury his nose in Mr. Devaux's neck and breathe in the tempting fragrance. He turned his face towards Mr. Devaux, his heart beating wildly. He stared into dark eyes, pupils blown wide open, only a thin line of blue left around the edge. His body craved more contact, and he leaned against Mr. Devaux's chest, canting his ass back at the same time. Mr. Devaux's mouth parted at the motion. Sean licked his lips, and Mr. Devaux looked down. Ever so slowly, he leaned forward.

"Thank you, Mr. Chapman," sounded Mr. Abis' voice, clear and strong from the other side of the closed door. "They will be ready for you tomorrow."

Mr. Devaux released Sean from his hold and took an abrupt step back. His expression shuttered into the professional business face he normally wore. Sean shivered at the sudden loss of his warmth, physically and emotionally, effectively dampening his arousal.

A knock sounded at the door. "Come in," Mr. Devaux replied, his voice deep and rasping.

Mr. Abis entered with a shopping bag, and without giving them a glance, headed straight for the table. He pulled out braces with matching garters and a couple of belts. "I apologize for taking so long, but one of my customers had an emergency." He layered the shirt and suit fabrics, adding the accessories to them. "Mr. Devaux, I would appreciate your opinion on these suspenders and belts."

"Of course." Mr. Devaux strode over to Mr. Abis, leaving Sean alone.

Without Mr. Devaux's attention, it didn't take long for Sean's erection to disappear, but the desire to remain close to his boss hadn't vanished. Instead, it was worse. Before today, Sean only dreamed such a thing could happen between the two of them. Today showed him the dream wasn't far out of reach.

After Mr. Abis and Mr. Devaux finished choosing the accessories, Mr. Abis helped Sean dress in one of his new casual suits. He adjusted the jacket shoulders and smoothed them down. "Please fasten the jacket buttons, Mr. O'Reilly."

Sean closed the jacket front and lowered his hands. He looked into the mirror and blinked. He didn't recognize himself. The man staring back at him was fashionably dressed in a white-and-blue-striped shirt with a taupe tie. Layered over that was a blue-gray vest and a pale white-and-blue-check sports jacket. A white handkerchief peeked from the top pocket, and the trousers were a light coordinating blue.

"Excellent." Mr. Abis beamed. "If you're happy with the fit, I'll fetch the paperwork for the other two suits."

Mr. Devaux nodded his approval. "Yes, please do." Mr. Abis left the room and Mr. Devaux continued. "Our next stop is for shoes, socks, undergarments, and matching caps."

"I... thank you, Mr. Devaux. I don't know what to say." Sean's words were hushed. He was blessed. Many people had helped him get to this point, after the tragedy in his life, and he'd never be able to repay them.

Mr. Devaux waved him off. "You're representing me. I consider the clothes part of your job position."

Mr. Abis approached with a folder and papers. "Please review the order, Mr. Devaux, and sign at the bottom if everything is correct." He took the forms once they were signed. "If you have other shopping to do today, we can hold the other sport suit and Mr. O'Reilly's clothes for you. My sons and I are

working late tonight. I'll be happy to keep your purchases and clothing here until you're finished."

Mr. Devaux nodded. "Yes, that will work well. We'll return around eight." He stuck out his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Abis, for seeing us today."

"It was a pleasure, Mr. Devaux, Mr. O'Reilly." He shook their hands. "I'll see you tonight."

Harrison

Harrison walked out of the shop with Sean close behind. What in the world had gotten into him, teasing Sean like that? He should be ashamed of himself for seducing an employee, but he wasn't. Sean had set off a firestorm in his groin, something he hadn't felt in years, and now his body was vibrating with arousal. He *never* got this excited on his few excursions to the Dionysus. He cast glances at the young man and often caught him peering down at his clothes. Harrison smiled to himself, Sean would get used to it. He was going to see to it that his favorite employee didn't want for any material object.

They'd barely traveled a block when two men approached them.

"Good Lord! Harrison, is that you?" called a tall, brown-haired man. "I can't believe you dragged yourself out of seclusion." He laughed, stopping in front of them. He grasped Harrison's bicep with one hand and shook his hand vigorously with the other.

Harrison smiled, returning the enthusiastic greeting. "Hello, Karl, you're looking well."

"Thank you, and so are you." He patted Harrison on the shoulder. "Finally, you took everyone's advice and got out of your cave. It's really good to see you out and about again." Karl glanced at Sean then back at Harrison. "Speaking of which, why are you?"

Harrison laughed. "We stopped by Abis' to fit my new assistant for his wardrobe." He smiled broadly. "This is Sean O'Reilly." He turned to Sean, drinking in his smartly dressed appearance, his chest swelling with pride to have a handsome young man such as Sean walking at his side. "Mr. O'Reilly, this is my colleague and friend, Mr. Karl Weston."

"How do you do, sir?"

"Pleasure to meet you," Karl said, shaking Sean's hand.

Karl motioned to the slim, attractive blond man standing next to him. “This is my assistant, Theodore Bracher.”

Harrison smiled to himself. It wasn’t a secret among their group that Theo was more than Karl’s “assistant.”

Theo snorted and shot Karl a sideways glance, his lips curling in a mischievous grin. He took a step forward and extended his hand towards Sean. “I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. O’Reilly,” he said, his voice bright and flirtatious.

Sean smiled politely and shook Theo’s hand, but then his smile faded and his cheeks flushed pink. Harrison looked down at their hands and saw Theo stroking his middle finger slowly along Sean’s palm. Harrison scowled and looked up, catching Theo fluttering his eyelashes. Harrison’s jaw clenched. He placed his hands on Sean’s arms, guiding him over to his right side, switching places. “It’s good to see you again, Mr. Bracher,” Harrison said through his fake smile, clasping Theo’s hand and tightening his grip around his fingers. Harrison stared hard into his eyes.

Theo winced and averted his gaze. “It’s nice to see you again too, sir,” he said softly.

“Harrison, what do you say about us grabbing lunch or dinner together sometime?” Karl said, interrupting Harrison’s silent challenge to Theo. “We’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

Harrison released Theo’s hand and turned to Karl. “Excellent idea. How about later this week? I’ll have to check my schedule first. I have an ungodly number of appointments.” From the corner of his eye Harrison saw Theo flexing his fingers before shoving his hands in his pockets.

“That’ll work. I’ll contact you and have Mr. O’Reilly schedule me in when you’re free.” Karl stuck out his hand and shook Sean’s again. “It was nice meeting you.”

Once the goodbye handshakes had been exchanged Harrison and Sean continued down the block.

“You deserved that, you know.” Harrison heard Karl say as they walked away.

“I was just being friendly,” Theo stated, his light voice carrying easily through the crowd.

“Not everyone appreciates your gestures. Keep your hands to yourself when it comes to Mr. O’Reilly.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harrison led the way to the men’s shoe shop only a block down the street and right next door to a men’s boutique. He picked out two pairs of Oxfords—one in black, one in brown—for Sean to try on. Once fitted, he paid for them, and they moved to the next shop, where they’d complete Sean’s new ensemble with multiple pairs of socks, Jimshirts—which Harrison insisted were more comfortable to wear under clothing instead of union suits—caps in gray and light tan, and the new fashionable men’s boxers in both silk and cotton. They’d shop for fedoras when they picked up his business suits.

“Mr. Devaux?” Sean asked hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“I’m already stocked up on boxers, sir,” he said quietly.

“The silk boxers will feel more comfortable under the business suits; the cotton for your everyday ones.” Harrison picked out several pairs for himself. “You’re free to wear whatever you wish for your hotel work, but I want you wearing these with your suits. Please pick out enough for the week, preferably more.”

“Yes, sir.”

Harrison smiled as Sean gave the boxers his undivided attention and fingered the fabric. Sean focused his full awareness on this task, like he did all his other duties. How would he react the first time silk boxers slipped over his skin? Would he enjoy the smooth touch brushing over his balls and cock? Would he harden like he did today at the tailor’s? Harrison’s gaze slid over Sean’s suit, knowing what lay hidden beneath it. Those strong muscular arms and legs had flexed while Sean was fitted, and the thick member hiding in his drawers had stiffened and filled. Harrison’s cock swelled now, and he ached to press up against Sean’s back again, bending him over and... Harrison shook his head. He was the employer; he couldn’t put the young man in the position of fearing for his job if he refused any overtures. It was unethical. Harrison walked around to the other side of the display table. He didn’t want to embarrass Sean any further than he had today.

“I have my choices, Mr. Devaux.”

Harrison nodded and paid for their selections including a dark-brown leather briefcase with a shoulder strap for those items Sean would need to carry back and forth from home. “We’ll return to Mr. Abis’ and pick up your clothes, then hail a cab. I want to eat dinner at home.”

Sean left after their meal. Harrison insisted he leave his suit and shoes in one of the penthouse’s spare bedrooms. That way he could change into them when he started work at three instead of leaving them in the communal changing rooms. He poured himself a drink and walked to a window, gazing down at the people leaving work late or heading out for a night on the town. Today was the first day in almost three years he didn’t have that dark cloud hanging over his head. Alone at home, with Sean gone—when had he started to think of Mr. O’Reilly as Sean?—he realized he hadn’t thought of Andrew all day as if he’d never existed.

Guilt warred with his peace. Andy would have laughed at him. “*It’s about time, you stubborn dimwit,*” he’d say. But he didn’t want to forget Andy—not ever. Their time together had been the happiest and most content of his life. His eyes burned, and his throat knotted. But wasn’t that what he was doing by showing interest in Sean? Forgetting Andy? Displacing him with someone else? His desire to kiss the tempting young man this afternoon had been overwhelming. He was positive Sean would have eagerly returned the gesture, if they hadn’t been interrupted.

Harrison raised his glass to his lips and, with a quick tilt of his head, downed the whiskey. He poured himself a double and threw that one back as well. He seemed to have only made his life more complicated. Missing the man he loved, whom he could never get back, and desiring a young man who wouldn’t turn down a chance to be with a man of his status. He poured himself another finger’s worth.

Was that so wrong? Many men of his persuasion, even though they were married, had boys they doted on and some even loved. He, luckily, did not have that chain to deal with or the worry about producing a family heir; his younger sister had done that three times over.

Would it be an affront to Andy’s memory if he took up a relationship with Sean? Would Andy forgive him? Sean had made it clear he didn’t fraternize with the hotel clients. Would that include him? Harrison brought a hand to his temple and massaged it. Too many questions were giving him a headache.

Sleep sounded like a good option. He swirled the amber liquid in his glass as he looked down at it. His thoughts still spiraling, he finished off his drink and placed the dirty tumbler on the table before seeking out his bed.

Chapter Nine

Sean

He stepped off the elevator and moved quickly to Mr. Devaux's door, anxious to begin his shift with his handsome employer. One month had passed since the visit to the tailor, and they'd fallen into an easy familiarity. He'd attend to Mr. Devaux's mail—opening and sorting it per category—and often functioned as his pickup and delivery boy. Mr. Devaux preferred someone he knew, rather than the random clerks sent to deliver important documents. One day he brought up the subject of hiring a tutor: he wanted Sean to learn business basics. For now, the sessions were twice a week for an hour, taking place at the teacher's home. Sean enjoyed it immensely, devouring all the information. Mr. Devaux even brought home books from the men's club for him to study. All this kept him busy, but if Mr. Devaux had no meetings scheduled on a given day, they would go out to lunch and take dinner in the penthouse.

Sean pushed on the door, elation turning quickly to confusion when he found it locked. He retrieved the key from his pocket and let himself inside, calling out, "Mr. Devaux?"

The penthouse was lit only by the sun coming in through the windows, the beams of light filtering about among the furnishings, setting lines in the carpet and sofa. Some of it caught on the crystal drops of the chandeliers, throwing tiny rainbows of color upon the rich browns and creams. He wandered through the rooms, hoping he'd find Mr. Devaux napping in some strange location... hopefully not drunk. He was quite proud of the fact that Mr. Devaux had curbed much of his alcohol consumption since Sean had come to work for him.

After a thorough inspection did not turn up his employer, he stepped into his room to change. Mr. Devaux could be back any moment, and Sean wanted to be ready to start their day. He halted; resting on the bed, on top of a laid-out suit, was a folded note.

Mr. O'Reilly,

Go to my lawyer's, Mr. David Weinberg, located on the tenth floor of the Franklin building on Broadway. He'll have some papers for me. I'll be back at five o'clock.

HD

Sean was ecstatic to be outside on such a gorgeous day. The temperature was in the midseventies, and the light breeze blowing in from the ocean and sneaking around the tall buildings felt wonderful. Although Mr. Devaux had left him taxi fare, he chose to walk to Mr. Weinberg's office, cutting through the corner of Central Park. Besides, Mr. Devaux said he wouldn't be back until five for dinner. He had plenty of time.

He pushed his briefcase to his shoulder and stuffed his hands in his pockets as he walked, enjoying the serenity of the park as he passed through. Once he emerged out of the park, he avidly people-watched, taking in the double-decker buses filled with people, the newspaper boys calling out to passersby, while waving their papers high in the air, and the refined ladies shopping, their valets weighed down with packages. Traffic cops directed the flow of vehicles, sometimes grabbing a person from harm's way when they weren't quick enough to dodge a hurrying taxi. Everyone doing something, going somewhere, and he smiled to himself, glad to be one of them.

In no time at all, he reached Mr. Weinberg's office and retrieved the necessary documents, enclosing them safely in his case. He accepted a piece of cake and some punch in celebration of an employee's birthday and downed them quickly, eager to be back outside. He stepped out and turned his face to the sun momentarily, knowing it would bring out his freckles, but he didn't care. Having Sundays off wasn't enough to soothe his heart's yearning for sunlight, and being outdoors. He'd take advantage of whatever small time he could get.

Sean's strides back to the penthouse were slower, and he dawdled in the sunshine and heat. He had time to spare, so he took one of the narrower side streets. This one, in particular, was filled with quaint cafés and shops, their colorful fabric awnings fluttering in the breeze. A few customers were seated outside, enjoying their meals within fenced-off patios. He gazed into the storefront windows as he passed and eavesdropped on conversations as he walked by. Until one sight brought him up short.

A chill ran through his body. There inside Bonjour, the restaurant across the street, sitting at the window table was Mr. Devaux. He'd recognize that handsome profile anywhere; there was no way he could be mistaken. And he wasn't alone; he was with a woman. A beautiful, dark-haired woman, her luxurious, wavy hair pulled back in a bright floral scarf. She was one of the most elegant women Sean had ever seen. Mr. Devaux leaned in close, laughing at something she'd said, and the woman raised her delicate hand with its long,

red fingernails and laid it on Mr. Devaux's cheek, holding his face still. She kissed him on the other cheek and Mr. Devaux smiled. He raised her hand to his lips and placed a lingering kiss on it, his eyes never leaving her face. She laughed and kissed him a couple more times.

Sean's stomach roiled at the sight, the cake threatening to make a reappearance. He had to get away; the sight of them together was unbearable. How could he have been so wrong? Just because Mr. Devaux's previous companion was a man didn't mean he only liked men. It was as clear as day he preferred the company of a beautiful woman or at least the company of someone of similar status. Sean dragged his hand over his eyes as if to wipe out what he'd seen. He should have known he was nothing more than a temporary distraction for Mr. Devaux until he found the right person. Someone like that woman or someone more sophisticated? He hurried away down the street and halted when he turned the corner.

His stupid dream that Mr. Devaux might ever find interest in him was just that, a dream, and now it was crushed. His chest tightened in despair, and he sucked in a deep shuddering breath. His hands balled into fists, and he crossed his arms, tucking his hands under his armpits. He leaned against a nearby lamppost and tried to calm his breathing. He'd never be anything other than an assistant. Mr. Devaux was out of his reach, and for him to think otherwise was foolishness. Trant was right.

Sean unfolded his arms. He still had to face Mr. Devaux, and soon. No matter what he saw, he needed to get his head on straight and pull himself together. He breathed in deeply, straightened, ran his hands down the front of his jacket, and headed back to the hotel.

Sean heard Mr. Devaux whistling a cheerful tune as he came in the door and rounded the hall into the living room.

"Hello, Mr. O'Reilly," he said, heading for the cabinet and pouring himself a drink. "Were you able to pick up the documents?" He turned and smiled brightly in Sean's direction.

He couldn't bear to see that smile, not when he knew who put it there. Sean turned away and pretended to remove a speck of dirt from the chessboard. "Yes, sir. I placed the packet on your desk."

"Good, thank you." Mr. Devaux came up to stand beside him. Sean chanced a glance, and he abruptly squeezed his eyes shut. A faint smear of red still

stained Mr. Devaux's cheek. Sean walked away to the other side of the sofa. "Is there anything in particular you want me to work on today, sir?" he asked flatly.

Mr. Devaux turned around slowly, a frown marring his face and wrinkling his forehead. "Are you all right, Mr. O'Reilly?"

Sean jerked his head in a short nod. "Fine, sir."

Mr. Devaux walked closer, eyeing him closely. "Is Mr. Trant causing problems?"

"No, sir," Sean said, swallowing. "I'm just not... feeling well today."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that." Mr. Devaux's frown disappeared and he studied Sean's face. "I wouldn't have sent you on a task if I'd known." He placed a hand on Sean's shoulder. "If you're sick, you're free to stay here in the guest room and rest. But I also don't mind if you go home."

Sean's stomach curdled at the touch, and he wanted to shrug it off, but he stood firm. "I would prefer to go home, sir, if you don't mind. I'll just change my clothes first."

"Yes, why don't you do that and get some rest. Let me call you a taxi."

"No, thank you, I'll catch the trolley home."

"Are you sure?" Mr. Devaux's gaze was kind. When Sean nodded, he smiled. "All right, I'll see you tomorrow if you're feeling better. If not, don't worry about me." He patted Sean's shoulder, smiled again, and then made his way over to the piano.

Sean changed his clothes and, without saying goodbye, headed for the door. As he did, he heard a lighthearted melody follow him out. He bit down hard on his lower lip; he knew that song wasn't for him.

For the next week, Mr. Devaux attended many meetings away from the penthouse. Sean wasn't sure that was all he was doing, because one morning he caught a glimpse of him hopping into a taxi with *that woman*, while Sean was on porter duty. Another day he told Sean to take the day off, because he didn't know when he'd return, and he'd take care of the mail himself.

Then Saturday evening arrived.

Mr. Devaux had called, saying he'd arrive home soon, but he was going back out and to ready his evening suit for him. He was giving Sean the evening

off, therefore he should be changed and ready to leave. Shortly after he received the message, Sean changed into his regular clothes that were slightly better now. He had earned enough money for new boots and had even bought a suit at a small department store at discount. He'd just brushed off his employer's suit when Mr. Devaux stepped into the bedroom.

"I'm in a hurry tonight, I'm afraid," Mr. Devaux said. "Please make up two drinks, a G and T and a straight Scotch. Leave them on the buffet."

"Yes, Mr. Devaux." Sean left the suit and headed for the living room. It didn't take him long, so he stared out the window, enjoying the city lights and waiting for Mr. Devaux's next orders. There was a knock on the front door, and he was just about to answer it when Mr. Devaux rushed out from the hall and motioned him away.

"Harrison, darling," Sean heard from the living room, and he cringed at the voice. It was *that woman*; he was sure of it. *How did she get up here without the elevator key? Did Mr. Devaux give her one too?* Sean ground his teeth.

"Aren't you ready yet? The show is due to start at any moment."

"I'm almost ready. Mr. O'Reilly, I've forgotten my cufflinks and watch," he said as he entered the living room. "Could you please get them for me? The Cartier pocket watch and the matching cufflinks." The sleek, black evening suit with white shirt and vest fit Mr. Devaux's sculpted body like a glove, and Sean's heart ached for the handsome man. The woman stood beside him as beautiful as ever. She was dressed in a pastel pink flapper dress embroidered with sequins, beads, and pearls. Her hair was pulled back in a soft bun and held in place with a gold band and a large circular ornament with feathers and dangling strings of pearls over her right ear. Around her long, graceful neck, she had draped more strands of pearls. Mr. Devaux turned away from the liquor cabinet and to his companion. "Here, drink this," he said, handing her the G&T.

"Perfect, darling. Thank you." The woman reached up and pulled Mr. Devaux's face towards her, kissing him on the cheek. She laughingly rubbed away the lipstick stain she'd left on his skin.

His stomach plummeting, Sean spun and hurried to Mr. Devaux's bedroom, eager to escape from the same room as the woman.

The first time Sean had seen Mr. Devaux's storage he was speechless. Most hotel residents stored their clothes in steamer trunks, or if they lived on the premises, a large armoire. Mr. Devaux's storage went far beyond that. One whole wall at the end of his bedroom was filled, floor to ceiling, with drawers

and closets for his clothing and accessories. A long counter area was above the drawers and Sean used that to fold Mr. Devaux's clothes. Mr. Devaux said it was made of dark cherry, and its drawers and doors inlaid with ebony in a large X pattern. He'd had it custom-made.

Sean pulled out the drawer containing the cufflinks and found the black onyx circular ones, rimmed with white gold and set with sparkling diamonds in the centers. Next he opened the watch drawer and easily found the gold-trimmed pocket watch with its cream-colored dial and black Roman numerals. Clipped to it was a gold chain. He was just about to close the drawer when he caught sight of a large, dark-blue velvet pouch he hadn't seen before. He shot a glance at the door, his hand hovering over the pouch. Taking one watch wouldn't hurt. Mr. Devaux had so many, and giving this to Trant would keep him off his back for a while. Sean snatched the pouch, feeling the shape of a pocket watch inside, along with something else he didn't have time to examine right now. He quickly shut the drawer, and stuck the pouch inside his jacket pocket.

"Come now, Harrison, we must be going," the woman said.

"Yes, yes." Mr. Devaux turned to Sean as he hurried down the hall.

Sean handed over the cufflinks and watch without a word, his heart hammering in his chest.

"Thank you, Mr. O'Reilly." Mr. Devaux took them and started to put them on when the woman grabbed his arm.

"Come along, darling. You can put them on in the car. I don't want to miss my friend's opening night."

"Very well," Mr. Devaux sighed. He looked at Sean and smiled. "You have the night off. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Devaux ushered Sean and the woman out and locked the door behind him. He fit his elevator key into the slot, and they all rode down together, the woman claiming Mr. Devaux's complete attention and talking animatedly the whole time. Mr. Devaux couldn't get a word in edgewise. The lower the elevator descended, the greater the sense of foreboding that grew over Sean. He shouldn't have done it.

When they reached the lobby, Mr. Devaux and the woman hurried off to a waiting car, but not just any car... it was a Rolls Royce. The black vehicle

pulled away from the curb, and once they were out of sight, a semblance of Sean's sanity returned. He looked down the hall to Mr. Trant's office. He could give him the watch, then it wouldn't be his responsibility anymore, but something urged him to see what was in the pouch first. Sean sought out the employee restroom facilities and closed one of the lavatory doors behind him. He carefully opened the pouch and pulled out the watch, and stopped, his breath quickening. No. It couldn't be. Maybe Mr. Devaux had another just like that one. He heard a soft crinkle in the pouch. His heart rate accelerated and he chewed on his bottom lip until it bled. With shaking fingers he pulled the pouch open and extracted the neatly folded piece of paper. He carefully unfolded it once... twice... and there was the handwriting he'd seen once before.

My Dearest Harry,

Sean rocked back and forth on his heels. Jesus have mercy on his soul! What had he done? He couldn't give this to Trant. He had to put it back before Mr. Devaux returned. Stuffing the note and watch into the pouch, he frantically searched his pockets for the door key, but he didn't have it. He must have left it in his suit. What was he going to do?

After walking the street for close to an hour, trying to figure out how he was going to fix the horrible thing he'd done, Sean pulled open the heavy oak front door of St. Bartholomew's Catholic Church and stepped inside. When the door closed behind him, the din of the cars faded away, and he was immediately surrounded by near silence. Without the daylight shining through the stained glass windows, the soft glow of prayer candles to the right of the altar cast a soothing light in the church, as did two small chandeliers. Three steps led up to an altar railing; farther behind it was the wooden altar draped with a white linen cloth, its edges woven with intricate embroidery. A cross stood in the center, and on either side was a three-branched, bronze table candelabra. Behind the altar, a large painting of *The Last Supper* hung on the wall; above that were three stained glass windows.

He removed his cap and walked down the center aisle, stopping to genuflect and make the sign of the cross. Choosing a pew close to the confessional, he slid to the end and dropped the padded kneeler. His mind fled in too many directions, searching for the easiest and least painful way to give the watch back. If he'd been able to return it after Mr. Devaux departed with the woman, Mr. Devaux would never have to know. But he'd left the door key in his suit when he changed. And as much as he didn't want to admit it, he knew that was

the coward's way out, not taking responsibility for what he'd done. His father's words—extolling responsibility and pride in his work—rang clearly in his head, and his heart ached for his da. He prayed the priest would tell him the right thing to do.

He heard the soft click of a door opening and looked up as a penitent left one of the confessionals. Checking around and finding no one else heading for the booth, Sean got to his feet and entered, closing the door quietly behind him so as not to disturb the priest or the person on the other side of the priest. He knelt on the wooden kneeler, his heart pounding hard in his chest, and clasped his sweaty palms together around his cap, waiting for the priest to slide open the panel. He wondered if this is what it felt like to stand before a judge and be sentenced for a crime. Only he had no lawyer to defend him for his actions, not that his actions were defensible. They weren't.

If it was quiet in the church, it was even quieter in this tiny space. The kneeler was uncomfortable, but Sean figured it was supposed to be—part of a sinner's penance for his sins. A crucifix hung over the decoratively carved wooden latticework in front of him. The window was small, and a tightly woven metal grill was sandwiched between the two halves of the lattice, one on the penitent's side and the other on the priest's so neither person could clearly see the other. The only difference was the priest's side had a sliding panel he opened when he was ready to hear confession. Sean didn't have to wait long before the panel slid gently open.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost," the priest said quietly.

Sean made the sign of the cross and cleared his throat. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been one week since my last confession," he said hoarsely and bowed his head.

He couldn't do this; he choked back a sob.

"Are you all right, my son?" the priest asked kindly.

Sean nodded, only to remember the priest couldn't see him. "All right, Father," he rasped, his mouth dry. He wiped at his eyes. His accent always grew heavier when he was upset. "I..." He swallowed, gathered his courage, and spilled out his crime in a rush. "I stole somethin' from someone. It's important to them." A sob broke free, and Sean covered his mouth with his hand. He took in a couple of deep breaths to steady himself. "I know I did wrong, but I don't know what to do now." He lifted his face, trying to see through the mesh and praying the priest would have the right answer for him.

The priest spoke gently. “It is true that confession is good for the soul. But sometimes it is not to God or the Church that one must confess their sins. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father.” Sean nodded. “But what if this person won’t forgive me?”

“There are always consequences for our actions, my son, be they good or bad. We must accept the decision and pray for God’s help in facing whatever happens.”

Sean’s stomach dropped and twisted, his hands shaking. Somehow he knew that was the only answer, even if he didn’t want to hear it.

“Is there anything else you wish to confess?”

He couldn’t tell the priest about the jealousy that started him on the road to stealing, not just yet. He would another day. Confessing to stealing the watch was more than he could handle for one night.

“No, that’s all, Father.”

“Recite five Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, and do what you already know is right. My prayers are with you.”

“Yes, Father. Thank you, Father.”

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.”

“Amen,” Sean repeated.

The window slid quietly closed.

Sean remained kneeling for another minute before exiting the cubicle. Despite the dark pit that opened in his stomach at his decision, the only right choice was for him to give the watch back to Mr. Devaux tomorrow.

Chapter Ten

Sean

Sweat trickled under Sean's uniform collar as he pushed the cart carrying Mr. Devaux's breakfast into the penthouse. The watch lay like a giant weight in his trouser pocket, and he ran his hand down the front of his jacket nervously. He was sure today would turn into one of the worst days of his life, right after his parents' funerals. They had brought him up to be trustworthy and honorable; instead, his actions disgraced both him and their memory.

He rolled the cart next to the table, swallowing hard as Mr. Devaux approached.

"Good morning, Mr. O'Reilly. How are you feeling today?" he asked cheerfully, pulling out the chair and taking a seat.

Sean kept his head down as he picked up the silver platter bearing Mr. Devaux's breakfast. He hadn't bothered to grab anything for himself from the kitchen, he was sure Mr. Devaux wouldn't want him around after he'd heard what he had to say. He just wanted to get it over with.

His stomach in knots, he placed the tray in front of Mr. Devaux and stood to the side, clasping his hands together anxiously. Mr. Devaux glanced towards the seat where Sean usually sat. His brow furrowed, and he turned his head to look up at Sean.

"Sit, Mr. O'Reilly," he said, indicating the empty chair.

"Could I..." Sean stared down at his hands and stumbled over his words. "Could I... speak to you... for a moment? Please?" He risked a quick peek at Mr. Devaux, finding him watching him with curiosity.

"Yes, of course. Go on." Mr. Devaux picked up his napkin and lay it in his lap. His movement drew Sean's attention to Mr. Devaux's groin, and he bit back a sigh at what he knew he would never have.

He stuck his right hand into his pocket and fingered the watch. "I... uh..." *Please have mercy on me.* "I have your friend's watch."

"You have what?" Mr. Devaux blinked in confusion. "What do you mean my friend's watch? Dr. Barnett's? Did he leave it?"

"No, sir. Not his watch." Sean grew light-headed, and his hands shook.

“Then whose is it?” Mr. Devaux peered at him, an eyebrow raised in question at Sean’s continued silence.

Sean’s mouth worked, but no sound came out, only a stifled sob muffled by the press of the back of his hand to his mouth. He withdrew the watch from his pocket and clutched it tightly in his fist.

Mr. Devaux swiveled in his chair and held out his hand, waiting. When Sean still didn’t hand it over, he rose to his feet. “Come now, Mr. O’Reilly, it can’t be that bad.”

It was worse than bad. Reluctantly, Sean lay the velvet pouch on Mr. Devaux’s open palm. He quickly withdrew his hand, as if he’d been burned, and clasped both hands behind him as he stepped back.

Mr. Devaux stared at the pouch and frowned. “I don’t understand. What are you doing with Andrew’s watch? I left it in my drawer.”

Sean stood silently, chewing on the inside of his lip. He could feel the bright flush of embarrassment grow on his skin as he watched the curtain of anger slowly draw across Mr. Devaux’s features. The clench of Mr. Devaux’s jaw grew tighter right before his eyes.

“You stole this from me?” His voice, heavy with accusation, sent an icy shock down Sean’s spine, and he flinched at the tone, only barely holding himself back from fleeing. “You went through my personal possessions and stole this from me?”

“Is that what you do? Pretend to friend someone and then steal from them?” Mr. Devaux’s eyes glinted with cold fury. “You’re no better than a common street urchin, only we know what to expect from those out there,” he spat, pointing out the window. “You hide behind your polite behavior in here and trick us into believing you’re something else.” He took a menacing step towards Sean. “How many others have you stolen from?”

Sean stumbled back and looked away.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you!” Mr. Devaux snapped. “I asked you a question. How many other hotel clients have you stolen from?”

“No one, sir,” he mumbled. “This is the first time.” Sean hunched his shoulders under Mr. Devaux’s glare.

“And I’m supposed to believe that?” he shouted, his face red with rage.

“It’s true, sir.” Sean prayed Mr. Devaux believed him. “I didn’t plan...”

Mr. Devaux snorted. “I don’t want to hear your excuses. You aren’t to be trusted.” He put the watch in his pocket and headed for the liquor cabinet. “I no longer require your service. Your contract is broken, and I’m reporting this to Mr. Trant. Leave the keys and get out,” he barked and turned his back on Sean.

Without another word Sean rushed down the hall, threw the keys on the entry table and ran out of the penthouse, brushing at his eyes. He wouldn’t cry. The click of the door closing behind him a final reminder of what he’d lost with one selfish action. He needed to get to work and find something to do; he couldn’t stand being up here one more second. He raced to the stairs circling behind the elevator and fled down the penthouse level’s marble steps, flinging open the one way door that lead to the next lower level. He stepped into an available elevator, the doors slid shut behind him, and he stared at his reflection. How could it all have gone so wrong? If only he’d quit his position when he grew jealous. Instead, he’d given in to the impulse to steal, and now he’d faced the consequences of his actions and lost his job.

The door opened and shut at various floors to pick up residents, and Sean moved over to operate the buttons. After the guests left, Patrick pushed on with an empty luggage rack. “So, how’s your—” He stopped and frowned, peering closely at Sean. “What’s wrong? Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be with Devaux this morning?”

Sean looked at Patrick, but all he could see was a blurry form through the tears in his eyes. “I’ve made a right mess of everythin’,” he said, his voice cracking.

Patrick reached in front of Sean and punched the stop button. “What happened?” he asked, grabbing Sean by the shoulders and pivoting him to face him.

“You’d better get goin’,” Sean said, ignoring Patrick’s question and turning back around. He pressed the start button.

The elevator jerked to a halt at Patrick’s floor, and he hopped off, dragging the rack after him. He stuck out a hand to block the door and keep it from closing. “We’re talkin’ later. You hear me? We’re talkin’ later.” He let his hand drop, and Sean watched the doors close, blocking out his friend’s worried face.

Trant must’ve been waiting for him, because Sean found him bouncing on the tips of his toes, a suppressed grin on his face, as soon as he exited the elevator. He demanded Sean’s presence in his office immediately.

“Close the door, Mr. O’Reilly, and take a seat.”

Sean closed the door quietly behind him and shuffled over to the chair, its fabric thinning and threads unraveling.

Trant eyed him closely. “I just got a call from Mr. Devaux. He’s severed your contract.”

Sean remained silent as Trant walked around to the back of his desk.

“Now why would he do that?” The leather chair creaked as Trant sat his heavy form onto the seat and forced it to lean back. He twirled the ends of a pencil between his fingers, his beady eyes peering over it as he stared at Sean.

“I don’t know, sir.” He may have lost his position, but he’d never give Trant the satisfaction of knowing why.

“Oh, I think you do.” Trant slapped the pencil on his desk along with his hand, the sharp sound causing Sean to flinch. Trant stood, his heavy footsteps carrying him around the desk to stand within inches of Sean. “Did he catch you stealing something?”

“No sir! He didn’t catch me.” In this, Sean knew he told the truth.

Trant crossed his arms over his chest. “Then why is he letting you go after favoring you these last few months?”

“I don’t know.” Sean would have to go to confession again after work; his lies were stacking up like a pile of dirty clothes.

Trant narrowed his eyes to mere slits. “I know you’re hiding something,” he said, leaning down into Sean’s space, his foul breath contaminating the air Sean breathed. “You’re lucky he isn’t saying. And you’re lucky he didn’t ask that I fire you. You’re also damn lucky the hotel clientele favor you, although I can’t for the life of me figure out why.” Trant straightened up. “You’re also lucky you bring in the most tips.” He moved back around to his chair and sat down. “Those are the only reasons I don’t kick you to the street right now.”

“Yes, sir.”

“From now on, Mr. Whitman will deliver Mr. Devaux’s meals and attend to whatever he needs. You will return to working the first and second floors.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.” The first two floors’ guests were always stingy with tips. He’d need to be very careful with his monies from now on. No extra niceties.

“And don’t, for a second, think this gets you out of our agreement. I’m sure you wouldn’t want your ‘reputation’ to become more widely known to your landlord or to the police, especially since Mr. Devaux fired you.”

Sean shrank away at the words. “I understand,” he whispered.

Trant’s lip curled, and a malicious glint took up residence in his eyes. “Now that you’re back on my schedule, you’ll work until midnight.”

A nine in the morning till midnight shift: he’d be exhausted, but that wasn’t even close to what he was concerned about. The gleeful look in Trant’s eyes at learning of his firing and returning to Trant’s control made Sean truly feel like he’d descended into Hell.

Chapter Eleven

Harrison

Harrison drummed his fingers on the arm of the leather chair at the men's business club. When did it happen? When had he let Sean get too close? Close enough that his absence created a massive hole in his life? He took a long inhale on his cigarette and let it out. Henry brought his meals now. The young man was polite, but Harrison didn't want him joining him at mealtime or at any other time. Without Sean, his life had slid back into the monotonous, dark drinking days before the strapping, young Irishman came in and shook him out of his melancholy.

Gilbert kicked Harrison's foot. "Are you going to sit there all afternoon and glower?"

Harrison jerked, pulling back his leg.

"It's good to see you again, but for the last couple of weeks you've been as gloomy as the storm clouds threatening to drench us." Gilbert slouched in his chair next to Harrison, his legs stretched out.

"Sorry. I've had a lot on my mind lately," Harrison mumbled. He finished his bourbon and reached over to the decanter on the tray atop the low, circular leather ottoman in the middle of their group of chairs.

"What's got you balled up this time?" Gilbert stifled a yawn. He rolled his head side to side on the back of his chair.

"Leave him alone, Gil," Karl said.

Gilbert looked at Karl and curled his lip. "Well, come on. Don't make me guess," he said, turning back to face Harrison.

Harrison sighed. "It's Se... Mr. O'Reilly."

"What about him?" Karl asked, suddenly interested.

"I caught him stealing from me." *No, that isn't exactly right.* "Rather, he came to me with the item he stole."

Gilbert sat up in his chair and leaned forward. "What did he take?" he asked, his expression avid, his eyes sparkling.

Harrison shot him a glare. He'd met Gilbert through Karl when he moved to New York after college. Brash and outspoken, he sometimes thought of life as a game. "Something that's valuable only to me."

Karl and Gilbert shared pointed glances.

“The thief deserves to go to jail.” Gilbert settled back in his chair.

Karl frowned. “Now wait a minute, don’t be hasty.” He turned to Harrison. “Didn’t you say he gave it back?”

Harrison nodded, running his hand over the chair’s dark-brown leather. He only half listened to his friends’ conversation. They weren’t helping him solve his dilemma anyway.

“There,” Karl said, his voice triumphant. “He’s honest enough to return what he stole.”

Gilbert scoffed. “Once a thief, always a thief.”

“You’re a pessimist, Gil.”

“And you’re a damn optimist, Karl. You’re a fool to trust anyone once they’ve stolen from you.”

Karl ignored his friend. “Did Mr. O’Reilly give you a reason why he took it?” he asked.

Harrison’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t give him a chance. I told him his appointment was severed, and I was informing his boss.” His stomach churned. He should have talked to Sean. It was out of character for him to steal. Why didn’t he talk to him?

“Is he still working at the hotel?” Gilbert asked.

“Yes. He’s been demoted to the first floor.”

“Good Lord.” Gilbert frowned. “Didn’t you tell the manager what happened?”

“No.”

“Why ever not?” Gilbert tsked. “What’s so special about him that you wouldn’t tell the manager?” He waited for an answer, but when Harrison didn’t reply, his eyes slowly widened in disbelief. “Oh, Lord. You don’t fancy him, do you?” He smacked his forehead with his palm. “I don’t believe you. You finally find your way out of that black pit you occupied, only to end up mooning over a petty thief.” Gilbert shook his head. “Your grief has addled your brains. I hope you come to your senses before someone more clever than a Bogtrotter cashes in on your stupidity. I bet his accent is so heavy you can barely understand him.”

A coil of fire burst into flame in Harrison's belly, and he narrowed his eyes. "Do *not* call him that. You haven't even met him yet. He works very hard at minimizing his accent. It's hardly noticeable," he snapped, glaring at Gilbert. *Except when he gets upset...*

"Take it easy, Harrison," Karl soothed. "Gil is only concerned for your well-being."

"If that's what it is, then he doesn't need to throw around insults in order to do it," Harrison spat.

Gilbert held up his hands in surrender. "You're right. I apologize for my callous comment. I should meet your friend before I form such a hasty opinion." He smiled tentatively at Harrison.

Harrison let out a breath and nodded. Gilbert was very intelligent but often spoke without thinking, especially if he was bored. He was also a great conversationalist, and despite his rash comments about Sean, would listen openly to opposing viewpoints when presented with trustworthy facts. Harrison knew he would treat Sean fairly when they met. What Gilbert needed was a partner strong enough to help get himself under control.

One of the junior businessmen—who served as butlers their first year of membership—made a timely entrance, bearing a silver tray with a note and letter opener. He stopped near Gilbert's chair. He plucked the letter and opener from the tray and sighed when he saw the handwriting on the front. "How does she even know I'm here?" Gilbert muttered, opening the letter. "It's my mother," he explained. "She's demanding my attendance at lunch immediately." He stuck the note in his coat pocket. "No doubt to present one of her endless parade of potential wives for me." He poured himself another glass of liquor and downed it in one go. "Why does she always do this at the last second?"

"Because you've always arranged to be away on holiday, or at some 'important' gathering when she's set up a meeting." Karl grinned.

Gilbert made a rude gesture at him, and Karl chuckled. He finished off his drink and rose from his chair. "I'll leave you two to discuss the disastrous state of Harrison's love life. Wish me luck on mine." Gilbert wove his way around the leather furniture, nodding to the other businessmen as he left the room.

Karl stared at Harrison, leaning his elbow on the armrest and tapping his cheekbone with his forefinger.

“What’s on your mind?” Harrison eyed one of his best and most perceptive friends.

“What makes you think I’m contemplating anything?”

“You only tap the side of your face when the wheels in your head are turning.” Harrison waved his finger at Karl in a circular motion. “Go on. Say what you have to say.”

“Very well. You’re hooked on the boy, aren’t you?”

“He isn’t a boy. He’s eighteen, nineteen in two months.”

Karl raised his eyebrows.

Harrison narrowed his eyes. “What?”

“You’ve only known him a few months, and you care enough to find out when his birthday is?”

“He was working for me,” Harrison countered. “It’s only proper to present him with a gift upon his birthday.”

“You tell yourself whatever you want, but the truth is you’ve avoided our company for three years, only attending the Dionysus a few times a year, if that. Then Sean is assigned your Room Service Boy, which—surprise—leads you to hiring him. As much as you don’t want to admit it, when he worked for you, you were happier, and you *were* drinking less. I saw it and so did others. Now you’ve slipped back into your previous routines and are almost as reclusive as you were before.”

“He took Andrew’s watch.” Harrison rubbed at his eye, his throat tightening. “How can I forgive that?”

“All of us make stupid mistakes.” Karl tapped the ashes from his pipe into the tray sitting on the end table. Reaching inside his jacket pocket, he pulled out a tobacco pouch. “You remember when Theo and I met you, and you introduced us to Sean?” He opened the pouch and pinched some flakes.

Harrison nodded.

“I saw your face when Theo flirted with your boy.” The sweet scent of tobacco drifted over to Harrison as Karl refilled the pipe bowl. Striking a match, Karl held it over the bowl and lit it, drawing on the stem, then flicking out the match. A cloud of smoke floated up from his pipe, and the aromatized flavor of vanilla tobacco, which Karl favored, wafted in Harrison’s direction. “It was written all over your face. You may not have known Sean long, but you

were jealous. Jealous of Theo who you know flirts with almost any man but would never take advantage.” He leaned back and pointed the pipe stem at Harrison. “And the way you defended Sean against Gilbert a little while ago. Admit it. Despite how upset you are with him right now, you’re hooked on your boy.”

“He’s not my boy.”

Karl huffed. “Is that what you’re telling yourself?”

Harrison ignored his friend’s huffing and stared into his glass. The two men sat in silence, the only sounds the soft whistling inhalation and the gentle puffs Karl made as he exhaled. “You think I should forgive him?” He looked over at Karl.

“I think you need to do what’s right for you. What makes you happiest. But—” Karl tapped the ashes into the tray. “—take into consideration whether this is his normal pattern of behavior, or if something happened that pushed him into this temporary madness.”

Harrison nodded to himself. He could do that—get the facts and he’d decide from there what to do... unless he’d bungled things up too badly with Sean already. Maybe... maybe he should speak to Henry first. He might know if Sean would be willing to speak with him again.

“I don’t know if I should say, sir.” Henry avoided another question as he cleared away the dinner dishes. “He’s my friend.”

Harrison nodded even though Henry wasn’t looking at him. “I want to help Mr. O’Reilly. Not hurt him.” He walked back towards Henry after pouring himself another drink. It was urgent he find out how Sean was faring, and if he’d consider coming back to work for him.

Henry snapped up his head. A frown creased his normally gentle face. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but that’s what you did when you fired him... sir.”

Harrison sighed. “Yes. I’m aware I acted hastily. That’s why I’m asking for your help.” He rubbed his neck in frustration. “I’ve seen him in the lobby. He doesn’t look well. I need to find out what’s happening.” Henry was normally easygoing, but tonight his questions about Sean had shown Harrison an entirely different side of Henry—a highly protective one. His carefully worded questions over dinner to elicit any information about Sean from Henry had so

far failed. Henry would either change the subject or not answer, which was unlike his usual polite self. Thank God he was finally getting somewhere.

"If I may ask, why do you care so much now when you didn't before?" Henry challenged him with his brown-eyed stare.

Harrison needed to be honest if he expected any help. "Because I believe I made a mistake in firing him. I want to fix it if I can, but first I have to find out if Mr. O'Reilly is receptive to a meeting between us. I don't want to upset him further if he isn't."

Henry seemed to think over what he'd said and after a minute relaxed his stance. "Since Sean's returned to the lower floors, he's told me he's been saving his money by skipping meals and working longer hours."

Why would he do that? "He should have more than enough money from the tips he's earned and from when he worked for me." Harrison's mind whirled, how and why had Sean's situation turned so bad?

"Yes sir, but—"

Harrison cut Henry off. "He isn't prostituting himself, or bootlegging, is he?"

"You don't know him very well, do you, sir?" Henry frowned. "He'd never do either of those."

Harrison leaned against the windowsill, his shoulders slumped. "Then tell me... please." He'd beg or pay for the information if needed.

Henry chewed on his lower lip, his brows furrowing with worry. "I'm only telling you this because I don't know how to help him. Don't tell Trant. I mean Mr. Trant."

"Mr. Trant is the last person I would tell on pain of death," Harrison growled. He had no respect for the man.

"Fair enough," Henry said. He walked forward and lowered his voice as if telling a secret. "Sean's handing over the tips and money he's saved from you to Trant."

Harrison nodded. "I knew about handing over part of your tips to him."

"It's more than that." Henry shook his head. "He's saying he stole the money from the residents because he won't steal their jewelry."

Harrison blinked. Had he heard right? "What's this about stealing jewelry? Why would he do that?"

“Trant ordered...” Henry snapped his mouth shut and stepped back. “I think you need to talk to Sean, sir. It’s not my place to tell you.” Henry breathed a troubled sigh. “I think Trant doesn’t believe he’s stealing the money, but he doesn’t care as long as he gets it. Sean has gone through almost all of his savings. He’s stubborn. He won’t take any help from us. We have to slip tips into his pockets when he leaves else he won’t take the help.”

Harrison covered his eyes with his palm, cursing under his breath. The worst period of his life was repeating itself all over again, and this time he had a part in creating it. He pulled out his wallet and extracted four five-dollar bills and a dollar coin. “Give these out, same as usual, and keep it quiet. You know who gets the coin. If you need to hide the currency on your person, use the restroom. You know where it is.”

Henry gasped. “Holy Mother of...” he whispered. He jerked up his head. “Sorry, Mr. Devaux. I’ve never held this much money in my hands in my life,” he said, his voice awed and his eyes as wide as saucers. “Are you sure you want to tip this much, sir? This is...” He shook his head, speechless.

“Yes, yes. It’s for you and your friends. Take it and make sure Mr. O’Reilly gets his share.”

“Thank you, sir.” Henry hurried to the bathroom.

Harrison paced across the living room. He’d balled up horrifically. Firing Sean had allowed Trant to manipulate him more than he already had. He needed to fix this. A motion out of the corner of his eye caught his attention, and he saw Henry watching him pace. “Don’t tell Mr. O’Reilly we spoke. I need to fix this myself. Then we’ll see about Mr. Trant.”

“What do you have planned, sir?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I need to contact some people.” Harrison pulled at his bottom lip with his thumb and forefinger. “Keep this quiet. Don’t tell any of your friends, not even your wife, or else what I have planned won’t work. You’re free to talk to me and, if Mr. O’Reilly returns to my service, him, any time you’re here in my residence. *But nowhere else.*” He stared pointedly at Henry.

Henry nodded vigorously. “Yes, sir. I’ll do whatever it takes to help.” He headed for his cart and stopped; he turned back. “Sean liked working for you, sir. He was happy,” he said. “He’s a good friend and helped my family when things got rough. We live close to each other, and he even looks after our son once in a while so the wife and I can spend time together. He’s got a good heart

as my wife would say.” Henry hesitated. “I don’t know what happened, but I know he’s tormenting himself over it. Please talk to him. I’m sure he’ll listen...” Henry trailed off, his eyes hopeful.

“I have to agree with your wife about Mr. O’Reilly,” Harrison said. “I made a grievous error in firing him. And yes, I will talk to him.” *But that is probably best done on neutral ground; not here at the hotel.* “Do you know a good time to catch him away from work? I know he attends church on Sunday. Does he still do that?”

“Yes, he usually attends morning Mass before coming to work. But sometimes he goes to the park first.”

“Central Park?”

Henry nodded.

“That’s a big place. Would you happen to know where in Central Park?”

“He walks all over, but his favorite places are the fountain and the lake because they’re the closest things around here that remind him of Ireland.”

What an idiot he was. Sean was dealing with homesickness, and he’d piled on more loss and pressure to his burden. He was a selfish lout. “Thank you for your help, Henry.”

Henry nodded and left.

Harrison sat on the couch, picked up the phone, and dialed. First, he needed to get together with Isabel. The woman had a knack for ferreting out information and rarely turned down a plea for help. Next, he’d have Henry deliver a letter to his good friend Chief Inspector Lyons, arranging for a lunch or dinner meeting. He wanted to find out what the investigator knew about the rumors versus the facts concerning Mr. Trant, and what was behind Mr. Ormsby’s arrest and firing. Then, most importantly, he needed to talk with Sean.

Chapter Twelve

Sean

Morning Mass over, the parishioners exited St. Bartholomew's through the open double doors. Sean stopped to chat briefly with the priest, thanking him for the stirring sermon on forgiveness before heading to the park. The gray clouds that peppered the sky on Sean's way to Mass had multiplied, and a light breeze brushed gentle fingers across his face. He sensed he needn't worry about rain for another couple of hours—long enough to soak in the serenity of the park, calm the scattered thoughts in his mind, and try to figure out what to do. Trant's demands and his dwindling savings added to his fear of Trant kicking him out or turning him in at any moment. Leaving wasn't an option since Trant could still inform the police and anyone else if he quit. One thing was certain—he needed to find another job soon. Even the extra tips his friends slipped him despite his objections, wouldn't help much longer.

Two weeks had passed, and he still didn't have any secondary job prospects. He woke every morning hungry and stressed. Trant gloated at the loss of his position and worked him harder than ever, and of course, there were the threats. Maybe he should just let Trant turn him in and face the consequences because he would never steal again. The one time he had, it brought nothing but heartache, not just for him, but for Mr. Devaux as well. All he could do was dive into his metal box of savings and hand over some of it every few days with the explanation he'd pilfered the residents' wallets. He was sure Trant didn't believe how he got the money, but Trant didn't seem to care. At least it kept him off Sean's back until the next time rolled around. Short on money, he'd been unable to buy groceries, so he didn't bring a lunch to work. Trant's miserliness led to the cancelation of free lunches for the staff, but sometimes the chef whipped together a soup, if he ran across bargain vegetables, and employees would snag a quick bite. He hated handouts. He'd worked hard at staying strong and independent—just as his parents had raised him—especially over the last few years. Now he felt humiliated.

Wallowing in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed how quickly the walk passed. He'd already arrived at the edge of the park. He slowed his pace and turned left, taking the path to Bethesda Fountain. Whoever thought up the idea of a park in the middle of New York City was a genius. It was the one place he could let his spirit soak in the open spaces and the nature he missed so dearly. Chances were

he'd never return to Killarney in his lifetime. This was going to be as close as he could get.

Not many people were out yet after Mass, except for the few walking their dogs or strolling couples decked out in their Sunday best taking advantage of the calm weather. He continued towards the fountain until he spotted the female angel with her outstretched wings poised at the top of the fountain. Water spilled from the circular disc on which she stood into an upper basin, and from there cascades and water spouts emptied into a large lower pool. He'd overheard someone at the park saying the statue was designed by a woman. She must be incredibly talented to have been chosen to create a work of art in a public park. But he wondered if she ever imagined the pigeons perching on the angel's head and wings when she designed it.

He headed for the expansive lawn surrounded by trees near the fountain. Most people sat on the benches in the paved area bordering it, but he preferred the sense of seclusion the trees created around the lush area of grass and the view it offered onto the lake beyond the fountain. On sunny days, people would row boats out onto the waters. He looked up at the gray overcast sky—there wouldn't be many people out today.

Sean crossed his arms, rested them on his bent knees, then leaned forward, settling his chin on his arms. Two weeks, and his body and heart ached like an old man's. He'd disappointed so many people, even those who might never know, like his da. Although, maybe wherever he was, he did know. How many times had his da told him that friendships and business deals were based on trust? Once broken, it was near impossible to get back. And the offender could never dictate the rules of forgiveness if he wanted to regain that trust.

Broken trust wasn't the only thing that tore at him—eating at his heart in the middle of the night. There was also the pity. He pitied himself. He grieved for the loss of Mr. Devaux's friendship and mentorship, but most of all, the hope that their work relationship might've grown into something more. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he'd thought the longer they worked together, the more often Mr. Devaux touched him. Light touches in passing or when he handed him a cup of tea or a drink. He missed Mr. Devaux's warm hand on his shoulder in compliment of work well done, the brush of his palm on his back when Mr. Devaux passed by in the penthouse, and when he held a door open for Mr. Devaux his shoulder sweeping against Sean in passing.

Sean couldn't stop his lower lip from trembling, and he squeezed his eyes shut, hiding his face in his arms. If he cried, no one would pay attention here; they would just think he was sleeping. A tear drifted down his cheek.

“You’re a very hard person to track down.”

Sean jerked his head up and gasped. His heart slammed against his ribs, and his blood pulsed loudly in his ears. Mr. Devaux stood right in front of him. He quickly brought his hand to his face and wiped away the tear.

“May I sit?” Mr. Devaux motioned towards the grass.

Sean nodded. What else could he do? He was at Mr. Devaux’s mercy.

Mr. Devaux lowered himself to the grass to Sean’s right and laid his black umbrella next to him.

Sean turned his face away. His mouth and throat sapped of all moisture, his tongue stuck to the dried surfaces. He couldn’t speak first even if he wanted to. Sean sneaked looks out of the corner of his eye at Mr. Devaux. Why was he here? Hadn’t he said all he needed that day? Was he here to tell him that he’d told Mr. Trant he’d stolen the watch? Sean’s body shook, breaking out in a cold sweat.

Mr. Devaux gazed out at the fountain and raised his hand, coughing into his fist nervously. “I believe I need to apologize,” he blurted out.

The stress must be affecting his mind. Sean imagined Mr. Devaux said he needed to apologize. No, that couldn’t be right. Mr. Devaux hadn’t done anything wrong. He was well within his right to fire him for stealing the watch. Static filled Sean’s ears, and his vision narrowed—blackness closed in around him from all sides.

“Mr. O’Reilly.” Someone was shaking his shoulder. This didn’t make sense. “Mr. O’Reilly? Are you all right?” Mr. Devaux’s concerned voice drifted back into Sean’s consciousness. He inhaled deeply to clear his head. Slowly his vision refocused, and the noises around him separated into recognizable sounds. He blinked and looked into the worried eyes of Mr. Harrison Devaux.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Devaux repeated gently.

“Yes, sir,” he whispered.

Mr. Devaux smiled briefly and removed his hand from Sean’s shoulder. “You scared me for a moment there. I thought I’d have to call for a doctor. Lord knows if there are any out here on a day like today.”

Sean nodded absently, his mind still not completely engaged. He frowned at Mr. Devaux sitting on the lawn without a blanket. He’d get stains on his trousers. Maybe he should offer him his jacket.

“I’m afraid I started our conversation off rather clumsily. I’ll begin again.” Mr. Devaux cleared his throat. “Over the last few weeks, I’ve thought a lot about what happened. I was furious when I realized what you’d done.”

Sean put his head back onto his knees and concentrated on plucking at blades of grass. He dropped them, letting them lie where they fell, like dead little soldiers.

“But after a time, I admitted to myself it wasn’t just that you stole something precious to me, but that I trusted you, and I felt betrayed.” Mr. Devaux started plucking at the grass too. “Why did you do it? I thought we got along well, but then...”

Sean tilted his head to the side, and Mr. Devaux glanced his way. Mr. Devaux’s appearance shocked Sean; it was nothing like he remembered. His mouth pulled down at the corners. Dark circles hung under pain-filled eyes, and deep stress lines edged their corners.

How could Sean explain his moment of weakness? He couldn’t even make sense of his actions himself. There was no explanation good enough for his cruel and selfish behavior. What would Mr. Devaux think of him once he knew the reason why? But it didn’t matter what he felt; what mattered was setting things right for Mr. Devaux. He took a deep breath. “I was jealous, sir,” he whispered. He looked away, not wanting to see the disgust on Mr. Devaux’s face.

“Jealous? Of what?” Mr. Devaux’s voice rose in surprise.

Sean turned back. Blank confusion shone on Mr. Devaux’s face. He cringed. It didn’t look like he could get away without confessing the whole story. “Do you remember when you sent me out to pick up the papers from the lawyer’s office?”

Mr. Devaux nodded.

“I decided to walk back to the hotel since it was a nice day.” Sean swallowed around the huge lump in his throat and lowered his voice. “I saw you at Bonjour with a dark-haired woman. You sat by the window and were talking... and laughing, and... kissing.” His voice cracked.

Mr. Devaux blinked once. Then his eyes grew wide. He drew back, sitting taller.

Sean swallowed, stopping and starting several times to get the next words out. “She kissed your cheek many times, and you... kissed her hand. I didn’t

know you liked women. I thought you only..." He picked at a small tear in the knee of his trousers. He'd have to ask his landlady to patch it for him when he got home. He wouldn't be able to pay her, but maybe he could do some chores for her instead. Clearing his throat Sean tried again. "When I saw you together, I couldn't see straight. I couldn't think straight. I know jealousy is wrong." He looked up at Mr. Devaux, praying he'd believe him. "I didn't want to be jealous. I prayed every night I'd wake and not feel the green-eyed monster in me. But it wouldn't go away. And then the day she came to your home, the night of the show... and kissed you again. I couldn't stop myself."

He ached with the weight of what he'd done. He needed Mr. Devaux to believe what he was going to say next. "I regretted stealing the watch as soon as I left the penthouse. And when I saw it was your... friend's special watch—" He choked, struggling to continue. "—I knew I deserved to go to Hell." His eyes prickled, his vision growing watery. He blinked rapidly; he had to finish or else he'd never get it out. "I'm sorry for what I did, sir." His voice wobbled from his held-back tears, which were threatening to spill. "I'm sorry I hurt you. It was wrong of me, and I understand if you can't forgive me, but everything I'm telling you now is the truth."

He dragged his sleeve across his face, wiped his wet eyes, and peered at Mr. Devaux. Mr. Devaux's mouth hung open, and his brows arched high up his forehead. It looked like he was in shock. At least, Sean thought it was shock. Maybe it was disbelief. Mr. Devaux would have every right not to believe him.

"Karl, you perceptive bastard," Mr. Devaux whispered after a moment, shaking his head. "You were right."

"Sir?" What did Mr. Devaux's friend have to do with this?

Mr. Devaux shook his head again. "Her name is Isabel Greene. She also goes by Victoria Lark. She's a stage actress, although she hasn't worked in quite a few years. That day, she'd just arrived back in New York from Europe. It was a chance encounter on the street, and we went to lunch." He sighed. "I met Isabel when I attended Harvard, and she was attending a dramatic arts academy." He smiled sadly at Sean. "I regret not mentioning and introducing her to you. It never occurs to me to tell anyone we're not anything more than friends because we've always behaved that way towards each other. If you knew her, you'd find she behaves that way with all her friends. She is quite demonstrative and... intense." Harrison leaned closer, his gaze direct and steady. "I've never been interested in women, Sean. Yes, I appreciate their beauty, and find them mysterious and intriguing—but I've only ever desired, and been attracted to, men."

Sean sucked in a breath. Mr. Devaux had never called him by his first name before. Hope unfurled in his chest. Was it possible they could salvage... at least a friendship?

"Thank you for your apology," Mr. Devaux continued. "I know it was hard to give, but it explains a lot." He took a deep breath and let it out as if gathering his courage. "Now I owe you one." He smiled unsteadily.

Sean opened his mouth to speak, but Mr. Devaux raised his hand. "No, I need to say this." He swallowed. "I'm sorry for my rash behavior and for my stubbornness. I should have asked at the beginning why you did what you did, and we wouldn't have had two weeks of this—" He waved his hand in the space between them. "—whatever it's been."

He couldn't let Mr. Devaux take responsibility for this. "No sir. I'm the one to blame."

"Yes. It started with your jealousy, but I allowed my emotions to rule me. I should have questioned you, instead of letting my anger get the upper hand." Mr. Devaux's words and gaze were sincere. "Please accept my apology. I accept yours." He searched Sean's eyes, waiting for an answer.

The clouds hanging over Sean's world and threatening to drown him with their flood waters... didn't. Instead, a gentle spring rain washed over him, purifying him. The misery that had accumulated in the last two weeks, caking his soul and dimming its light, released its hold, and the sun burst forth, brightening his world again, even as the real darkening clouds above threatened a downpour.

"I accept your apology, sir." Sean smiled, his heart brimming with gratitude. Mr. Devaux smiled back. Soft fingertips brushed the back of his hand resting on the grass, and Sean stilled. He slowly lowered his gaze to see if what he felt was real. It was. Mr. Devaux's fingers caressed his hand, leaving his skin tingling and hyperaware.

"I'd like you to come back to work for me," Mr. Devaux said quietly.

Sean glanced at Mr. Devaux in disbelief before looking away. He stared out across the lake, at the one boat and its single rower. He didn't answer.

"Don't you want to work with me again?" Mr. Devaux asked hesitantly after a minute.

Yes, his heart and mind screamed. He wanted to work for Mr. Devaux again, but his stomach twisted. What if he did something wrong? Not stealing—he'd

never do that again. He trembled at the thought he'd make a fool of himself though—humiliate himself by doing something stupid, or worse, he'd see suspicion grow in Mr. Devaux's eyes, thinking he might steal again. He dipped his head. Maybe that was part of regaining Mr. Devaux's trust and to pay his penance. He needed to prove that, despite his fears, he was trustworthy every minute of every day. Still, he had to ask, "How can you trust me?" He searched Mr. Devaux's eyes, afraid of his answer.

Mr. Devaux huffed out a breath. "I could ask you the same thing. How could you trust me not to act impulsively and lose my temper when I should know better?" He wrapped his fingers tightly around Sean's hand. "We both made mistakes, Sean. Come back to work... Please."

Joy strained to break free. Instead Sean forced it down, afraid it was too good to be true, and he'd only end up disappointed. Sean nodded and cautiously prayed for the best.

Chapter Thirteen

Harrison

He'd held his breath when Sean didn't answer his question immediately about returning to work. He'd feared he'd irreparably damaged their relationship. But when Sean nodded, Harrison exhaled, all the stress he hadn't realized he'd been holding leaving his body. He helped Sean to his feet, his warm, strong hand in his, and restrained himself from dragging Sean into a tight hug. Walking back to the hotel would give them time to get reacquainted. The drizzle started as soon as they left the park, and both of them huddled under his umbrella, Sean's shoulder brushing against his as they walked. He wanted to wrap his arm around Sean, but he'd save that for when they were in private.

Sean wasn't the only one who worried about taking a wrong step. Harrison knew he probably went too far today touching Sean's hand, but he'd missed him, and he ached to run his hands over the young man, checking to see if he was all right. The way Sean's clothing hung loose on him, and the shadowy hollows in his facial features bothered him immensely. Finding Sean crying had torn at his heart. Sean was so like him, both of them independent and strong; it took a lot to break either of them. He sympathized with Sean and the anguish he went through. Harrison's own discomfort with his actions rose and he tamped them down. Hopefully things would start to look up again.

Everything he'd learned about Sean so far told him that the man held himself to high moral standards, and what had happened was a lapse. He knew he could trust Sean; the young man would grow into controlling his impulses. Harrison wanted a chance to prove he could be trusted as well—to not raise his voice in anger, but instead, take the time to find out why or how or what. Harrison sent a silent thanks to Karl. His advice, as usual, had been right. A gift of one of his finest cognacs was most certainly in order.

They'd arrived back at the hotel just in time to escape the downpour. Harrison was busy shaking out his umbrella near the door when he heard Trant's voice before he appeared from behind one of the elaborately carved archways.

"There you are, Mr. O'Reilly. You're late for work," Trant scolded, his tone sharp, his attention focused on Sean. "You should be grateful I gave you time

off this morning. Instead you abuse my gener—" His tirade halted when Harrison moved up beside Sean.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Devaux." Trant's smile faltered, his gaze shifting between the two. "I didn't see you come in."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Trant. I'm afraid Mr. O'Reilly isn't available for the rest of the day. We have some business to conduct," he said politely. Inside, his blood boiled, his temper controlled only with the knowledge that Trant would soon rue the day he came to work at the Astraea.

"Business?"

"Yes. I need both of you to sign some documents," Harrison replied calmly. He led Sean down the lobby towards the elevators. "I expect you to be available today to sign them, Mr. Trant." His and Sean's long strides had Trant scurrying to keep up, and Harrison hid his smile.

Trant panted at their rapid pace. "What time, Mr. Devaux?" he wheezed.

Sean pushed the up button, and the doors parted. "I don't know yet." Harrison entered the elevator and Sean followed. Harrison inserted his key and Sean pressed eighteen, the round button lighting up. "I expect you to be available when I'm ready. Please don't leave the premises." He stared down at the vile man. The doors slid shut, closing out the sight of a red-faced Mr. Trant.

"Yes, Mr. Devaux. I'll be here" came the muffled reply.

Harrison found the penthouse key on his ring and unlocked the front door. He pushed it open and sidestepped to let Sean enter first. He dropped his umbrella into the brass octagonal stand in the waiting area and shrugged out of his damp jacket.

"I think we should get out of our wet things, then have lunch. What do you think?" Hearing no answer, Harrison turned around.

"I'm fine sir," Sean said. He'd removed his cap.

He looked down at Sean's feet. His shoes and the cuffs of his pants were wet and, most likely, so were his socks. "I'd feel better if you'd change into dry clothes. You can borrow a pair of slippers." He waited for Sean to follow him down the hall, but he didn't. Harrison turned back. Sean stood twisting his cap in his hands.

Harrison didn't recognize this unsure man. Gone was Sean's confidence and optimism, and Harrison cringed with guilt. He'd had a hand in snuffing out that spirit. He couldn't take back the two weeks of hell Sean had lived through, but if Sean would let him, he'd help him recover his bright outlook on life. Harrison walked over, stopping in front of him. "All your new clothing is still here," he said kindly. "I didn't throw anything out. I couldn't." He gazed into those questioning blue-green eyes. "Please change clothes. You'll be more comfortable, and I won't worry you'll catch cold."

They changed into dry pants and shirts, the top buttons left undone. Harrison loaned Sean a pair of sheepskin-lined beige slippers and his favorite silk lounging robe—the gold one with the collar, cuffs, and pockets trimmed in black satin. He quite admired the way the fabric draped around Sean's broad shoulders.

Harrison sat on the sofa and lifted the phone to order lunch but stopped before dialing and set the handset back into its cradle. He turned his attention to Sean.

"I'd like to have as little interruption as possible this afternoon and evening. We have several items to discuss." Harrison spotted the fear returning to Sean's eyes. He rose to his feet and moved to stand before the young man. He reached over and hooked his forefinger around Sean's. "No need to worry. One item is merely to contact my lawyer for another set of employment contracts to be delivered today."

Sean eyes widened in surprise. "But it's Sunday. Isn't his office closed?"

"His day of rest is on Saturday. That's one of the benefits of working with Jews." Harrison responded, drawing Sean towards him. "I mean no disrespect to your faith, but I haven't been one for the church since Andrew's death—well, before actually. The Catholic Church's views on my—our—*lifestyle* are... well, let's just say it's frowned upon. I doubt they'd be happy to have me." He picked up the phone, handing it to Sean. "But now, I'd like you to order us lunch. Make it a hearty one. The walk and the weather worked up my appetite." He smiled encouragingly.

"Would you like anything in particular, sir?" Sean asked.

Harrison rubbed a hand across his eyes. "Yes, I'd like it if you went back to calling me Mr. Devaux." Sean nodded. "And no bell peppers. I don't think I ever told you I dislike bell peppers. Order us a thick hot soup for starters and plenty of strong black tea. Anything else you like will be fine."

“Yes, Mr. Devaux.” Sean dialed the kitchen, and Harrison went to his office to modify Sean’s old contract and deliver it to his lawyer as soon as he finished. After Sean ordered their lunch, he’d have him telephone Mr. Weinberg’s office and inform them he was sending over a courier with papers to be drawn up immediately. Either Henry or Patrick could be trusted to handle this job, and whoever went could wait and bring back the papers as soon as they were completed. Harrison planned on eventually making the assistant position a permanent appointment so Sean could quit his hotel job, but not until he’d settled the issue concerning Trant. Next, he and Sean needed to have a conversation about openness; he mentally included himself in that discussion. There was no way he’d let what happened with Andrew happen to Sean. He tapped his forefinger on the desk’s hard surface. He was going to find out everything, then they’d work together to solve the problem. Opening his desk drawer, he retrieved Sean’s old contract, placed it on his desk, reached for his pen, and set to work.

Chapter Fourteen

Sean

The faint sound of a door closing, followed by footsteps reached Sean's ears. He turned around and found Mr. Devaux shrugging out of his navy-blue herringbone jacket.

"I'm going to change into something more comfortable. If you want anything else to eat or drink, feel free to call the kitchen." Without waiting for an answer, Mr. Devaux headed down the hall.

Sean turned back to the window he'd been staring out of. A sea of black umbrellas hid pedestrians hailing taxis and diving into shops to avoid the rain. Usually, watching people scurry like tiny insects from far up in the penthouse could keep Sean amused for hours, but not this time. The fear of what Mr. Devaux wanted to discuss after his return from his visit with Trant overshadowed that enjoyment.

Shortly after lunch, Mr. Devaux received a call, informing him Henry was returning with the employment documents. They ate in silence, watching the rain fall, the drops sliding down the window pane, the miniature images of buildings flipped upside-down in the droplets clear forms. After they'd finished their meal, Mr. Devaux asked him to leave the cart and dishes outside the front door.

He'd just finished positioning the cart in the hall when the elevator dinged, and Henry got off, walking towards him. "Are you all right?" he asked, stepping close, his eyes full of concern. "Mr. Devaux is treating you good?"

Sean nodded. Henry was a great friend. So was Patrick, but Henry was the one he'd felt comfortable enough to tell what was going on with Trant.

Henry smiled. "I can't do much, I know, but if you need me to be here, call downstairs, and I'll come up."

"I will. Thanks, Henry."

Sean watched Henry leave, then retired to the office with Mr. Devaux where he presented the papers as he had before, pointing out the new terms. Sean read them over, surprised at the major changes.

If there is reason for termination, the employer, Mr. Harrison Devaux, shall give a week's notice, and if requested, assist Mr. Sean O'Reilly in finding employment elsewhere.

The other change read:

This job offer is contingent upon the fact that it may turn into a full-time, permanent position in one year's time, if both parties are in agreement. If not, the position will remain part-time but will include a raise, the amount of which will be dependent upon any increase in duties after the time this document was signed.

Sean almost cried from gratitude and relief. His hand shook with tremors, turning his signature into a barely recognizable squiggly mess. He didn't deserve this, but for some reason, Mr. Devaux thought he did. By the time he'd finished reading and signing the contract, and he saw the relief in Mr. Devaux's eyes, he was a nervous wreck. But something told him this emotional day wasn't over, and he was dreading the next conversation.

It didn't take long for Mr. Devaux to change and return wearing his geometric-patterned black, gray, and copper silk lounging robe—the collar, cuffs, buttons, and sash trimmed in red satin. Sean feasted his eyes on the sophisticated man, the red trim of the robe contrasting perfectly with his thick, dark hair, and the warm and welcoming smile and gaze he gave Sean sent his stomach fluttering. Mr. Devaux carried himself with confidence, even in the simplest of clothing. This garment added to his overwhelming appeal.

Mr. Devaux headed straight for the liquor cabinet. "Please take a seat. We've a lot to talk through tonight." He gestured at the sofa. "Would you like anything? We have soda water, or I can make a drink heavy on the rocks with just a touch of your choice of liquor. And despite my prior indulgences, I can handle a virgin quite well, if I do say so myself." His lips curled in a teasing grin.

Sean dipped his head, feeling his cheeks flame, but he couldn't stop a smile as he raised his head to meet Mr. Devaux's gaze.

Mr. Devaux's eyes widened. "I didn't mean to imply..." he said flushing. He spun quickly back around and fumbled with the glasses. He opened the side cabinet door, took out a few bottles of fruit juices and tossed a quick drink together for Sean and a Scotch for himself. Opening the door on the opposite side of the cabinet, he pulled out a wood-inlaid serving tray. Placing the drinks on the tray, he brought everything over to Sean, setting it on the ottoman. "I hope you don't mind fruit juice?" he asked, the blush still tinting his cheeks. He handed the fruit concoction over to Sean with a faint smile. Picking up his

drink, Mr. Devaux took a seat on the opposite end of the sofa facing Sean, his arm draped casually over the back, one leg bent and resting on the cushion.

Sean dropped his gaze and plucked nervously at his robe. He wasn't this anxious even when Trant called him into his office. Now, there was more at stake. Not his job—surprisingly he trusted Mr. Devaux with that. It was what might happen between them.

"Sean?" Mr. Devaux called gently.

He startled and jerked his head up, surprised to hear his Christian name spoken instead of the usual way Mr. Devaux addressed him.

"Is it all right for me to call you Sean? Or would you prefer I continue to address you as Mr. O'Reilly?" Mr. Devaux asked.

Sean lifted one shoulder. "Whatever you like, sir."

Mr. Devaux scratched the back of his neck, his lips twisting left, then right. "I want to address you in the way you'd like me to." He waited patiently for an answer.

"I like Sean, sir," he replied quietly.

"Sean?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Please call me, Mr. Devaux."

"Yes, sir. I mean, yes, Mr. Devaux." Sean looked down.

Mr. Devaux sighed and set his untouched Scotch onto the tray. He shifted, sliding down the sofa closer to Sean. Mr. Devaux placed his fingers under Sean's chin and turned his face towards him so he could gaze into his eyes. "I know things have been rough between us, but I'd like to move on. I know it'll take time for both of us to get back to the way it was, but we've gotten past a bad situation. That has to mean something." The hint of a smile pulled at the corners of his mouth as Mr. Devaux moved his hand away, resting it in his lap.

Sean nodded. Mr. Devaux was right. He couldn't live in fear that he'd make a terrible mistake. Maybe this is where his prayers had been answered, and he was being given a second chance. He shouldn't waste a gift like that. "You're right, Mr. Devaux, it's just..." He looked away. "I'm afraid I'll do somethin' stupid again."

"You won't," Mr. Devaux said, pressing his forefinger to Sean's thigh with conviction. "And neither will I."

Sean snapped his gaze back to Mr. Devaux, desperately wanting to believe him. “How can you say that?”

“I’ve learned through my many years of business, and my relationship with An... Andrew,” he said with hesitation, “that partnerships can’t work if either party has a hidden agenda, or if both don’t bring their issues openly and honestly to the table. I’ve grown lazy these last few years without personal contact, and I had forgotten this.” Mr. Devaux pinched his lips together, and brushed irritably at his forehead with his hand. He refocused on Sean, his eyes intense. “From now on, if we’re ever bothered by something or someone, we’ll talk it over. There must be truth and trust between us if we don’t want something like this to happen again. It’s not just you, it includes me.” He leaned even closer, the scent Mr. Devaux wore tantalizing Sean’s nostrils. “I will be completely candid with you from now on, Sean.” He closed his eyes and swallowed. “Therefore, I’d like you to read a note. It’ll help you understand why I was upset about the watch, and why I’ve come to despise Mr. Trant.” He stuck a shaking hand into his robe pocket and withdrew an envelope, holding it out to Sean.

The envelope fluttered between them, and Sean reached out cautiously, halting before he grasped it. He looked questioningly into Mr. Devaux’s eyes.

“Go on.” Mr. Devaux’s voice cracked as he raised the envelope towards Sean. “I want you to read it.”

With great hesitation, Sean lifted it delicately from Mr. Devaux’s fingers and opened the flap. He glanced again at Mr. Devaux, who nodded. Sean pulled out the worn, folded letter and opened it.

My Dearest Harry,

Here is the second note I promised, the one I wrote about in the first letter. I’m hoping this information will help you understand why I did what I did.

Knowing your inquisitive nature, I’m sure you have many questions. I’ll give you as many answers as I think are helpful. Do you remember I once mentioned that a man I knew had found me? Well he knows about my proclivities, and he wanted money to keep quiet. Of course I gave him what he asked, but as with all blackmailing scum, he went on demanding more. Now, I am almost penniless. I won’t tell you the evidence he presented, but nobody who read it could deny it was me. It

won't solve anything if I tell you who he was because you'll go after him, and then he'll find out about you. Besides, what would you do with him when you caught him? I don't want you doing anything stupid, Harry. We both know how rash you are when you get a bee in your bonnet.

I also know what you would tell me to do. I could never go to the police. My family can pretend I don't associate with men as long as I never speak of it or flaunt it in their faces. Out of sight, out of mind, they say. To publicize it, would scandalize the family's sterling reputation, and they'd never forgive me. And despite us being accepted in a certain segment of society in this city, you have to admit, most of us are still not thought of kindly. What I'm about to do is the only option. You can tell me I've too much stubborn pride, and you'd be right. I don't have much left to my name, but what I do have, is yours. You've probably already found them in the wall safe with this letter.

Well, that's it, Harry. I hope what I've written gives you some of the answers you seek. Now my advice to you is this: let sleeping dogs lie. He's not worth it. I don't want you wasting your life chasing after him. Promise me you'll fall in love again with a kind, thoughtful young man. I love you.

Forever yours,

Andy

Sean lifted his eyes slowly from the paper to the face of his employer, only to find Mr. Devaux with his hand clamped over his mouth, as if to keep from screaming, and his eyes squeezed tightly shut to keep the tears from flowing. But they refused to stop, leaking out the corners and tracking lines down his red face. His shoulders hunched, and he shook in silent sobs as the usually controlled man fell apart before Sean's eyes. Sean laid the letter on the ottoman, reached out and pulled Mr. Devaux's hand away from his face. He opened his eyes, and the pain and anguish in them pierced Sean's heart.

Scooting forward on the sofa, Sean tugged gently on Mr. Devaux's wrist until Mr. Devaux slowly fell forward, letting his head drop to rest on Sean's shoulder. Trembling arms came up to encircle Sean's waist, clinging tightly to him as if he was his salvation. Sean wrapped one arm around Mr. Devaux's back, the other over his shoulder to cup his neck. And there Sean held him,

gently rubbing his back and lightly massaging his nape while Mr. Devaux quietly sobbed out his pain, loss, and heartache. Sean couldn't comprehend the agony of loving and losing someone who'd taken their own life. It was one thing to lose a loved one to an illness when they had no choice. But for Mr. Devaux to feel that he could have saved his friend and prevented death, but hadn't, must be a living hell. Taking away Mr. Devaux's pain wasn't possible, but he could offer comfort, like his ma used to do for him and his brother and sister. She used to hold him like this when he hurt, and being held always eased his pain, knowing someone was there for him without question or judgment.

Chapter Fifteen

Sean

He didn't know how long they sat there, but Sean continued to console Mr. Devaux in his arms until the sobs died away and his shuddering breaths returned to normal. Gradually, Mr. Devaux loosened his hold on Sean's shirt and pulled back, sniffing and hiding his face. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a handkerchief, wiping at his eyes and blowing his nose.

"I apologize for my lack of control," Mr. Devaux said, his voice hoarse.

"Never apologize for your grief," Sean replied firmly.

Mr. Devaux nodded and turned to retrieve his tumbler from the tray.

Sean laid his hand on Mr. Devaux's arm, stopping his motion. "No alcohol. Drink water instead. Wait here." Rising to his feet, he headed to the cabinet and made up two soda waters, bringing them back to the sofa and handing one to Mr. Devaux, who raised an eyebrow in question but sipped nonetheless.

"Why water?" he asked.

Sean shifted sideways, mirroring Mr. Devaux's position, bringing a leg up onto the sofa and folding it under him. He rubbed his hand up and down his shin. "My ma believed water was best after a good cry. She used to say that when we cried out our sadness, we needed to refill ourselves with fresh water. It helps wash away sad feelings, like rain cleansing away the dust and nourishing the crops. She also believed alcohol only clouded men's pain—it didn't make it go away."

Mr. Devaux cleared his throat. "Your mother sounds wise. I realize I've been selfish in not enquiring about you or your family. Are they here with you in America?"

A well of grief billowed up from within, and Sean dropped his head. How he wished his family was with him to see this country, but they weren't. He shook his head and raised it, wiping at moist eyes.

"I'm sorry." Mr. Devaux set his glass on the tray and gave Sean his undivided attention. "Would you like to tell me about it?"

Sean gave a brief nod. "My family... died from the influenza almost three years ago now. I'm... I'm the only one left." He gulped down his water and

stared into the empty glass. “That’s why I came to America. There was nuthin’ and no one left. The rest of the family were up north, and they’d lost so much between the famine and the flu. They couldn’t do nuthin’. The church helped arrange for my trip, and the priest’s cousin here in America, Mr. Clarke, got me the bell hop job. Mr. and Mrs. Clarke are my landlord and landlady. I had to sell the farm. Didn’t get much, but it got me the ticket here, and the money that was left helped me the first year while I learned my job at the hotel.”

“Oh, Lord. I didn’t know.” Mr. Devaux laid his hand over Sean’s and gave it a squeeze.

Sean blinked rapidly to clear his tears. He missed his ma and all his family. They’d taught him the simple things, like manners and cleanliness and how to behave in public, things that were all ingrained now. But it was hard figuring out the right thing to do with major decisions and problems. His ma and da would’ve had the right answers, but he often made mistakes without their wisdom. He wished he could’ve stayed a kid longer—going to school and hanging about with the lads—but once he arrived in America, his childhood disappeared.

Mr. Clarke had taught him how to get around New York. He and Mrs. Clarke were kind to him, renting him a room in the basement, which was clean and spacious enough. But Mr. Clarke had his own family and couldn’t spend much time guiding him. The first year Sean lived there, the adjustments to American life were difficult. It wasn’t so bad now, because he had friends, but they were mostly around his age and weren’t always the best when it came to advice. Not like his da and ma. He was fortunate to have had Mr. Ormsby’s support, if only for a short while. When Sean was hired as a bellhop, Mr. Ormsby taught him much about dealing with people and planning for the future. But Sean was under no illusion he was special; Mr. Ormsby took every new employee under his wing. He was a father figure whom everyone looked up to. But Mr. Trant had been hired on to take care of the books, and not long after, Mr. Ormsby was gone.

“You must miss them terribly,” Mr. Devaux said, breaking into Sean’s thoughts.

Sean nodded solemnly. “All the time. Every day.” He lifted his face to find Mr. Devaux watching him closely, his eyes sad and still a bit red.

Mr. Devaux glanced away as if to gather his thoughts before turning back again. “Sometimes I wish I could forget,” he finally managed to say quietly.

“Sometimes I’ve wondered why I haven’t been torn completely apart, why I even went on living.” He tried to muster a smile but couldn’t. “Do you ever wish you could forget?”

Sean shook his head. “Never,” he said firmly.

“Why not?”

“That would be like wishing I’d never been born or had them as my family.” He looked over the back of the sofa and out towards the windows. The rain had slowed, but still it fell, lightly splattering the panes with tiny dots. “I remember the little things my sister used to do. She loved to imagine we were a family of elves, and she’d make wreaths of flowers for us all to wear, even our dog.” Sean smiled at the memory. “My younger brother followed me everywhere, and my parents... they showed me what love is, because they lived it every day.” He turned back to Mr. Devaux. “Why would I want to forget?”

“Because... it hurts so much,” Mr. Devaux choked. “Then again, I’m afraid I’ll forget.” His voice cracked, and he raised a hand to cover his mouth.

“You won’t ever forget Andy,” Sean assured him. He took hold of Mr. Devaux’s hand, gently prying it away from his mouth and lowering it to the man’s lap, threading their fingers together.

Mr. Devaux looked up from their entwining fingers at Sean’s words. “How do you know?” he whispered, his expression hopeful.

“Because you loved him, and he loved you,” Sean said with confidence. “I carry my family with me... here.” He laid his free hand over his heart. “As long as I’m alive, wherever I go, my eyes see for them. I wish they could see America for themselves, but they can’t, so I do it for them. I know they’re proud of me and happy for me.”

Mr. Devaux gave Sean a watery smile.

“Drink up,” Sean said, pointing to Mr. Devaux’s glass. “I’ll get you another when you’re finished.” Mr. Devaux finished off his water and handed Sean his empty glass. He rose and refilled both of their glasses before reclaiming his spot on the sofa.

“This has been a very intense day,” Mr. Devaux said, running his hand over his hair. “And it isn’t over yet.” He dropped his head to the side, letting it come to rest on the sofa back, and he briefly closed his eyes.

Sean traced the lines of Mr. Devaux’s face with his gaze—down the side of his forehead and high cheekbone, along the line of his strong jaw, and over his

exposed throat. Somehow he'd been granted a second chance, and Sean would do whatever it took for him and Mr. Devaux to work as a team.

Mr. Devaux opened his eyes and lifted his head slightly. "I want to ask you some questions that I'm sure are going to be difficult for you to answer, but I need the information in order for my plan to work."

Sean opened his mouth to speak, and Mr. Devaux sat up straight.

"I know you want the answers, and I promise you will get them." He clasped Sean's hand again. "Will you trust me?"

He nodded, his curiosity piqued. "What do you want to know?"

"Let me start by saying—" Mr. Devaux cleared his throat. "—before I found you in the park, I asked Henry about your situation."

Sean frowned. *Why would he ask Henry about me?*

"Don't be angry with him. He's a good friend to you and wouldn't tell me a thing at first. I pestered him all evening, and he only spoke of you after I promised I wanted to help," Mr. Devaux explained. "He hinted that it had something to do with Mr. Trant, and you were giving up your savings in place of stealing jewelry."

Mr. Devaux's stare bore into Sean's, and he shrank away.

"No, don't, please." Mr. Devaux grabbed hold of Sean's forearm. "I'm not judging you, but I do need to know why Mr. Trant has you stealing jewelry from the residents, or rather, tried to get you to steal." Mr. Devaux inched closer, his knee touching Sean's.

That extra contact with Mr. Devaux helped calm Sean's nerves. "I don't know where to begin."

A hint of a smile teased at Mr. Devaux's lips. "At the beginning is always best, but I don't need specifics. Some general background will do."

Sean rubbed the back of his neck. He could do this. Taking a deep breath, he exhaled slowly and looked at Mr. Devaux. "Do you remember I said I didn't have relations with the residents?"

Mr. Devaux nodded.

"Before I served you, I did a few times, but I stopped when I was transferred to your floor." Sean watched for any sign of judgment on Mr. Devaux's face, instead, the man just listened attentively. "I don't know how

Trant found out, but when he did, he called me into his office.” Sean stopped and recalled the horrible day, he must admit now, led to him sitting here with Mr. Devaux in the penthouse. A shift occurred inside Sean—a change of perspective, like he was looking out a window from a higher floor, and he could see all the steps that took him to get where he was, right here, right now, with Mr. Devaux. Maybe everything he experienced, even the bad things, were for a reason—to help him get to a better place—and he smiled.

“Why are you smiling?” Mr. Devaux asked, a cloud of confusion on his face.

Sean couldn’t stop grinning. “I thought the day Mr. Trant ordered me to steal jewelry was the beginning of the end. I didn’t know then that, instead, it would be the beginning of the beginning—with you.”

Mr. Devaux’s mouth opened in surprise at Sean’s revelation, and a smile grew on his handsome face. He raised his hand and cupped Sean’s cheek. “I don’t think I’d ever thought of it like that.” He gazed deep into Sean’s eyes. “You are a remarkable young man, Sean O’Reilly.” With that said, he moved forward and brought his mouth closer to Sean’s.

Sean held his breath, his heart roaring to a gallop, pounding in his chest. Mr. Devaux’s warm lips brushed lightly over his, tantalizing him, teasing him with their closeness. Then he drew back slightly. His gaze swept over Sean’s face before drifting down and settling on his lips. He dove forward again. Sean moaned into the kiss, hungrily pressing, wrapping his arms around Mr. Devaux’s neck and grabbing on tight. He’d wanted this for so long! He opened his mouth, inviting the man to take advantage of his offer, which he did, driving his tongue inside and sweeping it over Sean’s. Sean couldn’t get enough of the taste of him.

Kissing Mr. Devaux left Sean breathless. His seductive mouth inflamed Sean’s desires to obsession, far greater than any quick dalliance he’d previously experienced. Those encounters couldn’t compare to the lust, the drive, the *need*, to give himself completely to Mr. Devaux and to have Mr. Devaux return those feelings for him. He wanted to be consumed, not just to relieve pressure. He ached to belong, not just to pass his time with a friendly companion.

He lifted his leg from the floor and draped it over Mr. Devaux’s, hooking his heel around Mr. Devaux’s back and drawing him closer. The added contact heated his skin, radiating through his trousers. He hoisted himself up from the sofa and maneuvered onto Mr. Devaux’s lap, shoving his leg between the sofa

back and Mr. Devaux's side until he locked his legs together behind Mr. Devaux. A steely rod pressed against his own straining member, and Sean ground against it, the forceful thrusts in response, driving him closer to the edge. Strong arms held him tight, and nimble fingers roamed over his back and through his hair, marking every place they touched with an invisible fingerprint of possession. Sean rotated his hips faster, harder, and a low groan vibrated from Mr. Devaux's chest. Abruptly, Mr. Devaux's warm hands left his body and cool air drifted between them as Mr. Devaux drew away, placing a steadying hand to Sean's chest. *No, he can't stop, not now.* Sean whimpered, chasing after those soft lips. He didn't want to stop.

"Sean," Mr. Devaux said, breathing heavily. He gently grabbed hold of Sean's wrists and unwrapped them from around his neck. "Sean," he said, trying to catch Sean's attention.

So long he'd wanted this. *Why is Mr. Devaux stopping me now?* He was hard as a rock, and he was sure lust was written all over his face. Mr. Devaux couldn't mistake it for anything else. "Why did you stop? I would, if you wanted," Sean pleaded. He wasn't ashamed to beg, not this time.

"I know, I know." Mr. Devaux clasped their hands together and kissed Sean's knuckles. "That's what I'm afraid of. We're both tired and... vulnerable right now. It's not the right time. Especially with all we've yet to talk about." His gaze pleaded with Sean to understand—his pupils still fully blown.

Mr. Devaux was right, even though Sean didn't want to hear it. His shoulders drooped. "I suppose we should finish talking." He moved off Mr. Devaux's lap and shifted, reaching down to adjust himself to a more comfortable position. Mr. Devaux snorted softly and did the same. They stopped, looked at each other, and laughed.

"I'm sorry I have to break the mood, but I need you to continue with your story."

Sean nodded. "Some clients and I did enjoy each other before I was transferred." He glanced at Mr. Devaux to see him nod. "But I never took money." He looked again, hoping Mr. Devaux believed him. Mr. Devaux raised his hand and ran it through Sean's hair, and he pressed into the calming touch, closing his eyes.

"Go on," Mr. Devaux said.

He looked Mr. Devaux in the eye. "When Trant found out—" Sean swallowed. "—he told me if I didn't steal either money or jewelry from the

residents, he would turn me over to the police and tell my church, and my landlord, the perversions I was doing.” This time he hung his head in shame, not for what he’d done, but because of the disappointment he would have caused the kind people in his life.

A loud curse burst from Mr. Devaux’s lips, and he jerked his hand away, startling Sean. Jumping to his feet, Mr. Devaux rapidly paced the living room.

“So that’s why you were turning over your money to Trant in place of stealing jewelry or money. To keep him off your back because he was blackmailing you?” A dark scowl creased his brow as he strode angrily back and forth. “Is he doing this to any of the other employees?” He halted in front of Sean.

Sean nodded. “Yes, I think so, at least a couple others. Something also happened to two more before I was caught, but they’re no longer working here, and I don’t know where they are.” Mr. Devaux held his hands out to him, and Sean took hold. He was pulled to his feet and warm hands carefully cupped his face. Mr. Devaux caressed Sean’s lips with the smooth pad of his thumb.

“I promise I will do everything in my power to stop him. You will not be arrested, nor will you be shamed before your church or your landlord. Please let me help you with this.”

Sean shook his head. “It’s not your problem. You didn’t do anything.”

“Please let me help.” Mr. Devaux swallowed. “Please. I want to do this, because... because I’ve come to care for you.” He ran the back of his knuckles slowly over Sean’s cheek. “Not just as my employee, but as a friend... and I think... even more.” A tentative smile pulled at the corner of his lips. “I want you to feel safe and cared for, and that won’t happen while corrupt men like Trant take advantage of honest people.”

Mr. Devaux cares for me? And after everything, he thinks I’m honest? Without hesitation, Sean stepped up to Mr. Devaux and wrapped his arms around the man’s body, grabbing the back of his robe in his fists, hiding his face in the collar of his robe and burrowing into his shoulder. “Yes,” he said, nodding. He heard Mr. Devaux sigh, and then long fingers carded through the hair at the nape of his neck. The tension in his body released for the first time in months.

“Let’s sit down. There are a few things I need to tell you. They concern Mr. Trant and another blackmailer.” This time when they sat together on the sofa, their bodies touched in as many places as possible, without being in each

other's laps. "I've hired a private detective to look into who was blackmailing Andrew."

Sean raised his eyebrows. *Now I see why Andrew was adamant Mr. Devaux let it be. He's definitely determined.*

"Yes, I know, I know." Mr. Devaux sighed. "He didn't want me to look for the man, but I won't have peace until I find him. The detective's name is Mr. Rutherford. When he calls, I'll want to speak to him immediately. I'll stop whatever I'm doing. Interrupt me if you have to, but don't let him hang up until I've spoken with him. If I'm not here, you will take a detailed message from him. Even if the message doesn't make sense to you, it will to me. Have him give you the number at which he can be reached." Mr. Devaux's gaze was serious.

"Yes, Mr. Devaux."

"Next, Mr. Trant." Mr. Devaux's lip curled in disgust. "What I tell you here is not to be spoken of to anyone except those people I will introduce you to who will be participating in—what I'm calling—"The Plan."

Sean's eyes widened. "The Plan?" he whispered.

"Yes." Mr. Devaux nodded. "The Chief Inspector has had his suspicions all along that Mr. Ormsby was set up by Mr. Trant, but they didn't have enough proof to arrest him. All they could do was let Mr. Ormsby go without a jail sentence. I'll give you more details as they are finalized, but we'll meet somewhere away from the hotel to work out our plans." Mr. Devaux laid a warm hand on Sean's thigh. "Oh, and Henry is allowed to know some of this, but he is only allowed to hear about it and speak about it here in the penthouse."

Sean's mind whirled in a thousand directions at once. It never occurred to him that Mr. Devaux had so much prestige and power he could practically snap his fingers and the Chief Inspector would offer him whatever assistance he desired. Could that possibly mean... "Do you think Mr. Ormsby will be able to get his job back?" he asked hopefully.

"We have to work out the details first and investigate some more, but we'll try. It also depends on whether he *wants* his job back. The Astraea may hold too many bad memories for him, and he may not wish to return."

Sean nodded solemnly. It was true. Mr. Ormsby had proclaimed his innocence the entire time the police were dragging him away. Maybe he'd feel

too ashamed and embarrassed to come back. “The lads all want him back, Mr. Devaux. We all miss him. He was a fair manager.”

“Then we’ll do our best.” Mr. Devaux smiled and leaned forward, pressing his mouth gently to Sean’s.

Sean savored the tender kiss, a sign of hope and promises. They pulled apart, and Sean couldn’t stop the yawn from escaping. “Sorry, sir. I’m more tired than I thought.”

Mr. Devaux chuckled. “We’ve had an exhausting day with what happened this morning, waiting for the documents—and I hadn’t realized—the hours we’ve sat here discussing plans... and us.” He ran his finger over the back of Sean’s hand. I think it’s time we went to bed.”

Sean brightened, perking up in more ways than one at the thought of bed. He watched Mr. Devaux in anticipation.

Mr. Devaux laughed again. “As much as I would love to, I don’t think tonight is a good time for either of us.”

Sean sighed and deflated. He hated to agree, but Mr. Devaux was right again.

“However, I would like you to spend the night in the guest room if you aren’t required to return to your place of boarding?”

“I’d like that.” Sean smiled. “But I should return tomorrow and let my landlord and landlady know where I’ve been. They’re used to me coming home in the early morning hours and Trant had me working till midnight since...” He shrugged. “Anyway, they won’t be alarmed right away, so tomorrow is fine.”

Mr. Devaux nodded. “You might want to notify them that your schedule may turn erratic for the foreseeable future.” He rubbed his chin, the motion creating a pleasant scratching sound over the bristles. “Do they have a telephone?”

“Yes. It’s shared with another family in their building in the hall.”

“If they don’t mind, you can call them from here and let them know if you’re not returning.”

“I’ll ask them. Thank you, Mr. Devaux.”

Mr. Devaux stood and held out his hand. “Come, we have a long day tomorrow. I’d like you to meet Isabel. Hopefully, I can get hold of her for lunch.” He led Sean down the hall. “She’s an incredible social butterfly, as they

say.” He stopped in front of Sean’s room. “We’ll sleep in a bit. I’ll wake you at eight.”

Sean closed his eyes as Mr. Devaux’s lips met his, the kiss gentle and, unfortunately, short.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Mr. Devaux let go of his hand and headed down the hall.

Entering the guest room, Sean stripped to his boxers and climbed into bed. He didn’t have any pajamas here. If he was going to stay more frequently, he’d need to purchase some. Yawning, he rolled over onto his side and turned off the wall sconce. He wouldn’t have ever thought that one of the worst days of his life, could turn out to be one of the best. With a happy sigh, he snuggled deeper under the blankets and was soon fast asleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Sean

His morning ablutions finished, Sean made a call to the kitchen and waited for Henry to deliver his and Mr. Devaux's breakfasts at the usual time of nine. In the meantime, he surveyed the automobiles, and pedestrians scurrying to and fro on important business. A knock at the door sounded, and after a few moments, Henry called out, "Room service, Mr. Devaux." Sean kept quiet, a tiny smile inching onto his lips. He wanted to surprise his friend.

Henry appeared from around the corner and stopped. His eyes widened, and a grin spread across his face. "Sean!" Ignoring his cart, he hurried over and grabbed Sean in a fierce hug and pounded him on the back. "I can't believe you're here this morning! Is everything all right between you and Mr. Devaux? When did you arrive? Will you be working with him all day?"

Sean laughed as he hugged Henry back. "That's a lot of questions. Why don't I tell you while we set up?"

"So, go on, tell me," Henry urged, snapping out the tablecloth in one skilled movement.

"First, yes, I'm working for Mr. Devaux again, and it's better than before. I have the same schedule but with the option for full-time employment if we both want it in a year."

Henry halted and smiled at Sean. "That's swell! Best news ever. I'm going to be honest though, you had me worried these last two weeks." Henry chewed on the corner of his bottom lip. "I had to tell Mr. Devaux what was happening when he asked for help. I didn't know what else to do." Henry's eyes pleaded with him for understanding. "I hope you aren't mad."

Sean shook his head and, laying his hand on Henry's shoulder, gave it a quick squeeze. "No. In fact, thank you for mentioning Trant to Mr. Devaux for me. I don't know if I could have done it if he hadn't asked me point-blank. You did a good thing." He moved to arrange the silverware.

"You don't have to thank me. You would have told him eventually." Henry turned to the cart. "I spoke to my wife, and we agreed if you couldn't pay for your board, you could move in with us."

Sean stopped and blinked at Henry. He hadn't expected or asked for anything like that. Henry and his wife, Anna, were kind people; he'd do

whatever it took to help them, and it warmed his heart to know they'd do the same for him. "Thanks, Henry. Tell your wife thanks too."

"I will." He picked up the breakfast dishes from the cart. "Go on, tell me more."

"Mr. Devaux found me in the park, and we had a long talk, walked back to the hotel, and Trant saw me as soon as we walked in."

"Trant?" Henry's eyes widened.

Sean nodded. "But Mr. Devaux stopped him, and we came back to the penthouse. And you know the rest with the documents since you carried them to the lawyer's."

"I'm glad it worked out."

They leaned against the back of the sofa silently, both lost in their own thoughts while they waited for Mr. Devaux to appear.

"Mr. Devaux said I could tell you about what he's got planned for Trant," Sean said, breaking the silence between them.

"My lips are sealed. I haven't even told my wife."

"Good. He says you mustn't speak of it to anyone but us, and only to us in here. We're meeting for lunch with the Inspector this afternoon, to find out what really happened with Mr. Ormsby and what we can do about Trant."

Henry's eyes grew wide. "Do you think Mr. Ormsby might return?"

"Mr. Devaux said not to get my hopes up. He might have bad memories about what happened and not want to come back."

"I'm hoping for the best then," Henry said.

Sean heard the muffled slide of slippers on the wood floors and spotted Mr. Devaux coming towards them from down the hallway. "Good morning, Henry," Mr. Devaux called as he neared. He glanced between Sean and Henry and smiled. "How's your day so far?"

"As well as can be expected, sir."

Mr. Devaux dug into his pocket for some change and placed a few coins into Henry's gloved hand. "Mr. O'Reilly and I will be eating lunch out. We'll call about dinner."

Henry nodded. "All right, Mr. Devaux, and thank you. Bye, Sean." Henry left the cart behind for the dirty dishes and exited the penthouse.

Sean turned to the table and was about to remove the silver dome covering Mr. Devaux's breakfast when Mr. Devaux pressed himself to Sean's back.

"Before we start..." Mr. Devaux whispered into his ear, wrapping his arms around Sean and pulling him to his chest. Sean rotated in his arms, a smile on his lips as he reached to encircle Mr. Devaux's waist. This close, Sean could enjoy the scent of talcum wafting up from around the man's collar. Mr. Devaux lowered his head and, with surprising gentleness, kissed Sean. His warm mouth was a tender greeting to the morning. His tongue lightly skimmed over Sean's lips, and Sean parted them, silently asking for more. But Mr. Devaux only flicked his tongue briefly against his before leaning away.

"As much as I'd love to spend the morning kissing you, we have two appointments today, and you and I have a few more items to discuss." He withdrew a telegram from his robe pocket and set it on the table. "What did you order for us?" he asked, pulling out his chair and taking a seat. He smiled up at Sean.

Sean removed the lid from the plate. "Toast and jam, a cheese omelet with sausage, and orange juice. I also ordered an Irish breakfast tea." He momentarily drifted back to his home in Eire and his ma making a strong cup of tea for his da and bringing it to him at the breakfast table before he headed out to the fields. His heart warming at the treasured memory, Sean poured both of them a cup.

"Irish breakfast tea?" Mr. Devaux lifted the cup and sniffed the malty aroma before taking a sip. "I don't think I've had this type before. It's strong... and rich. It's certainly a tea that will wake you up. I like it." Mr. Devaux nodded his approval. "Continue to order new varieties. I'm curious about how they differ."

"Yes, sir." Sean took the cover off his own meal, then sat.

Mr. Devaux set his cup on its saucer and reached into his robe pocket. "I'd like to return something to you." He extended his hand. Lying in the center of his palm was the elevator key. Mr. Devaux smiled tentatively. "It's yours. Keep it."

Sean hesitated, his hand hovering over the key. "Are you sure you want me to have this? After everything?" He searched Mr. Devaux's eyes for any worries or second thoughts.

"I'm positive."

The key symbolized much more than entry to the penthouse. It meant Mr. Devaux trusted him again, and the small, tight knot that still existed in his chest

from yesterday, even after their heartfelt talks, released and his muscles relaxed. "Thank you, sir." He picked up the key and stared at it, then lifted his head to gaze into Mr. Devaux's eyes. "I won't ever give you a reason to distrust me again."

Mr. Devaux smiled, his eyes glistening. He blinked rapidly and folded Sean's fingers over the key, holding them closed. "I know," he said. "Now let's eat. This smells delicious." Mr. Devaux withdrew his hand and arranged his linen napkin across his lap. He picked up his fork and cut into the large omelet. Thick, creamy cheddar cheese oozed out of the slice.

Sean stared as Mr. Devaux lifted the juicy bite to his lips and closed his eyes to savor the taste. A hum of satisfaction escaped Mr. Devaux's throat, and Sean ran his tongue over his lips, imagining the sharpness of that cheese in his mouth if they were kissing.

Mr. Devaux opened his eyes and smiled. "Delicious. An excellent choice for breakfast." He dabbed at his lips with the napkin. "I want to talk to you about Detective Rutherford, the investigator I hired to hunt down information about Andrew's blackmailer." He took a sip of his orange juice. "He'll be arriving today at eleven. This is the telegram he sent me a little over a week ago." Mr. Devaux slid a small envelope across the table to Sean. "Please read it. It's important you know everything that's happening."

Taking the telegram, Sean extracted the folded note from the envelope and read the message from Mr. Rutherford:

Saw Tower of London and a castle. Stop. Bringing back a souvenir. Stop. Home in five days. Stop

Sean frowned. "This is just a vacation message from a friend, sir." He raised his eyes from the note and met Mr. Devaux's gaze.

His employer smiled smugly. "That's what anyone who read it would think. I don't like having my business bandied about. Phones are handy items, but party lines have eavesdroppers. My exchanges with Mr. Rutherford have been in a simple code that we could understand, yet others would think ordinary. That message—" He reached across the table and tapped on the note. "—contains much information."

Sean watched as Mr. Devaux grew more animated.

"Tower of London, means he arrived in London and found the blackmailer deceased."

Sean's eyes widened.

Mr. Devaux smiled. "Castle means he talked to someone of peerage who is also connected to the blackmailer or had been blackmailed. We'll find out more when Mr. Rutherford arrives." Mr. Devaux bit into another forkful of omelet, keeping Sean in suspense.

"The souvenir, means..." Mr. Devaux trailed off and glanced out the window for a moment. When he turned back to Sean, his voice had lost its excitement. "It means he probably found something of Andrew's that the blackmailer had. Although I don't know why he would have kept it if Andrew was already..." Mr. Devaux halted abruptly, staring down at his plate.

Sean reached for Mr. Devaux's hand and entwined their fingers. Mr. Devaux grasped onto him as if he were a lifeline.

"I'd like you to be here when Mr. Rutherford arrives—to hear everything he has to say. As I promised, I'm not going to hide anything from you." He gazed solemnly at Sean. "Of course if you don't want to be here, you may leave." His eyes pleaded with Sean to stay.

"I'll be here, sir," Sean said firmly. There was no way he'd let Mr. Devaux face the results of the investigation on his own.

"Thank you." Mr. Devaux squeezed his hand, then let go. "We have another priority we must attend to this afternoon." He twirled the handle of his fork in his hand. "I scheduled the appointment with Chief Inspector Lyons about the issue of Mr. Trant and Mr. Ormsby. We're meeting him for lunch at two o'clock."

Sean's brows rose even higher than before. Mr. Devaux had said they'd eat lunch out. They were meeting the Inspector for lunch... "In a public place?"

"Yes, it's better than him coming here. Mr. Trant would surely grow suspicious of my sudden increase in visitors when I've had so few in the past. But don't worry. Many of the more upscale restaurants have private rooms for parties and business meetings. I've booked us a room at the Jade Lotus. That reminds me, I need to contact Isabel about the lunch since she'll be helping us."

Sean slowly put down his fork, his stomach suddenly refusing even the idea of another bite. *Miss Greene is helping us? Why?* His enthusiasm for the meeting faltered at the name of the woman whose arrival set in motion two of the worst weeks of his life.

Isabel. The woman his jealousy chose as the source of his undisciplined, childish behavior. How could he face her? He cringed in shame remembering

his prior actions. If he couldn't face her, he dare not ask Mr. Devaux why he was asking for her help with The Plan. It wasn't his place to question his employer's decisions anyway. Sean startled at the touch of Mr. Devaux's leg against his under the table, a slippered foot running slowly up and down over his ankle.

Mr. Devaux smiled. "You worry too much. She's a good person, I assure you. There's no reason for your nervousness." He poured himself another cup of tea. "I'm going to call her after breakfast. I spoke to her about my plans this past Saturday, and now I'm hoping she can meet with us and the Inspector. This is just the sort of excitement she enjoys getting involved in. It puts her dramatic talents to good use. I'll introduce you to her then."

Sean lifted his knife and fork again. He listened to Mr. Devaux's calming chatter, determined to finish his breakfast.

"She's a bit overwhelming, but I won't let you deal with her on your own until you get used to her." Mr. Devaux smiled reassuringly before slicing up the sausage. "Let's finish our breakfast before it grows colder. We're going to need all our energy for the day."

Sean hadn't realized how much he'd missed having breakfast with Mr. Devaux. Usually the morning discussions were light: the weather, plans for the day, simple things. Dinner was usually more focused on business and what had transpired over the course of the day. He was looking forward to their first full day together, and especially to finding out what the Chief Inspector had to say. On the other hand, he was nervous about meeting Isabel Greene. She sounded like a force to be reckoned with, and he'd seen her commanding presence with Mr. Devaux. But there was no use worrying about her now. Now, he wanted to use his time to focus on his handsome employer, and imagine the man's lips wrapped around something other than a fork.

Chapter Seventeen

Sean

As the clock on the mantel struck ten, a knock sounded at the front door.

Sean glanced quickly in the direction of the hall then back over at Mr. Devaux, who slowly returned his teacup to its saucer and picked up his napkin. “Were you expecting someone, sir?” Sean pushed his seat back.

Mr. Devaux deposited the napkin on the table and rose. “No, I wasn’t.”

The sound of the door opening and closing reached Sean’s ears, followed by the one sultry feminine voice he knew.

“Harrison, darling, are you awake yet? I’ve come to take you to breakfast.”

Every muscle in Sean’s body locked, and he shot a nervous glance in Mr. Devaux’s direction. Mr. Devaux reached over and ran a hand over Sean’s back, giving him a reassuring smile.

The rapid *click, click, click* of high heels tapping on the wood floor grew louder as Miss Isabel Greene rounded the corner. Her carefully plucked brows rose in surprise. “Oh! How disappointing. You’ve already had your breakfast.” She pouted.

“Why didn’t you call?” Mr. Devaux said, striding over to greet her.

“I wanted to surprise you.” She smoothed her features and laid a hand on Mr. Devaux’s forearm before kissing him on both cheeks.

Sean glanced at Mr. Devaux’s cheeks, checking for lipstick stains, but he couldn’t see from his angle. *At least the lipstick is pink instead of red this time.*

“You certainly did that,” Mr. Devaux said.

Sean stood quietly by the sofa, watching them greet each other. His heart beat rapidly, waiting for the jealousy to arise... but it didn’t. And with an internal sigh, he relaxed and smiled. He took in Miss Greene’s casual but elegant attire, something he never would have noticed before Mr. Devaux’s valet training. She wore a pale-yellow, knee-length dress with silver sequin embellishments at the waist. Smoky teardrop-shaped earrings matching the sequin design hung from her ears, and her long hair was gathered in a soft bun at the base of her neck. A light-orange cloche hat, sporting a few pastel blossoms, reflected the flower design of her shoes.

Miss Greene stepped around Mr. Devaux and approached Sean. “And just who is this handsome young man?” She shot Mr. Devaux a sly smile, the corner of her lips curling daintily upwards. “You didn’t tell me you had company.”

Sean blushed, his gaze shifting back and forth between the two friends as they bantered, like he was watching one of those tennis matches he’d seen on a day trip with Mr. Devaux.

“Isabel...” Mr. Devaux chided.

“It’s about time.” She winked at Sean.

Sean blinked in surprise. No woman had *ever* winked at him before.

Mr. Devaux cleared his throat. “It’s not what you think. This is Se—”

“Of course not, dear.” She turned to Sean. “Hello, I’m Isabel Greene, a long-time friend of Harrison’s. I’m sure he’s told you all about me.” She smiled at him... and it was dazzling. Miss Greene was pretty before, but her full grin revealed straight, white teeth and accented high, rosy cheekbones that added sparkle to her sky-blue eyes with their flecks of gold, making her whole face light up with an inner beauty.

Sean couldn’t speak, and he completely forgot his manners. She had to be one of the most beautiful women he’d ever seen. No wonder Mr. Devaux couldn’t stop looking at her. Sean cast a desperate glance at Mr. Devaux to help reorient himself from the dizzying effects of Miss Greene’s stunning gaze. Unfortunately, Mr. Devaux looked just as unsettled.

Mr. Devaux sent an apologetic smile Sean’s way and rubbed at a clean-shaven cheek. “After a fashion,” he muttered.

Miss Greene pivoted towards Mr. Devaux, her expression serious. “What does ‘after a fashion’ mean?” She’d dropped her voice, stringing out the words in a dramatic manner.

“Well...” Mr. Devaux hesitated, glancing between Sean and Miss Greene. “Not immediately.”

Miss Greene sighed loudly. “Oh, Harrison, you did it again, didn’t you? You didn’t tell this young man that we’re only friends?”

Mr. Devaux scrunched up his face at the accuracy of her deduction and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Oh, heavens. What am I to do with you? You are far too careless sometimes. It’s a wonder Andrew didn’t flee in defeat the first time he saw us

together.” She addressed Sean. “No offense, darling. I’m sure Harrison will tell you about it eventually.” She turned back to Harrison. “Your *friend*—” Isabel smiled playfully. “—must be very forgiving.”

Sean stood silent. *Forgiving? Me?* If only she knew the true story—that Mr. Devaux forgave *him*.

“Isabel, it’s not like that. We haven’t...” Mr. Devaux petered out under Miss Greene’s intense gaze.

“Really?” She raised a perfectly sculpted eyebrow in question. “You can’t fool me, darling. Three years alone is an eternity, I would know. It’s only a matter of time.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “We both are at our best when we’re in love, and this young man is here eating breakfast with you. Granted, at the moment he’s fully clothed...”

Mr. Devaux gaped, his mouth opening and closing a few times.

Miss Greene looked Sean over and flashed him a smile. “But he has successfully swum the moat and climbed your castle walls—penetrated your inner sanctum, as it were. I’m sure it won’t be long before he’s climbing something else entirely,” she said smugly.

Mr. Devaux choked, his face going red, and he slapped at his chest.

Sean hurried over, grabbed hold of his bicep with one hand and pounded his back with the other. “Would you like some water, sir?” Frantic nods greeted Sean’s question, and he scurried to the cabinet and poured a soda water, then rushed back, handing over the tumbler.

Mr. Devaux accepted the glass and sipped the water carefully. He took several deep, ragged breaths before he spoke. “Who on earth says ‘inner sanctum’?” he squeaked out, coughing between words. He peered at Isabel with watery, reddened eyes.

Sean hovered at Mr. Devaux’s side, watching him closely, a hand on his back.

“I do, darling,” Miss Greene said with an innocent smile—one Sean could already tell was anything but. “Now, where were we? Oh, yes... What’s your name, my dear?” She held out her hand.

“Sean O’Reilly, madam.” Sean held her delicate hand carefully and noticed the nails on her long, slender fingers were painted a soft shade of pink this time. On her right ring finger she wore a large, emerald-cut diamond.

“Good heavens, Isabel will do. I’ll feel twenty years older if you call me that.”

“Yes, ma... Isabel.” It felt strange to call a woman of her status by her first name, but it would be rude to not honor her request.

“Back to what I came here for. I intended to take Harrison out to breakfast, and of course, you would’ve been welcome to join us, but I see you’ve already eaten. I wanted to celebrate.” Isabel pouted prettily, her lower lip a dainty protrusion.

“Celebrate what?” Mr. Devaux asked after finishing off his water. Sean took the glass and set it on the table.

“Elise’s and my moving in, of course.”

“Moving in?” Mr. Devaux arched a brow. “Where?”

“Here.” Her smile brightened. “This hotel is lovely, and I ran into some dear friends who said they also live here. I haven’t seen them since...” She trailed off, her smile faltering, but she picked right up again. “Anyway, we’re moving in to see if this hotel suits our needs. We’ve rented a room on the floor below, opposite wing. We’ll have so much fun, together.”

Sean couldn’t contribute anything to the conversation, so he listened, standing close to Mr. Devaux, their arms touching.

“How about lunch?” Mr. Devaux asked. “I’m planning on meeting with the Chief Inspector this afternoon at the Jade Lotus. Elise’s invited, and I’ll be bringing Sean along too.”

Sean glanced at Mr. Devaux. He still didn’t understand why Mr. Devaux wanted Isabel’s help with The Plan.

Isabel’s cheeks flushed, and she raised a hand to her mouth, then dropped it. Her eyes sparkled with glee. “This is going to be a great adventure, and I’ll enjoy whatever role you give me.” She clapped her hands together. “I can’t wait to get started. What time do you wish Elise and me to arrive at the restaurant?”

“Two. Sean and I have a meeting with Detective Rutherford shortly regarding another matter.”

Isabel frowned slightly, and then her forehead smoothed out. “Oh, darling, this isn’t about the blackmailer, is it?” Her eyes saddened. “I understand why you’re doing it, even though he asked you not to.” She gave him a kind smile. “I hope whatever answers you find bring you peace.”

Sean's body jerked a second time. *When did Mr. Devaux tell her about Andrew's blackmailer?* Mr. Devaux peered at Sean, then moved closer. Soon a soothing hand caressed Sean's back. "I know, but just because Andrew asked me not to doesn't mean I won't try to find the truth."

Isabel looked at Sean. "So, Mr. O'Reilly?" she let the question dangle.

Mr. Devaux nodded and turned, his gaze holding Sean's, his words a promise. "Yes. I keep nothing from Sean."

Sean caught Isabel beaming as he turned back. "I was right!" Isabel grinned. "I am so happy for you, Harrison, truly." She kissed him again on his cheek before turning to Sean. "And I am happy for you too." She didn't kiss him, but she clasped his hand warmly between hers, her smile radiant. "Well then, I must be going. I don't want to leave Elise alone too long. We'll see you at two at the Jade Lotus. I'll see myself out." With that she turned, and her quick footsteps receded as she swept from the living room, down the hall and out of the penthouse, the door closing quietly behind her.

The energy in the room dissipated. A human whirlwind had passed through, and now all was peaceful again, allowing Sean to relax. A warm body pressed against Sean's back, and steady arms wrapped around him. He lifted his hands and grabbed hold of Mr. Devaux's forearms. His heart rate slowed further at the comforting contact, and he looked over his shoulder at Mr. Devaux. "I don't think I've ever met anyone like her. I think she enjoys shocking you."

Mr. Devaux laughed. "That she does. She's also a good and loyal friend." He paused and nuzzled Sean's neck. "I'll let her tell you the complete tale, but I'm sure you remember I mentioned the day I ran into her, and we went to lunch. She'd just returned from Europe."

Sean nodded. He remembered the conversation.

Mr. Devaux rested his head on Sean's shoulder. "She moved there because she'd lost her husband of five years and couldn't bear to stay in America any longer—too many memories. She wanted to get as far away as possible. Like me, she needed time for her heart to heal. Both our tragedies happened around the same time, but we handled them differently. They loved each other deeply, and Martin's death was unexpected. But while she was in Europe she met someone, and now she's back."

"Who is it?"

Mr. Devaux kissed Sean's ear. "I'll let her tell you." Sean didn't understand the mystery, but it wasn't his business really. He wanted to know why Mr.

Devaux asked Isabel for help and when he had told her about Andrew's blackmailer; they were supposed to tell each other everything, so he said. Mr. Devaux turned Sean around and searched his eyes, only to frown after a bit. "What's the matter?"

Sean opened his mouth, hesitating. He didn't want Mr. Devaux angry with him, but he had so many questions about Isabel. Mr. Devaux waited patiently for him to get his thoughts together. There wasn't much for it. He'd never find out if he didn't ask. He looked Mr. Devaux in the eyes. "I have two questions, sir."

Mr. Devaux nodded. "Ask. I'll answer truthfully."

Relieved, Sean spoke. "When did Isabel find out about the detective working on Andrew's case? And why are you asking her to help us with Trant?"

Mr. Devaux lifted his hand to cup Sean's face. "First, from now on, I don't want you to ever fear asking me questions. We've moved beyond our... difficulties. Next, I told Isabel about the detective a few days after her arrival—it was one of those nights I stayed away from the penthouse. We had a lot of catching up to do. You wouldn't have known at the time. As to helping with the problem concerning Mr. Trant, she's a consummate actress. She also keeps secrets well." Mr. Devaux lowered his hand. "Does that information help?" he asked kindly.

"Yes, sir, thank you." Sean's stomach unknotted. He'd worried over nothing. Mr. Devaux had answered his questions without hesitation.

"Good." Mr. Devaux smiled. "It's time for us to get ready for our next guest. Please clear off the table, and set the cart outside the door. I'm going to finish dressing, and I suggest you do the same before Mr. Rutherford arrives." He gave Sean a chaste kiss before heading to his bedroom.

Sean smiled as he watched the dignified way Mr. Devaux carried himself, even in a robe and slippers. There went a man he admired and would strive to emulate all the days of his life. And, with luck, keep him company at night.

Chapter Eighteen

Harrison

A light tap landed on Harrison's shoulder, and he turned to find Sean holding out a glass of Scotch. "Mr. Devaux, I think you might need this."

"Thank you." He took the tumbler in his left hand and sipped. His right thumb idly flicked at the butt of the cigarette between his first two fingers. Funny, but his ability and desire to down alcohol in large quantities had waned considerably since Sean's return to work. In fact, he hardly craved smoking either. *I wonder how much my vices were due to my missing someone in my life...* Nerves still pushed him to smoke or drink, however, and right now his were stretched thin.

He looked out the window and observed the people and cars far below. All of those people going about their lives and none of them knew the importance of Mr. Rutherford's visit this morning. Numb from heartache the year following Andrew's death, Harrison could barely function and didn't even consider hiring an investigator. Once he did, Mr. Rutherford searched for two years, starting with very few clues.

He snuffed out his half-smoked and smoldering cigarette. "Sean?"

"Yes, sir?" He glanced up from reading the newspaper.

Harrison wagged his index finger towards his palm. "Come here, please." Sean folded the paper, set it on the end table, and stood, making his way over to stop in front of Harrison. Harrison wrapped his arms around the young man. "Just stand here with me," he murmured, dropping his head onto Sean's shoulder and closing his eyes. Sean's strong arms rose up to circle around his back, and peace cloaked itself over Harrison.

This is what he'd needed. He breathed in and out slowly, absorbing Sean's steadiness, his calm. As long as Sean was here, he could handle this. Sean had agreed to stay with him while Mr. Rutherford came to deliver his report, and the young man's stoic presence soothed his nerves somewhat. He took a deep breath and exhaled, extracting himself from Sean's arms. "Thank you." He kissed Sean lightly on the lips. "Now if only he'd get here." Harrison glanced towards the hall, and as he did, he heard the rap of the door knocker.

Sean hurried to answer, and Harrison pulled out another cigarette, quickly lighting it. The door clicked open and shut and muffled voices reached him.

Soon Sean reappeared, ushering in a balding Mr. Rutherford dressed in a taupe suit with white pinstripes, a solid navy tie, and carrying a nondescript brown briefcase.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Devaux. It’s been a long time.” Mr. Rutherford held out his hand.

“Yes, indeed it has.” Harrison gripped the detective’s large hand and returned the handshake. “I’d like you to meet my assistant, Mr. Sean O’Reilly. You’ve conversed with him a few times already on the telephone.” He motioned to Sean. “I want him present during this discussion.” Mr. Rutherford nodded, his face expressionless, not a hint that he cared one way or another about Sean’s attendance.

“If you’re ready to get started, I can present my findings.”

Harrison hesitated. *Yes, I would like to start.* But he needed a few more minutes to center himself. “Would you care for a drink?”

Mr. Rutherford nodded. “That would be nice, thank you. A bourbon, if you have it?”

“Mr. O’Reilly, two bourbons and something for yourself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, have a seat.” Harrison motioned to the club chair.

Mr. Rutherford removed his keys from his pocket and took a seat in the velvet chair, its trim and legs decorated with fancy scrollwork carved into the dark wood. With an economy of movement, he laid his briefcase in his lap and unfastened the two leather straps holding it closed. He selected one of the keys from his ring, inserted it into the center latch, and unlocked it. Reaching inside, he pulled out three packets: one regular envelope, one large manila envelope, and a small parcel wrapped in brown paper. Each of these he handed over to Harrison.

“The large manila envelope contains a copy of certified documents from the London morgue identifying the body found in an alley the day before my arrival as that of Mr. Smyth—Mr. White’s blackmailer. It also contains newspaper clippings and ‘unofficial’ comments from police working the case. The smaller envelope is a private letter to you from Earl Maycroft.”

Sean returned with the drinks on a tray and set it on the oversize ottoman. He handed a bourbon to each of the men. Taking the remaining tumbler of fruit

juice for himself, he moved to stand next to Harrison, who placed the documents on the ottoman.

“Are you ready for the rest of the information?” Mr. Rutherford asked.

Harrison downed his drink and handed his glass to Sean. He took a deep inhale of his cigarette, followed by a long, slow exhale. “Yes. Let’s get this over with.”

“Mr. Smyth was an... old acquaintance of Mr. White’s from their college days at Yale. It appears that while at school they had... similar interests.” He shot a glance at Sean and back to Mr. Devaux.

“No need to mince words, Mr. Rutherford. I’ve informed Mr. O’Reilly about Mr. White’s status and ‘interests.’”

“I understand.” Mr. Rutherford nodded. “Although Mr. White tried to sustain their friendship, the two lost contact. It turned out that Mr. Smyth developed a gambling problem and dropped most of his friends, focusing on his habit. Running out of money, he decided to use Mr. White’s letters as grounds to threaten blackmail, which ultimately led to Mr. White’s untimely death.”

The news drained the energy from Harrison, and he dropped back into the sofa. He closed his eyes and absorbed the information. How could he have forgotten about Smyth, one of Andrew’s significant relationships? Despite Smyth cutting off Andrew’s friendship, Andrew’d never had a bad word to say about him. And yet, Smyth turned on his friend and ex-lover, taking on a more addictive love in his place.

Harrison startled at the touch of fingers lightly caressing over his suit at the base of his neck, hidden from the view of Mr. Rutherford. Yet Harrison guessed the man surely surmised there was more to Sean’s and his relationship than business. He relaxed into Sean’s touch, and it helped him rein in his wandering thoughts. “Go on.”

“Once Mr. Smyth no longer had a source of income, he needed to find someone else, which he quickly did. A young lord, on summer holiday here in America, took an interest in him. When the lord returned home, he paid the expenses for Mr. Smyth to follow him to England where he set him up in a decent bedsit. Mr. Smyth’s move resulted in the trail growing temporarily cold.”

Harrison nodded.

“On the lord’s return, his father, Earl Maycroft, quickly learned of his son’s lover.” Mr. Rutherford paused, sipped on his bourbon, and cradled the glass

between his hands. “The earl is a formidable force. When he found out, he pushed through the marriage of his son to a young lady the boy was fond of. Unfortunately, once the lord married, Mr. Smyth presented his demands. I don’t know how the earl managed it, but he retrieved whatever evidence Mr. Smyth held. That’s when he ran across the letters to Mr. Smyth from Mr. White. The earl told me he debated about what to do with them. He disliked the idea of mailing them back to America, since he believed the letters contained implicating information, but he also believed it wasn’t his place to destroy them. He was relieved to hand them over to me when I contacted him.

“Where have I heard that name before?” Harrison frowned.

“The earl mentioned he met you at a party during your and Mr. White’s trip to England many years ago. You two discussed the financing of a hotel, but the other investors unfortunately backed out.”

“Ah, yes. That’s it.” Satisfied with remembering, Harrison urged Mr. Rutherford to continue.

“There isn’t much else. Mr. Smyth continued to gamble until one day the police believe he angered the wrong group of men and ended up dead in an alley.” He pointed to the manila envelope on the ottoman, its closure string wrapped around two paper discs in a figure eight. “As I mentioned, the detailed police report is in that envelope, along with newspaper clippings and unofficial comments.”

Harrison clamped a hand over his mouth, his eyes blurring. It was over. The man who’d ruined Andrew’s life and stolen him from Harrison was dead. Sean’s warm hand landed on his shoulder, and he grasped for it. It didn’t matter what Mr. Rutherford thought, he needed Sean’s comfort right now. It took him a moment, but finally Harrison cleared his throat. “Mr. O’Reilly, would you bring my check binder, please?”

“Yes, sir.”

Once Sean returned with the binder, Harrison paid the remainder of Mr. Rutherford’s fee, thanked him for his work, and had Sean escort him to the door. Harrison stared at the bundles of paper on the ottoman. Two years of searching—and three years of heartache and loss—and it all came down to packets and pieces of paper. He didn’t resent Andrew’s past lovers, only the one who betrayed a good and kind man because of an addiction.

Harrison didn’t notice Sean moving about the room until he stood in front of him.

“Does this mean your search is over?” Sean asked looking down at him.

“Yes, I guess it does.” Harrison let out a loud breath, and ran his hand over his face. “It’s over. It’s finally over, and it’s like an elephant off my back. A relief, but at the same time... I had purpose before, but now...” He raised his open palms to the air, then let them drop, slapping onto his thighs.

“Locking yourself away in these rooms was hardly a life filled with purpose,” Sean stated matter-of-factly.

“I suppose you’re right,” Harrison said with resignation. He patted the sofa cushion next to him and reached up to take Sean’s hand.

Sean settled onto the sofa, leaning against Harrison, wrapping an arm around his waist. “Are you going to read the letters?”

Harrison eyed the bundle on the ottoman. “Probably.”

“Then what?”

“Burn them.” He turned and gazed at Sean, taking in his multitude of red freckles. He lifted his free hand and ran his knuckles along Sean’s chin, temporarily free of the red whiskers that reappeared in the evening. “I know there’s incriminating evidence in those letters, and I want to find out what it is. I need that last bit of information. But after that...” He shrugged. “There’s no need to keep them. It was part of Andrew’s life before I met him.” He cupped the side of Sean’s face with his palm. “And I have a new life now. One I know Andrew would approve of.”

Harrison slid his hand behind Sean’s neck and drew him forward, until their mouths met. He claimed the lips of a remarkable young man who, for some reason, put up with all his eccentricities and gladly returned his feelings. Sean’s passion increased; his fevered hands worked their way between Harrison’s jacket and vest and grabbed hold of his waist, his fingers gripping tight. Kissing Sean was addictive. Regretfully, they still had much to do this afternoon. He broke contact and grabbed Sean’s face between his palms, holding him in place while Sean pushed forward to gain more contact. “As much as I’m tempted right now, we’ll miss lunch.”

Sean’s face flushed red from their short span of petting, but he nodded and rose, adjusting himself as he did so, and headed to the guest room. Harrison smiled, thrilled to know he excited Sean as much as Sean did him. But until the case with Trant was concluded, he couldn’t take Sean to his bed. Harrison didn’t want the unresolved issue with Trant, to taint Sean’s and his first

complete moment together. He wanted the man who caused Sean so much grief gone and nothing hanging over either Sean's or his head when he finally ravished Sean and claimed him. In the meantime, he knew of other interesting ways they might entertain themselves to take off the edge. He planned on one such experience tomorrow night at one of the most private of clubs catering to some of the wealthiest and most discreet of men. Harrison grinned. Sean was in for a surprise.

Chapter Nineteen

Sean

One month, Chief Inspector Lyons said. It could take up to one month for The Plan to be completed, perhaps longer. Sean deflated when he heard that; he wanted it over with now. He wanted Trant gone and Mr. Ormsby back, but rushing could ruin the work people were putting into making The Plan a success.

In the meantime, Isabel—it felt strange calling her that—had volunteered to pose as one of the victims, and one of the newly hired maids would pretend to have relations with a second-floor customer, who in all actuality was her husband and a detective himself. She would attempt to be “found out and blackmailed” by Trant, who would force her to steal like he had Sean, but she would “steal” from Isabel and the detective. Mr. Devaux planned to give them items to hand over to Trant, and they’d keep track, in detail, of all jewelry turned over. The police would take things from there.

“You’re very quiet,” Mr. Devaux said softly as he turned to look at Sean. “What are you thinking?”

“That I wish this was over.”

Mr. Devaux sneaked a quick look at the driver then edged his hand over in Sean’s direction to lightly touch his.

Sean smiled and pretended not to notice but linked their little fingers together. “Is there any other business we need to take care of this afternoon?”

“No, the rest of the afternoon and evening is free. Did you want to go somewhere? Or would you like the evening off?” His voice dropped and flattened out as he spoke the last question.

“No, but I do have something in mind that I want to do once we get back to the hotel.”

Mr. Devaux raised an eyebrow. “Oh? And what might that be?”

“It’s a secret.” Sean winked.

A hearty laugh sprang forth from Mr. Devaux’s chest. “I’m eager to see this surprise. We’d best not dawdle then.”

Sean grinned and turned back to gaze through the taxi's window, watching people hurrying about with their lives, his finger still wrapped around Mr. Devaux's.

Heart pounding, Sean pocketed the key and exited the elevator with the serving cart, heading towards the penthouse door. He hoped Mr. Devaux liked this surprise. He'd come up with the idea at the last minute and stopped in the kitchen prior to their leaving for lunch. Once Mr. Devaux and he had returned to the hotel, he'd mentioned he needed to take care of something downstairs and would meet Mr. Devaux later.

He entered the penthouse and rolled the cart inside, closing the door quietly behind him. This time he didn't call out, instead, directing the cart into the living room and placing it by the ottoman. Sean scanned the room and didn't see Mr. Devaux anywhere. Good. His stomach fluttered with excitement as he set the silver tray—with the dome-covered surprise created just for two by the chef—on the ottoman and the other tray with utensils and napkins beside it. He straightened, checked the layout, and nodded. Time to find Mr. Devaux.

Sean gasped, jumping in surprise as strong arms snaked around his waist, and a raspy face nuzzled into his neck, laying kisses over his skin. "I think you took ten years off my life, sir." The frantic thudding of his heart beat wildly in his chest.

A muffled chuckle sounded against his neck, creating tickling vibrations, and Sean laughed, twisting his body away from Mr. Devaux's. "Stop, sir. Please stop." He continued to laugh and squirm, Mr. Devaux hanging on tight.

"Not until you tell me what those trays are for." Mr. Devaux nipped at Sean's chin and Sean halted, his heart beating rapidly for an entirely different reason this time. He dropped his head to the side, allowing Mr. Devaux to nibble farther down his neck. Sean closed his eyes, relaxing into Mr. Devaux's arms, but all too soon, Mr. Devaux stopped, let go, and walked around Sean, taking a seat on the sofa. He reached over to remove the lid, and Sean jumped forward, holding down the cover.

Mr. Devaux raised his eyebrows, and Sean flushed. "It's a surprise. You can't open it."

"A surprise, is it?" Mr. Devaux leaned back on the sofa, his smile slowly growing into a full-out grin. "Then who can?"

“Me, sir.”

Mr. Devaux pressed his lips together in amusement. He grabbed hold of Sean’s wrist and pulled him onto the sofa. “Then get over here and show me,” he said, his grin teasing, his eyes sparkling.

Nervous and excited, Sean collected himself, reached for the handle on the cover, and, with a grand flourish, whipped off the lid. “Ta-da!” He felt a bit silly, but he couldn’t help adding that extra touch. He set the lid aside and closely watched Mr. Devaux look over the special desserts the chef had created.

Two large cupcakes, one vanilla, one chocolate, each sat on a dainty plate. Thick, chocolate hand-iced frosting topped one cupcake and vanilla topped the other.

“What’s this?” Harrison stretched forward to get a closer look. “I can tell these are cupcakes, but what’s the topping? I don’t believe I’ve seen anything like this before.” He turned to Sean, his eyes full of curiosity.

“It’s hand-iced frosting. The chef said it’s something new that’s swept the culinary world by storm. The frosting comes in chocolate and vanilla. When I asked him for a special dessert he suggested these.” Sean reached for a napkin and handed it to Mr. Devaux. “He plans on adding them to the dessert menu, but hasn’t yet. Other than him and the kitchen staff, you’re the first to taste these. He’s anxious to know what you think. If you like them, he plans on experimenting further with more frosting flavors and decorations.”

“Before I try these, what are we celebrating?” Mr. Devaux swiveled on the sofa to face Sean and rested his arm along the back. He laid his hand on Sean’s shoulder and massaged it gently.

As always, Mr. Devaux relaxed in a lounge robe, this one a butterscotch-colored silk fabric brocade design, and he exuded confidence and masculinity. Sean itched to crawl all over him. He restrained himself and, instead, answered Mr. Devaux’s question. “I thought, since you received your answers from Mr. Rutherford, and with Inspector Lyons working on The Plan, life is getting better. We should celebrate our good luck.” Mr. Devaux didn’t say anything. He just stared at Sean, and Sean fidgeted. His heart sank. He’d guessed wrong, and Mr. Devaux didn’t think their progress today was anything to celebrate. He twisted away and reached for the lid to put it back on the cupcakes. “Sorry, sir, for being presumptuous.”

Mr. Devaux placed his hand over Sean’s, halting his motion. He took the lid from Sean and set it down. With his thumb and forefinger, he gently took hold

of Sean's chin and turned it back around to face him. "It wasn't presumptuous at all. I agree. Today is a day for celebration." He dropped his hand and looked back at the cupcakes. "Which do you suggest I try first?" Mr. Devaux asked as he picked up a fork.

"The chocolate?" Sean loved chocolate.

Mr. Devaux nodded and reached for the dessert plate with the chocolate-frosted cupcake. He turned it left, then right, scrutinizing it with deep concentration. He sniffed at the dessert. "It smells good." Without further fanfare, he inserted his fork into the thick frosting, pressing down into the cupcake and breaking off a piece.

Sean sat mesmerized, his gaze following the path of the fork passing Mr. Devaux's lips into his open mouth. As he watched his stunning employer wrap his lips tightly around the fork and slowly draw it back out, Sean shifted, seeking a comfortable position as his trousers constrained his growing arousal. Mr. Devaux's eyes closed to savor the chocolate, and a low moan of pleasure sounded from his throat. His tongue slipped out, and he ran it slowly over his lips, removing every last bit of frosting.

When he opened his eyes again, a glint was there, and his smile was well-pleased. "This is excellent. Rich, buttery, sweet—but not too sweet—and the chocolate is smooth and flavorful. Try it, and tell me what you think."

Sean picked up his fork, and turned back only to find Mr. Devaux holding out a forkful of cupcake for him. Sean placed his hand around Mr. Devaux's and steadied it as he was fed a large piece of dessert. The creamy frosting smeared across his lips when he closed his mouth around the fork. Sean decided two could play at the teasing game, and when Mr. Devaux began to withdraw the fork from his mouth, he bit on it, preventing its removal a moment before he allowed the man to take it out. He stared at his employer, straight into those blue eyes, and with infinite slowness, ran his own tongue around his lips. Mr. Devaux's gaze intensified with desire, and Sean cheered slightly as Mr. Devaux's pupils expanded right before his eyes. There was an inward whoop of further celebration when Mr. Devaux shifted his seat on the sofa. *Yes!*

He reached for his napkin to wipe the rest of the frosting away, but Mr. Devaux halted him. He brought his right hand to Sean's face, his fingers resting under his chin. He brushed his warm thumb lightly over Sean's lower lip, stopping at the corner. "You forgot some." Lifting his thumb, he pressed it against Sean's lips and Sean opened, sucking his thumb inside.

Mr. Devaux's breath hitched, his gaze flickering between Sean's mouth and his eyes. Sean wrapped his lips tightly around Mr. Devaux's thumb, wetting and circling the digit with his tongue. He lapped and flicked his tongue over it like he would Mr. Devaux's cock if he'd let him. Mr. Devaux's mouth dropped open, and Sean heard his breaths grow louder with each increase in his ministrations. Sean suckled harder and pushed his head forward. He slid his lips farther down Mr. Devaux's thumb only to withdraw and repeat the process.

"Stop," Mr. Devaux whispered, slowly pulling out his thumb. His hand shook as he returned the cupcake to the tray. "I think, we've had enough for tonight."

"But we haven't finished the cupcakes, sir." *No! Mr. Devaux can't stop now!*

"Forget the cupcakes." Mr. Devaux's ravenous gaze zeroed in on Sean, and he gasped at the hunger shining forth from them. "I have something tastier in mind." He dove forward, and Sean grunted at the impact, falling backwards onto the sofa and sinking into the cushions. Mr. Devaux grabbed Sean's wrists pinning them above his head and climbed on top of him. "This teasing is driving me mad." He dropped his face into the curve of Sean's neck, nipping and biting.

Yes! He'd wanted this for so long. Sean arched his hips, groaning at the stiffness and answering grind from Mr. Devaux. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop."

"I don't intend to. Except..." Mr. Devaux released Sean's hands, pushing up slightly to attack Sean's buttons and shirt. "All of it. Off, now. I want you naked."

Sean had never obeyed an order faster in his life. He practically ripped off his vest, then thumbed the suspender straps off his shoulders, unbuttoned his dress shirt, and peeled his Jimshirt over his head.

"Damned robe." Mr. Devaux flung it and his white Jimshirt over the back of the sofa.

Sean struggled to push off his trousers. Mr. Devaux untied Sean's boxer shorts, grabbed the waist of the trousers and yanked them and his shorts off together, stripping them over his legs in one long swoop. When he was done, Sean lay naked on the sofa, his cock hard and leaking a clear string from the glistening tip onto his belly, pulsing to the rhythm of his rapidly beating heart. Mr. Devaux stared down at him, his face as flushed as Sean's felt. Mr.

Devaux's chest was a smooth, pale, hairless expanse, accentuated by dark nipples that Sean was dying to get his mouth on. His pants and silk boxer shorts were pushed down over slim hips, and his long cock strained upwards, the wide head flushed, and shining with wetness. Sean held up his hand, and Mr. Devaux took it, climbing back on top. He shoved his knees between Sean's, and they both moaned as Mr. Devaux settled back down.

Their passion flared, ignited by the smooth, hot friction of their bodies rubbing against one another. They couldn't stop themselves. Harder and harder, they ground together, their cocks slipping and sliding, each stroke sending streaks of pleasure up Sean's spine and tightening his groin. He was so lost in the sensual assault, he could barely think. It was all he could do to breathe.

Sean threw his legs around Mr. Devaux's sides and back, squeezing him in a viselike grip. He rolled his hips faster, and loud grunts erupted from Mr. Devaux's throat. He trailed his lips over Sean's ear, his breath loud and harsh.

"I want to mark you." Mr. Devaux's voice rumbled like thunder.

The declaration almost sent Sean over the edge. His cock pulsed, and he felt more fluid leak from its tip and smear between their bellies. "Yessss," he hissed.

Mr. Devaux dropped his head and licked at a spot on Sean's collarbone. He latched onto it, and Sean pressed into the hot mouth, a silent demand to mark him harder. A mark only visible to Mr. Devaux and himself, a mark of possession from a man who offered complete and utter devotion to the one he claimed. Sean moaned deeply, accepting completely the man's claim over him. The already scorching flames of his desire fanned higher, bringing him to the brink, desperate for release. Sharp teeth bit down on the chosen spot, sending stabs of erotic overload into his already sensitized skin. Another hard draw on the bite, and Sean's orgasm swept over him. He stiffened as the spike of rapture seized his body, and his cry caught in his throat. Sparks of light flashed behind his closed eyes, and his ears rang with static. His vision darkened around the edges from the onslaught of pleasure coursing through him. His hips bucked, and his cock pulsed, sending strings of seed over his stomach. And then Mr. Devaux groaned, loud and long in Sean's ear, and his body writhed again in ecstasy at the sound, the hot splashes from his lover mixing with his ejaculate on his stomach and his chest.

Gentle kisses peppered Sean's eyes, cheeks, and lips, and the scent of their sex surrounded him like a cloud. His eyes fluttered open. "Don't tell me I blacked out," he rasped, his throat hoarse from heavy breathing.

Mr. Devaux chuckled, the sound deep and throaty. “All right, I won’t.” He leaned over to the silver tray and grabbed a linen napkin, wiping up the remains of their private party before resting his head on Sean’s shoulder.

Sean ran his palms up and down Mr. Devaux’s back, eliciting a quiet sigh from him, and he further relaxed into Sean’s arms.

“Can we stay like this all afternoon?” Sean whispered, nuzzling into Mr. Devaux’s hair. “I’m comfortable.”

Mr. Devaux hummed. “We could, but we should call room service at some point for dinner, and I’d rather Henry didn’t see us like this.”

Sean laughed. “Henry is accepting, but I agree. I think seeing us together would probably be too much.”

The edge taken off their passion, at least for the moment, Mr. Devaux kissed him leisurely, only to break off abruptly. “I need to say something.”

Uh-oh. Did I do somethin’ wrong? Sean tensed and held his breath.

Mr. Devaux shook his head. “Don’t.” He kissed Sean’s nose, and Sean let out the air he was holding in a *whoosh*, making Mr. Devaux laugh. Sean did so like the sound of his laughter. When Mr. Devaux pulled himself back together, he continued. “You worry too much. It’s nothing bad. In fact I hope you like the idea.”

“What is it?”

“I think—” Mr. Devaux whispered and kissed his lips. “—that since we’ve gone past the employer and employee barrier—” He kissed Sean’s cheek. “—that I’d like for you—” He trailed his lips to Sean’s ear. “—to call me Harrison, from now on.”

Sean drew back as far as he could and stared into Mr. Devaux’s eyes. *Harrison. He wants me to call him Harrison!* A huge grin spread across Sean’s face in answer to Mr. Dev—Harrison’s own. “I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

“Good, I had hoped so. There’s a few places where it won’t be appropriate, but I’ll let you know when such a time occurs.”

Sean nodded, his heart filled to bursting at the about-face in their relationship. Harrison pressed his mouth to Sean’s, and he opened for the man, letting him take his fill, totally giving himself over to a second round of desire. They were so wrapped up in each other, they ignored the first few rings of the phone until Harrison pulled away.

“Leave it,” Sean said, holding Harrison back, annoyed at the interruption.

“Unfortunately, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because—” Harrison leaned in and rubbed his nose against Sean’s. “—if it’s Isabel, and she doesn’t reach me, she’ll either keep calling or come barreling through the door.”

Sean wrinkled his nose. “I’d rather she didn’t.”

Harrison hoisted himself up on his elbows and reached over Sean’s head for the phone on the end table.

“Harrison Devaux speaking.”

Sean heard a muffled voice on the other end of the line. Looking up, he saw Harrison’s chest above him, the man’s dark nipples within reach. He raised his head and fastened his mouth around one, suckling on it firmly. Harrison’s greeting to the person on line stuttered with a hitch and gasp. Sean let go with a smack and a sly grin as Harrison slithered back down his body.

Harrison quietly growled and laid his cheek close to Sean’s for a moment before angling the phone so both of them could hear who was speaking.

“What was that sound?” Isabel asked. “Are you busy?”

“Not at this precise moment. Why?”

“What do you mean you’re not busy at this precise... Oooh! How delightful! I hope it was enjoyable.” She giggled. The way she said enjoyable, made Sean imagine she was fanning herself dramatically. He grinned and chuckled, the movement sending vibrations from his chest into Harrison’s. Harrison gazed down at him, drawing in his lower lip in the sexiest of expressions Sean had ever seen. He let out a tiny sigh of contentment.

“If it’s who I think it is, it’s about time,” Isabel said smugly, her voice cutting into Sean’s little private moment.

“Is-a-bel,” Harrison said, drawing out her name.

“It is!” Isabel squealed with glee.

Harrison frowned, his tone deepening in disapproval. “Isabel, this isn’t an appropriate conversation over a party line.”

Sean wriggled beneath Harrison and rocked his hips. He liked this protective side of his lover.

“All right, darling, I’ll behave... for now.”

“Why are you calling, Isabel?” Harrison ran his knuckles over Sean’s stubble—unconsciously, Sean thought.

“I told you I wanted to celebrate. Dear Elise couldn’t attend lunch this afternoon, feeling under the weather as she was, but she’s much better now and wants to go out. So do I. Nothing too exciting mind you, just a nice quiet dinner. We’re both tired from moving.”

“Just a moment.” Harrison buried the mouthpiece against his shoulder. “Would you like to? You haven’t had a chance to meet Elise yet.”

Harrison’s gaze was soft and warm, no longer wearing the employer mask he so often kept in place. “I’d like that,” Sean answered, circling his fingers over Harrison’s back in a soothing motion. Harrison’s weight on him was comforting. He could fall asleep like this; maybe one day they would.

Harrison flashed him a quick smile and laid a peck on his nose before speaking into the phone. “We’d love to join you for dinner. What time and where?”

“Surprise us, darling. Why don’t you come to our room at six? It’ll give you two a chance to clean up and change before we head to a restaurant.”

“All right, we’ll see you at six. Goodbye, Isabel.”

“Bye, darling.”

The click of the phone on the other end of the line reached Sean’s ears, and Harrison climbed off, getting to his feet and setting the handset back in its cradle. A wave of cool air brushed over Sean’s body at the loss of Harrison’s warmth, and he shivered.

“Come.” Harrison hoisted his shorts and trousers up over his hips, leaving the waist unfastened, and drew his suspenders back over his shoulders. He held out his hands. “We should bathe.”

Sean grinned and allowed himself to be helped up. “Together? I promise to keep my hands to myself.” He shook one hand free from Harrison’s and playfully crossed his fingers.

Harrison laughed, pulling Sean to his chest. “Very well. Leave the clothes. We’ll take care of them later.”

Maybe he could stay the night, and they could do it again? The idea sent a pulse of pleasure to Sean’s groin, and his sated cock half woke. He canted his pelvis into Harrison’s thigh.

Barking out a loud laugh, Harrison spun him around to face the hallway and landed a tingling smack on Sean's ass. "None of that, or we'll never leave the apartment." Strong hands gripped Sean's shoulders and guided him forward. "Time for your bath."

Chapter Twenty

Sean

Sean barely behaved himself in the tub as they washed each other. Baths had never registered high on his list of imaginary erotic adventures, but the reality did now. Unfortunately, this time it was purely utilitarian, limited to scrubbing away their afternoon of pleasure and drying each other off. Right after they went to their separate bedrooms to dress for dinner. In order to save time, Mr. De—*Harrison*—Sean smiled, realizing he could call his employer that now, and his stomach flipped with joy—stated he would choose his own outfit this evening. They stood side by side in the elevator, descending to the seventeenth floor, staring at their reflections in the polished brass door. A sly smirk emerged on Harrison's face.

"What?" Sean asked, turning his head to look at the now doubly handsome man, his cheeks smooth with a fresh shave and his body smelling of that delicious powdery scent.

"It just occurred to me—" Harrison said, slipping his hand into Sean's and leaning closer. He pressed his cheek alongside Sean's and redirected his view back to the mirrored surface. His voice dropped as he completed his thought. "—that I'd like to stop the elevator sometime and have my wicked way with you."

Sean gulped and stared straight ahead, titillated by Harrison's forthright words. Harrison grabbed his right butt cheek and gave it a hard squeeze. He gasped in surprise.

Bing.

Literally saved by the bell, his body already responded to Harrison's touch, leaving him half-hard.

Harrison chuckled, removed the key, and poked Sean in the shoulder to get moving. He'd have to watch out for this man. It seemed that Harrison enjoyed a bit of exhibitionism, or at least the idea of getting caught.

They exited and turned left. At the end of the hall, they turned right and kept walking until they arrived at the very last door on the left. The door wasn't as ornate as Harrison's, although it was still wide enough to admit large furniture, and it had similar brass scrollwork decorating the center of the door.

Harrison knocked. Sean glanced up at him, and Harrison smiled, placing a hand on Sean's lower back.

"Don't worry. You've already met Isabel, and Elise is only slightly older than you. She's very charming." The door swung open. "Much less... forceful than Isabel." Harrison hurriedly switched his attention to the person in the doorway.

Isabel smiled, her eyes glittering with amusement, as she stepped aside to let them in. "Who's less forceful than me?"

"Elise." Harrison entered the apartment and kissed Isabel on the cheek.

Sean stretched out his hand to greet Isabel.

"Nonsense dear, you're family now." Isabel laid her soft palm on his right cheek, holding his head still, and kissed him on the left cheek.

She kissed me. Just like she did Harrison the time at the hotel. Sean lifted his hand to his face, covering the spot she'd kissed, and grinned.

Isabel led them into a large, elegant living room, about a third of the size of the penthouse. Persian rugs covered the floor as they did in Harrison's, but this residence displayed much more color. Rich, green brocade drapes pulled back with gold ties framed the windows. Multicolored rugs brightened the atmosphere with their reds, and greens and oranges. No piano occupied this room, but rather an artist's easel.

"Elise, there you are," Isabel called to someone behind Sean and Harrison. They turned around in unison, and Sean observed a remarkably young-looking woman walking towards them from the hallway. Her dark hair was cut in a fashionable bob, and she wore a light-peach-colored dress decorated with silver, and copper beaded flowers, with matching cloche hat and shoes. It was not as flashy as Isabel's attire, but it suited her. Elise came closer and offered a gentle smile, the corners of her mouth curled up in a natural turn that added to one of the sweetest smiles Sean had seen since his sister's. "*Bonjour, Monsieur Devaux.* Eetezz good to see you again." She lifted her hand, and Harrison took it, placing a kiss on its back.

"As always, it's a pleasure to see you, Elise." Elise's smile grew larger, her eyes sparkling and lighting up her face. Harrison directed her attention to Sean. "I'd like to introduce you to my assistant, Sean O'Reilly."

Elise looked up coyly from under her lashes. "*Bonjour, Monsieur O'Reilly. C'est un plaisir de vous rencontrer.*"

Following Harrison's example, Sean rested the hand with his hat behind his back and reached for Elise's offered hand. Carefully, he took hold of her fingers and lowered his head. He looked up into her soft, gray eyes and gently brushed a kiss over her dainty knuckles. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Elise," he said, then straightened and let go.

Giggles erupted from Elise, and she covered her mouth with her fingertips. "*Il est charmant!*" she exclaimed.

Sean's cheeks flushed hot. He'd overdone it. Next time, he'd skip the kiss.

"You're blushing, darling," Isabel teased Sean. "But I agree, Elise. He is utterly charming." Isabel looked over at Harrison. "Don't you think so, Harrison?"

Harrison stepped closer to Sean, and Sean felt a comforting hand rest on the small of his back. "Yes, I happen to find his blush very charming myself." He smiled at Sean, his gaze taking in his eyes, and sweeping over his face until—before Sean could even react—Harrison leaned over and brushed a tender kiss on his mouth, startling him. His jaw dropped open, his heart thudded, and prickly heat raced over his body, burning him up. Harrison withdrew and Sean stared into his eyes, momentarily dumbfounded.

"You just..."

"Kissed you in front of our friends?" Harrison finished for him.

Sean nodded, slowly swiveling his head to check on Isabel and Elise. He found Isabel behind Elise, her arms wrapped around Elise's waist, both grinning like the cats that caught the canary.

"I'm truly glad to see you happy again, Harrison, and you too, Mr. O'Reilly. Tonight, we will celebrate your finding each other, and Elise and I doing the same." And with that, Isabel directed Elise's face towards her and placed a kiss on her lips.

Sean thought his eyes might pop out of his head. *Wasn't Isabel married before?*

Isabel broke out into a peal of laughter at seeing his expression. "Oh dear, I think I've stunned Mr. O'Reilly into speechlessness." She directed her question at Harrison. "You didn't tell him, did you?"

Harrison shook his head. "I mentioned only that you'd fallen in love again, but I decided it wasn't my story to tell."

“You are free to tell him whatever he needs to know. You and I are close friends, and now an important person has entered each of our lives. Let us not keep secrets among ourselves.”

“Agreed.” Harrison nodded.

“I’m sure you have questions, Mr. O’Reilly. May I call you Sean?”

“Yes, please.”

“Harrison, I’m sure, mentioned I was married.” She glanced at Harrison before continuing. “I loved Martin deeply. I traveled to Europe to escape the pain of his loss, and there I met my new love. Elise has been a blessing to me.” Isabel smiled down at Elise, still wrapped in her arms. “I would say I fall in love with a person’s spirit or soul, if you will. Some people have an attractive appearance, but—” She frowned. “—for want of a better word, ugly souls. But people imperfect on the outside, can have shining, beautiful souls. Elise is beautiful both inside and out.” Isabel kissed Elise once more then let her go. “And I’m sure Harrison finds that true about you.”

If she only knew. Sean opened his mouth to protest.

“No, don’t deny it.” She shook her head. “Harrison is an excellent judge of character. Now where are we going for dinner?” Isabel picked up the coat draped over the back of the sofa, and Elise helped her on with it.

“I was thinking the Hurricane on Broadway,” Harrison said. “The theme is tropical and much more casual than Hotel Astor, which is the other choice.”

“Elise and I would prefer more casual tonight, if that’s fine with you?”

Isabel pointed to a diamond brooch on the sideboard behind Sean. “Take that, please.”

Sean picked up the brooch, thinking she meant for him to give it to her, but when he reached out to hand it over to Isabel, she waved him off.

“No, dear. That’s something to give to Mr. Trant. Tell him you found it lying around here with other items when we were moving in.”

“I can’t take this, Isabel, it’s wrong.” Sean’s gut tightened.

Isabel stepped forward and stopped in front of him. “It’s fine, darling,” she said gently. “I hardly ever wear it, and besides, when the police catch Mr. Trant, I shall get it back anyway, so take it.”

Still unsure, Sean felt Harrison slip closer to his side, and his arm encircled Sean’s waist. He looked down at Sean, covering his hand holding the pin.

“You’re not stealing it. This is the first part of our plan. We need Mr. Trant to have possession of items that we know about.”

“But what about keeping track of what the items are and what they look like for the police records?”

“Elise has taken care of that.” Isabel motioned to Elise, and she walked over to the small writing desk, pulled open a drawer and withdrew an extra-large notebook. She flipped it open, stopped at a page and handed it over to Isabel, who handed it to Sean. “Elise is an artist. She’s already detailed the brooch.”

Sean held the sketchbook in his hands and studied the intricately detailed image of the diamond brooch sketched in pencil. Along the sides of the image, Elise wrote in perfect penmanship the specifics concerning the size and approximate number of diamonds. “This is amazing.” He looked over at her. “You’re incredibly talented.”

Pink spots appeared on Elise’s high cheekbones and she smiled. “*Merçi, Monsieur O’Reilly.*”

“Please, call me Sean.”

Elise nodded. “And you must call me Elise.”

“She’s working on drawings for the other items I plan on ‘accidentally’ leaving around the apartment for the maid to ‘take.’”

Sean pocketed the brooch.

“Why don’t you head down now?” Harrison said. “Have one of the bell hops hail us a large cab. Once you do that, hand over the jewelry to Mr. Trant. Try to act embarrassed.”

“That won’t be difficult,” Sean said dryly. Harrison kissed him goodbye, and he left the apartment.

Sean shuffled to the back of the elevator as hotel clientele filed in. Everyone exited at the lobby, and he found a porter to hail a cab and wait with it. Sean headed to Trant’s office to find the door closed, as usual. Ever since he was rehired by Mr. Devaux, Trant was extra cautious in how he treated Sean. But he never forgot to threaten him about his hazardous status if he didn’t continue to supply cash or jewelry. Sean still gave him some of his tips, or rather Harrison gave him money to give Trant, but Trant still wanted jewelry. Hopefully this piece would satisfy him for a while. Sean raised his hand and knocked. He hoped he could pull off the deception.

“Come in.”

Sean wet his suddenly dry mouth and entered. He moved to the front of the desk and stopped.

Trant looked up from some paperwork and set down his pen, folding his hands and placing them on the surface of the desk. A slight curl distorted the corner of his upper lip, and he slowly looked Sean up and down. “Well, look at you. Aren’t you the lucky one?” He leaned back in his chair, pulling his joined hands into his lap. His cold eyes bore into Sean’s. “Why are you here?”

Sweat broke out in Sean’s armpits. He could do this. Not just for himself, but for Mr. Ormsby and for the other employees whom Trant constantly abused. He dug deep inside and steadied himself. “I was up in Miss Greene’s apartment. She was just moving in, and—” He swallowed. He could do this. “—I found this lying around.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out the diamond brooch. His hand shaking, he offered it to Trant.

Trant dropped his gaze to the object in Sean’s hand, and his eyes widened at what he saw. He straightened up in his chair to lean forward. He reached out his hand and picked it up like it might bite him. Narrowing his eyes at Sean, and still not speaking a word, he checked it over. “Tell me again how you got this.”

“Mr. Devaux and I were up in Miss Greene’s room. She’s moving in, and she has lots of things still lying around.” Sean fidgeted with the brim of his hat. “I figured she had so many items, she would think she just misplaced it in the move.”

Trant eyed him silently for a moment, then smirked. “Excellent. This is valuable enough to keep you from having to bring anything for another week.”

Sean let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding. “Yes, Mr. Trant.” He couldn’t bring himself to say “thank you” to the man.

Trant locked the brooch in a drawer. “You’re in for your usual hours tomorrow morning?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, you’re dismissed until then.” Trant picked up his pen and returned to his paperwork.

His nerves still on edge, Sean hurried out of the room and headed for the lobby where he found Harrison waiting for him.

Harrison frowned upon seeing him. “Are you all right?” he whispered.

“Let’s leave the hotel, and I’ll tell you.” Sean hurried to the taxi, which Isabel and Elise had already climbed into. He slid in first, and Harrison followed. *Not long now, and it’ll be over*, he kept telling himself, and he didn’t have to do it all on his own. He looked around at his friends and gave a silent prayer of thanks.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sean

Sean eyed Harrison's dinner jacket for clinging lint and swept the clothing brush over it with careful strokes. Satisfied with the jacket's appearance, he strode over to Harrison and held the jacket open.

"Before I forget," Harrison said after shrugging his arms into the sleeves, "I want you to take this." He reached into the drawer that housed his cufflinks and pulled out a black velvet box which he placed in Sean's hand. "They're cufflinks."

"Thank you, but I have three pairs already. I don't need any more."

Harrison scoffed. "I'd purchase more expensive cufflinks than these to gift you. No, these are part of 'The Plan.'" He finished tying his bowtie and turned to Sean. Harrison raised his chin to allow Sean to make any needed adjustments. Sean shoved the cufflink box into his trouser pocket and made a slight fix to the bowtie. When he finished, he fingered Harrison's lapels nervously.

"I often receive gifts from business associates hoping to win favor." Harrison continued. "I have no need for every gift I receive. Those cufflinks I can do without. I want you to give them to Mr. Trant this evening before we leave for dinner."

Sean frowned. "Do you think this will work?"

Harrison covered Sean's hands with his own, stilling his nervous movements. "Yes. His greed will have him take them. And soon he'll get careless."

Harrison raised Sean's hands to his mouth, kissing each one before letting him go. He turned and checked himself in the mirror. "Finish putting on your bowtie and jacket, and head downstairs." He pulled open another drawer and withdrew a set of keys. "Have Patrick or Henry drive the Phaeton to the front, and wait with it." He passed the keys to Sean. "Wait." Harrison laid a hand on Sean's forearm, his gaze raking up and down Sean appreciatively. "I fear I will be fending off suitors for you tonight."

Sean laughed. "I think it's the suit." He ran his hand down the front of his cream brocade vest, a twin to Harrison's.

“I think it’s more the man inside the suit,” Harrison said. “I can’t wait to surprise you tonight.” He hauled Sean forward into a quick kiss. “Now go.”

Sean finished dressing and made his way downstairs. It took only a few minutes to deal with Trant. He’d either gotten better at the deception, or else Trant had gotten greedier. He no longer questioned what Sean gave him.

Harrison arrived downstairs, and together, they exited the hotel. Patrick stood beside the front passenger door of the sleek, black Phaeton, and opened it for Sean, giving him a huge grin, which Sean returned while Harrison circled around the back of the car. Patrick closed the door and Sean relaxed into the leather seat as Harrison got behind the wheel. He gave Sean’s thigh a single squeeze, started the engine and maneuvered the car into traffic.

Sean ate a light meal at the Parthenon as Harrison instructed, choosing a small spanakopita, white bean soup, and salad. While waiting for their meal, he noticed the many couples attired in evening wear, and the higher than usual number of men dining together. After they finished, Harrison told him they would head to the back of the restaurant. He guessed there was an adjacent ballroom.

The food was excellent, but Sean’s excitement also kept him from eating too much. Once they finished and Harrison paid the bill, they walked back through the restaurant and down a long hallway. They stopped in front of a door marked with a small sign. *Office – Employees Only*. Sean frowned. *Why are we going in here?* His frown deepened when Harrison rapped out a precise rhythm on the door. Sean heard the click of a lock disengaging, and the door opened. Harrison stepped aside and gently pushed Sean into the room, taking his hand once they’d entered. A large man dressed in a black suit closed the door quietly behind them. Another man, also dressed in a suit, sat at a table. By the look of the cards and coins on it, they’d interrupted a game. Sean opened his mouth to apologize, but stopped when Harrison squeezed his hand.

“ello, Mr. D. Pleasure to have ya back, sir. Been a while, ’asn’t it?”

Harrison chuckled. “Yes, Roy, it has. It’s good to be back. This is Mr. O. He’ll be joining me from now on.” He turned to the other man in the room. “Howard,” he said, with an acknowledging nod.

“Pleased ta meet ya, Mr. O,” Roy said. “Come on, then. I’ll get ya safely over.” He stepped around them and walked across the room to a second door. “Don’t fergit to take a mask, sirs.” He pointed at a small table beside the door

covered with a variety of masks. Simple black ones mixed in with some that were lavish, their surfaces embellished with feathers, glitter, paint, and rhinestones.

Harrison moved to the table and picked up a plain black mask. “How about this one?” He raised a single eyebrow. “It suits me, I think.”

Sean smiled slyly and checked over the table. “I think”—he shifted through the masks—“this is the one for you.” With a flourish he held up a black mask with gold glitter and golden feathers adorning the top.

“You think so?” Harrison grinned. “Then this surely must be yours.” He retrieved an ornate mask painted blue and green, the colors shifting as he moved it in the light. “It accents your eyes perfectly.” He slipped it over Sean’s head, letting his fingers trail along Sean’s temples and hairline as he adjusted the string.

“If you say so, sir,” Sean said cheekily.

Roy laughed. “Sounds like you have your hands full there, Mr. D.”

“That I have, Roy, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Harrison smiled over at Sean and put on his mask.

Roy opened the door and exited first, motioning to Harrison and Sean after he’d checked the area and found it clear. They followed Roy, who strode with confidence and a lightness to his feet, surprising in such a large man. Sean guessed he wasn’t a stranger to a brawl or two. The alley between the buildings was fairly dark: a few lights illuminated the walkway, just enough to allow them to see, but dark enough to conceal their identities should they have foregone the masks.

Roy stopped at a plain wooden door and rapped out a knock in a different pattern from the one Harrison had used. A small window in the door slid open. The wirework covering the window was ordinary, nothing attention-getting, and it didn’t allow Sean to see the face on the other side of the door. It reminded him of the confessional’s window, and he bit back a laugh.

He was bubbling over with excitement and a slight case of nerves. This must be a speakeasy Harrison was taking him to. He’d heard all about them from Patrick months ago after his friend had visited one such clandestine establishment. Sean had enjoyed hearing his tales of how the alcohol flowed freely, and the men and women went wild, drinking and dancing. But some of the things Patrick told Sean and Henry had them blushing bright red, and Patrick had howled with laughter at their embarrassment.

The little window slid shut with a loud snap, and the scraping of metal on wood sounded from the other side. The door opened barely wide enough for the two of them to slip inside, then swiftly shut behind them. A small, dimly lit chandelier provided the only light in a large, square entrance hall. Heavy dark-blue fabric woven with gold threads in an elaborate scroll design covered the walls, and one of the largest Persian rugs Sean had ever seen blanketed the entire entry floor. Several leather club chairs along the left and right walls provided seating for a few gentlemen who appeared to be waiting for their guests to arrive. Off to the left ran a hallway and straight ahead, behind a counter, stood two handsome young men—one blond, the other brunet, both dressed in what reminded Sean of togas.

Harrison placed a hand on Sean's back and guided him to the counter.

"Welcome to the Dionysus, sirs. Would you like to check in any apparel?" the blond boy asked.

"Yes, thank you." Harrison and Sean handed over their lightweight overcoats and masks. The brunet boy took them away while the blond issued Harrison two tickets. When Harrison looked down to slip the tickets into his wallet, Sean glanced around the room once more. He watched as two gentlemen finished conversing, stood, and turned the corner to their left, traveling down the hall. Harrison touched Sean's elbow, drawing his attention back.

"Ready?" Harrison asked. Sean nodded, and Harrison turned to his left and led him down the hallway where the gentlemen had gone. They walked past several large, electric candelabras situated on pedestals, and Sean could hear the melodic sounds of an orchestra growing louder with each step. An underlying murmur of voices droned, and the clinking of glasses punctuated the dulcet tones.

They turned to the right and passed through an entryway with dark-blue velvet draperies pulled to either side. Sean froze at the sight before him.

He didn't know where to look first. The right wall's shelves were filled with bottles of hard liquor, the colorful array multiplied by mirrors running along behind the bottles. Behind the wooden and mirrored bar, three bartenders worked, while three waiters served the customers. Many men sat on leather stools up against the bar, but many more reclined along the opposite wall on the blue velvet sofas and low leather ottomans. Scrolled brass wall sconces supplied soft lighting that bounced off the polished copper ceiling with its hammered designs. Sean glanced up at Harrison and found the man watching him with amusement. "Is this the surprise?"

“Not, yet. The best is yet to come.” His gentle hand on Sean’s back urged him to the far end of the bar, where they came to a halt in another hall that ran to the left and right. The strains of the orchestra were louder now, and they came from the left, accompanied by quiet chatter and bouts of laughter.

“Would you like to take a look?” Harrison asked, indicating that direction.

“Yes, sir.”

Harrison laughed. “You don’t need to worry about calling me ‘sir’ or ‘Mr. Devaux’ here. All of the members either go by their first names, or, if they wish, a name of their choosing.”

Harrison caught hold of Sean’s hand and wound their fingers together. “Come, let’s visit the dance floor first.” With a little tug of his hand, he turned left and escorted Sean down the hallway.

Could this night get any better? Only their hands touched, and yet Sean’s focused awareness on their entwined fingers and warm palms was made all the more intimate because everyone around could see that he and Harrison were a couple.

Harrison made a right turn towards an open doorway partitioned off from the wide hall with glass, the surfaces covered with elaborate gold-toned etchings, and the same candelabras standing sentinel on either side. Through the glasswork, Sean couldn’t yet see the band for the people, but the melodic dance music grew louder as they approached. Finally, when they entered the room, he could make out the clientele, and he stopped short in surprise. All those around him were men! His eyes widened. Sean scanned the room, but he couldn’t spot a single woman. All the men wore dress suits like Harrison and himself. Those who weren’t dancing, sat in conversation, close to each other on the chaises and sofas around the outside of the room. Those on their feet danced a slow foxtrot over the polished wood floor. Straight ahead on a low stage, a small orchestra played.

“Would you care to dance?” Harrison asked, holding out his free hand, a slight smile on his lips.

Sean jerked his attention away from the dancers and stared at Harrison. “Dance?” His voice cracked in surprise. He had no idea how to dance like these elegant couples, he could only stare at Harrison.

Harrison chuckled. “All right, we won’t dance tonight, but how about I teach you at home?”

Sean stopped panicking and smiled. “I’d like that.”

“Shall we find your surprise?”

Sean nodded, and again, Harrison took hold of his hand, leading him around the outside of the dance floor and near the sofas and chairs.

“Harrison,” a familiar voice called out.

Harrison stopped, and Sean bumped into his back. He looked to his right and spotted Mr. Weston—or rather, Karl—and Theo, snuggled up on a velvet sofa.

“Good heavens, I wasn’t expecting to see you here tonight,” Karl said, rising to shake their hands. Theo also stood and shook their hands without any suggestive gestures this time.

“Did you just get here?” Harrison asked, circling his arm around Sean’s waist.

Karl pulled out his pocket watch. “Half an hour ago.” He snapped the cover closed and slipped it back into his watch pocket. “Are you dancing tonight?”

“No, not tonight.” He looked at Sean. “I’m eager to show Sean the ‘Room of Statues.’” He turned back to Karl. “Are you two here for the dancing?”

“No. Theo is feeling a bit... restless. I expect he might get a bit overexcited tonight.”

Sean glanced at Theo, and Theo grinned back, a barely contained energy emanating from his whole body.

“Ah, I see.” Harrison grinned at Theo and Karl. “I’m keeping ours private tonight.”

What on earth was Harrison talking about? Sean gazed in confusion from one man to the other. “What—” Harrison placed a finger over his lips, halting his question, and Sean locked eyes on him. If only they were at the penthouse, he’d take that finger into his mouth, and...

Karl laughed. “I think you’d better grab your usual table. Sean doesn’t look like he can hold out much longer.”

“I think you might be right,” Harrison said, his gaze heated. “Have a good evening.”

“Oh, we will,” Sean heard Theo answer as they walked away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sean

“Come along. Mr. O,” Harrison said teasingly, his lips quirking up at the corners, and a sparkle in his eye. “I’m eager to show you your surprise.” Without waiting for Sean’s reply, he turned right and pulled him out of the room and into another hall.

“The restrooms are to your right,” Harrison pointed, and Sean saw a door marked with a silhouette of a man in a tuxedo and top hat and holding a cane. “And if there’s an emergency, we can use the door to the left.”

Sean peeked around Harrison. Not only was there a door there, but a very burly doorman, sitting guard in the dimly lit alcove.

“A door right here in the middle of everything, isn’t that dangerous?”

Harrison shook his head. “No. That door leads into another alley just like the one we traveled through to get here. The Dionysus has never been raided. We take extreme precautions, and the businesses that supply the club are all owned by members. They’ve a hand in keeping this place a secret. They would lose too much if anyone other than those vetted learned of this place.” Harrison crossed the short hall and entered the next large room, stopping in the open doorway.

Sean gasped, swiftly hardening at the decadent displays before him. Two nude men, their pale bodies appearing like porcelain in the overhead chandeliers’ light, posed atop three-foot-high, wide, square pedestals in the central aisle of the room. One man sat on his heels, hands on knees, perfectly still. The other stood as still as a statue, only bent slightly over, with his left arm crossed to touch his right thigh and his right arm crooked backwards. Patrons wandered around the platforms, speaking in whispers, admiring and pointing, but not touching.

He tore his eyes away from the mesmerizing sight and surveyed the rest of the room. Five, four-person banquette booths lined each wall, their seats adorned with the same luxurious dark-blue velvet. Heavy, gold curtains draped to each side of the booths, pulled back to show the intimacy of the interior. Small round tables sat in the center of each booth, their white linen tablecloth reaching nearly to the floor. A single, lit candle in the center of each table flickered strongly enough to illuminate the faces of the gentlemen seated in a

few of the velvet booths. Small, single-bulb gold chandeliers, with dangling crystals and accents of pearl, cast more light into some of the booths.

Harrison's gentle push on his back urged Sean forward, and he craned his neck to see the statues as he walked by.

"We can take a closer look after we get our table," Harrison whispered. They arrived at a booth on the right, second from the end, its chandelier switched off.

Sean sat on the plush cushions and scooted towards the middle. Harrison followed. As soon as they were seated, another young blond male, dressed in nothing but a sheer piece of white cloth fastened at one shoulder and short enough to brush the bottom of his genitals as he moved, approached their table.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Welcome to the Dionysus. My name is Owen. How may I serve you?"

"Good evening, Owen," Harrison said. "This is my guest, Sean. I'll have a Sidecar." He turned to Sean. "What would you care to drink?"

Sean hadn't the slightest clue. He didn't particularly care for hard liquor; he preferred sweeter drinks. "Something sweet and not strong?" he asked hesitantly.

Harrison nodded and turned to the waiter. "He'll have a Bee's Knees."

"Thank you, sir." The blond left, his outfit lifting up high enough as he turned to give Sean a glimpse of his firm bottom. Not that it needed to lift, the fabric's sheerness left nothing to the imagination.

"Why is he wearing a dress if it doesn't hide anything?" Sean asked, not that he was complaining. It just didn't make sense. Why not go naked like the other men?

Harrison chuckled. "It's for the atmosphere of the club—Dionysus, based on the Greek god of wine. The 'dress' is called a 'chiton,' which men wore back in that time, although, I'm sure, not as sheer." He leaned in close and whispered, "If you prefer, you can ask him to remove it, and he will. The employees are here for the patrons' 'entertainment.' They have only a finite list of activities they will not do: sex with the members or each other, and we may not touch or offer payment for sexual services. If any of them wish to participate in any such activities with other employees or guests, they must take place outside and away from the Dionysus and are on a strictly personal basis."

Sean stared speechless at Harrison, his brain overwhelmed by both the sights inside the club, and all he was hearing.

Harrison grinned, and without warning, reached over, cupping a warm hand behind Sean's neck. He pulled Sean forward and pressed their mouths together. Sean sighed and opened, taking in his lover's familiar taste—a flavor that had grown sweeter since Harrison had set aside the cigarettes.

“Are you better now?” Harrison asked after breaking their kiss.

Sean nodded. “I never imagined such a place as this existed. I’ve heard about speakeasies from Patrick, but the one he described was nothing like this.”

Harrison chuckled. “No, I would expect not. This is the only such place in New York that I know of. Which is why it’s such a closely guarded secret. Everyone who visits is thoroughly vetted by at least five members before being allowed entrance.”

“Was I ‘vetted’?” Sean asked.

“Yes, but not by as many, nor as thoroughly. Karl and Theo vouched for you, as did I.”

“But they hardly know me.”

“True, but I do, and that holds the most weight among this circle of men.”

Sean sat stunned again. He’d learned, over time, that Harrison had earned much respect for his business acumen, and that he had connections, but he never thought he could merely utter the words, ‘Do it,’ and whatever ‘it’ was, got done. Harrison surprised him more and more each day, and a swell of joy and love burst from his chest for this intelligent, kind, powerful man who could find a former Room Service Boy worthy of his attention. He threw himself at Harrison, twining his arms around his neck and claiming his mouth in a fierce kiss. Harrison grabbed Sean around the waist and moaned deeply into the kiss, their tongues battling until a gentle cough interrupted them.

“Please excuse me, sirs, but your drinks are here,” the waiter said politely.

They pulled apart, and Sean looked at Owen nervously. He’d caught them kissing in public. Sean snatched his arms back from around Harrison’s neck and shifted away from him on the seat, sliding his hands under his thighs.

Harrison looked at him and shook his head. He initialed the drink card the waiter offered and laid it on the table. “We’ll place our order in fifteen minutes. Please come back then.”

“Yes, sir.” Owen hurried away to the next table.

“Sean.”

“Yes, sir?”

Harrison huffed. “Sean, come over here.”

Sean pulled his hands out from under him and inched his way back over to Harrison, without looking him in the eye.

“It may be hard for you to believe, but the waiter doesn’t care that you’re kissing me in public. In fact, you’re going to find a lot more going on in public this evening than you ever thought possible.”

What did he mean by that? Sean snapped his head up and stared into Harrison’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

Harrison smiled. “It’s part of the surprise. But I promise you, none of the men here will care what we do tonight. The Dionysus is the one place we are free to be ourselves, without the world judging us for our desire and who we are.” He clasped Sean’s hand with one of his. “But if you, at any point, are uncomfortable, tell me, and I promise we’ll leave. Understood?”

“All right.” Sean nodded.

“Now, would you like to take a closer look at the Living Statues, or would you like to finish your drink first? Or perhaps, eat and drink?”

“I’d like to look at one before we eat if we have time?” Sean grinned, eager to get an up-close view of the naked men on the platforms. They slid out of their booth, leaving behind their dinner jackets as many of the other gentlemen in the room had already done. He didn’t spot any other men he knew at the Dionysus, other than Karl and Theo, who had taken a booth in the middle of the room on the opposite side. Men occupied some of the other booths, but many still milled about the room, chatting and observing the statues. Harrison let him lead the way this time, and he wandered over to the handsome man who was kneeling when they entered the room. The statue’s pose had changed, and he now stood on his hands and feet, his head down between his arms and his butt high in the air. His member was stiff between his legs.

“What’s he doing?” Sean asked.

“I’m not sure, but I believe it’s called yoga,” Harrison answered. “It’s something new in America, and I’ve only ever seen Peter perform it.” They watched in silence for a moment as Peter held his pose. Harrison turned to Sean. “Would you like him to change poses?”

Sean's gaze shifted to Harrison. "Will he, if you ask?"

"Yes, why don't you?"

"Me?" Sean's voice rose.

Harrison laughed quietly. "Yes, you. He won't bite. They're accustomed to requests. Ask him to 'display.'" His eyes twinkled.

Sean narrowed his eyes. Harrison was up to something. He knew it. But he loved taking the man up on his challenges. Sean grinned. "All right, I'll do it." He looked around at the other men suddenly watching him. Sean wet his lips and stepped closer to the platform. "Would you please... display?" he whispered to Peter.

Peter slowly descended from his pose to his hands and knees. Lower and lower he went until he lay flat on the platform, his movements slow and fluid like a lithe cat. He turned over onto his back and placed his feet flat on the platform, reached beside his head with his hands, his palms flat on the surface, and with one, easy, continuous movement, pushed himself upright. Sean sucked in a breath. The man's body arched perfectly in a backwards bow, his sculpted arm and leg muscles defined underneath his skin, his cock, which had stayed hard the whole time, displayed proudly as it arched towards the ceiling. The gentlemen around him murmured their approval as more gathered to enjoy the pose.

"He's incredible," Sean breathed.

"Yes, he is. He's one of six performing statues here. They always work in pairs. They do quite well for themselves."

"How so?"

"The tips the men give them for their performances."

Sean looked around for a place to leave tips, but couldn't find one.

Harrison chuckled. "On the same card as the drinks. The men write the tips on there. The two statues working that night split their earnings."

"Sort of like what we do at the hotel."

"Yes." Harrison nodded. "Shall we return to our seats? The waiter will be back soon."

Sean turned away from Peter, but not before thanking him and receiving an upside-down smile in return.

Harrison handed Sean a black and white card listing the numerous finger foods and desserts available, and he checked it over.

~ Creamy Sausage-Stuffed Mushrooms ~

~ Deviled Eggs ~

~ Asparagus Tips, Bacon and Sour Cream Canapés ~

~ Fig, Feta and Honey Canapés ~

~ Smoked Salmon and Caviar Canapés ~

~ Baked Oysters Rockefeller ~

~ Chocolate-Dipped Strawberries with Whipped Cream ~

~ Lemon Squares with Confectioner's Sugar ~

~ Cannoli Drizzled with Chocolate and Chocolate Pieces ~

Despite serving and eating with Harrison for months, the only item on the list he had ever tasted was deviled eggs, which he enjoyed. He definitely wanted to try the chocolate-dipped strawberries and the chocolate-drizzled cannoli. Harrison moved in close, draping his arm over Sean's shoulders and pressing his body into his side. "Let me guess," he murmured. "You want the two chocolate desserts."

Sean glanced up from the card into intense blue eyes. Harrison ran light fingers over Sean's thigh, and his erection, having deflated slightly at reading the menu, sprung back to full attention. "How'd you guess?" Sean smiled. "What do you want?"

Harrison's eyes flashed, and Sean inhaled sharply. He didn't need to ask what Harrison had in mind, and he could barely wait to get back to the penthouse. Maybe he could ask about returning right after eating. Soft lips caressed his ear, and Sean closed his eyes and squirmed in his seat. Harrison had discovered that Sean's ears were highly sensitive to any sort of sexual stimulation. A whimper escaped his throat. He amazed himself at how shamelessly he behaved while under Harrison's hands.

"You'll have to try the oysters," Harrison whispered in Sean's ear, sending a shiver down his spine. Harrison grabbed hold of Sean's earlobe with his teeth and pulled.

Sean groaned and dug his fingers into Harrison's thigh. A deep chuckle vibrated from Harrison's chest. "W... why oysters?" Sean breathed out.

“Because they’re considered an aphrodisiac, and I have plans for you tonight.” Harrison trailed his way to Sean’s chin and nipped along it. Sean shuddered, and his cock pulsed. He grabbed his hard-on through his trousers. Harrison always excited him, but his display of affection for Sean in public was more arousing than Sean could have imagined, and he gave himself a squeeze. He swiveled towards Harrison, ready to climb onto his lap, when...

“Have you decided on your order, sirs?” Owen asked.

Sean growled quietly in frustration, and Harrison chuckled.

“Yes, we have. For now we’ll have the mushrooms, salmon, oysters, strawberries and cannoli.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sean peered around the room. Some men had already received their food and eaten, others conversed, and others... Sean’s eyes widened. Theo sat on Karl’s lap, his shirt pulled back off his shoulders, with Karl sucking on Theo’s neck. Sean shot nervous glances around the room. Most of the men paid no attention to them, not even those wandering around looking at the statues, but there were a couple that stood at a polite distance and watched intently, one even blatantly rubbing at the bulge in his trousers. Sean looked away, but kept glancing over at Karl and Theo until he didn’t bother to hide his intense interest. Karl relieved Theo of his shirt, and Theo reached up to the chandelier, switching it off. The booth descended into darkness, but not completely. The small table candle remained lit, casting a golden glow over the couple.

“I see you’re watching Karl and Theo.” Harrison ran his hand up and down Sean’s leg and finally up and over his belly. Sean arched into the touch, but Harrison pulled away. His gaze jumped from Karl to Harrison, his stomach fluttering with excitement and nervousness. Could he? If Harrison wanted to do what they were doing, would he let his lover do that to him in full view of everyone?

Harrison placed a forefinger on Sean’s cheek and turned his face towards him. “What are you thinking?”

Sean wet his lips. “Is that what you want me to do?” His voice sounded weak and unsure.

Harrison kissed him lightly. “Only if you want to. I wouldn’t pressure you to do something you don’t want. But I can tell you some things that may help ease your mind.”

Sean nodded.

“Karl and Theo, especially Theo, are exhibitionists.” He cast a glance in their direction, where the two had suspended their amorous adventures. Each held a chocolate-covered strawberry to the other’s mouth, and they playfully bit for them, while the other snatched the strawberry away. Karl drew his strawberry in closer and closer to his mouth to tease Theo, until the two ended up in a passionate kiss. “You saw how Theo turned off the chandelier?”

“Yes.”

“There is also the table light.”

“There’s still a lot of light in the room.”

Harrison shook his head. “There are unspoken rules here. If the table light is blown out, no one looks at the people in the booth. They are to be ignored. As you can see. Their light is still on.”

Sean looked over again, and Harrison was right. The candle still flickered and sometimes people looked over. “But there’s still the room light.” He hated sounding like a coward, but he had a difficult time getting past his manners about behaving properly in public.

Harrison ran his thumb over Sean’s bottom lip. “There is also a privacy screen.”

“A screen?”

“Yes. Did you see the gold sheer curtains, behind the velvet ones?”

Sean looked and noticed some transparent drapery heavier than the chiton fabric the servers wore, restrained by hooks.

“Those are for the clientele who wish the most privacy, but would still like to let a bit of the ambiance of the room into their booth. If any man ignores the curtain rule, he is temporarily banned by the management. Respect and privacy are of high value here, and everyone wishes for the Dionysus to remain.”

“Has anyone been banned from here?” Sean asked curiously.

“To my knowledge, no, and I’ve been a member for five years. That’s how important this place is.” Harrison stretched out his legs under the table. “Does that information help?”

“Yes, it does.” Sean relaxed into Harrison’s arms, and Harrison told him a little about the history of the Dionysus. Soon Owen returned with their food.

Sean had to give the chef credit, the speed and service outranked even the Astraea's. He sat up straight and stared at the delicious and mouth-watering temptations laid out before him. No wonder Harrison suggested he eat a light meal for dinner. He didn't know what to try first. Rock salt decorated the smallest and closest platter to them, and baked oysters with thick cheese and spinach nestled in their shells. Dainty oyster forks rested beside them. However, the silver platter, neatly arranged with the desserts, was the one that caught his attention. His eyes drifted over the chocolate-covered strawberries and chocolate-drizzled cannoli. Licking his lips, he reached for a strawberry.

"Uh-uh-uh." Harrison lightly tapped the back of his hand.

"Why not?" Sean scowled playfully at Harrison. Since their relationship changed, his mischievous side had become more pronounced.

"Because I want to feed them to you." A teasing smile curled Harrison's lip.

"You could feed them to me now," Sean countered, poking him in the side.

"Mmmm, I have plans for you, and they must be followed in strict order," Harrison chided, attempting to hide his smile.

"What's the plan?"

"The plan is you try the oysters first. I want you in the right mood." Harrison waggled his eyebrows.

"Right mood? I don't think I've been out of it since we walked in here." Sean reached down and rubbed himself. He hoped he didn't get blue balls.

"Well then—" Harrison grinned. "—I won't have any trouble convincing you to do my bidding."

"Well, then," Sean mimicked. "What is your first bidding, *sir*?"

Harrison laughed. "I'd like you to try the oysters." He edged the platter closer to Sean. "I'm curious about what you think of them."

Sean picked up one of the two pronged forks and an oyster shell. Luscious cheese and spinach, toasted to a light brown on top, filled the shell. He scooped out a bit of the filling and took a bite, closing his eyes. *Delicious*. He loved the cheese. *Not bad so far*. Sean pushed away the topping, looking for the oyster, and found it sitting at the bottom in a pale lump. It didn't look appealing. Shrugging his shoulders, he attempted to scoop it up but it slid off the fork. He poked it and a squirt of salty liquid shot into his eye. He swiped at his eye with his wrist. "I just got spat on." He squinted at Harrison through one eye and found him with his hand over his mouth.

“Yes, they do that sometimes.” He pinched his lips together to hide his smile but was unsuccessful.

“Hmm.” Sean eyed Harrison suspiciously. It occurred to him he might be the entertainment for the evening. He tried again, but narrowed his eyes this time. Successfully spearing the oyster, he opened his mouth and... *Ugh. Slimy.* Maybe it tasted better. Biting into the oyster it shot salt water into his mouth, and he felt sand crunch between his teeth. *Sand? Didn't the chef wash these?* He wrinkled his nose. It was salty but didn't taste nearly as good as Harrison when he grew aroused, and Sean licked off the salty fluid from his slit before he came. He chewed the oyster slowly; the slimy, salty texture slipping over his tongue made his stomach clench. *How am I going to swallow this?* Sean attempted to swallow, but the slimy oyster didn't want to go down. He swallowed again, but all he wanted to do was spit it out. Nothing else for it, he grabbed his Bee's Knees and took a big gulp, chasing the oyster down with his cocktail.

“So, how do you like it?” Harrison asked, scanning Sean's face.

He glanced up at Harrison. “I don't like it much. It was slimy, and it had sand.” He finished off his drink.

Harrison burst out laughing then coughed into his fist, stifling his laugh. “They aren't for everyone, but I'm glad you tried it. I'm sure you'll enjoy the other foods more.” He motioned to Sean's drink. “Would you like another?”

“I'd like to try something else sweet and without alcohol.” Sean preferred having all his faculties for a night like this. He didn't plan on walking out in a haze.

Harrison motioned their waiter over. “I'll have a Planter's Punch, and he'll have something sweet without liquor.”

“Yes, sir.” Owen left to place their drink order, and Sean eyed the desserts, hoping they'd be next on Harrison's list to try.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Harrison

Keeping his hands to himself was proving quite the challenge. He didn't want to eat the desserts or wait for the dancers. He wanted to tear off Sean's neat and tidy vest and shirt, ravish him with kisses, and see that blush appear—first on his cheeks, then creeping up his chest, higher and higher, like a thermometer telling him when Sean would burst. But he didn't. He would remain the gentleman, until the right time arrived, despite the raging erection that tented his trousers. He had every intention of making this night one of the best of Sean's life.

The waiter delivered their drinks, and after Harrison signed the card, he caught Sean eyeing the strawberries again. "You ready to try one?"

"I've been waitin' ages," Sean sighed dramatically.

Harrison picked up a chocolate-covered strawberry by its short green stem and dipped it in the small cup of whipped cream, scooping up a large dollop. He glanced at Sean and found him watching his movements closely. Harrison held the strawberry over his other palm and slowly brought it to Sean, who'd twisted his body to face him. The pink tongue that had grown in wickedness during the time they'd spent together, snaked out and licked those soft lips. Then Sean opened his mouth.

"Not yet."

Sean's eyes snapped up, and a slight frown formed between his brows. "What do you mean 'not yet'?"

"Close your mouth."

Sean did as he was told, and Harrison brought the strawberry forward, stroking it over the surface of those delectable lips, smearing cream on them.

A mischievous grin spread across Sean's face, and ever so slowly, he ran his tongue over the cream, licking his mouth clean. Harrison shifted and crossed his legs. Sean chuckled and grabbed his hand, taking a large bite out of the strawberry.

"It's good. You should try some," Sean said, mumbling around his mouthful of strawberry. He grinned and smacked his lips loudly when he finished.

“Hmm, I think I shall.” Harrison dipped his finger into the cream and raised it to his mouth. Locking gazes with Sean, he extended his tongue and ran it up the length of his finger, licking off a strip of cream. Sean’s mouth dropped open, and Harrison drew his tongue along his finger in a slow glide until, at the tip, he flicked his tongue rapidly over the end. A tiny whine escaped Sean’s throat, the sound of his arousal inflaming Harrison’s desire. Opening his mouth wide, he inserted his finger all the way in and wrapped his lips tight around it and withdrew it slowly, only to insert it and withdraw it in rapid succession. He preened inside as Sean’s cheeks grew redder, tiny grunts sounded in his throat, and unawares, the young man jerked his hips minutely. He pulled his finger out with a pop. “I think,” he said roughly, “we need to finish this food before the next show starts.”

Sean blinked a few times, coming out of his trance, and his eyes widened. “There’s a show?”

“Yes, in about thirty minutes. That’ll give us enough time to sample everything.”

Harrison finished off the oysters, and it didn’t take them long to dispatch the less ‘entertaining’ appetizers before they started on the desserts. When Sean put on a show of his own, with his partner, the cannoli, Harrison nearly came from the decadent display of sucking and the stimulating sounds of Sean’s slurps.

They finished with time to spare for the show. Owen removed their dishes and brought them another round of drinks. Harrison and Sean relaxed after their feast of epicurean delights, their hands wandering over each other, without attempts to arouse. Harrison checked to see what Karl and Theo were up to and found them chatting with two other gentlemen. Most of the members Harrison knew nodded or spoke with him only briefly; they knew he didn’t usually like being bothered, especially during the last two years with his infrequent attendance. He’d shut everyone out then. But now being at the Dionysus gave him a chance to introduce Sean. Show the men he was ready to face the world again, and it was all because of the remarkable young man in his arms. He may not believe in a God, but he was grateful to Fate for sending him Sean. Harrison kissed Sean on the temple and hugged him tight.

Sean looked up and smiled. “What was that for?”

“That—” Harrison kissed Sean’s forehead this time. “—was a thank you for entering my life.” He raised his hand and cupped Sean’s face. “You have no

idea how lost I was. How dark my world had grown. I existed, but barely. Not until the day you arrived and shocked me out of my stupor. Even after what I did, you didn't ask to not serve me—you stayed and looked after me. And despite the two godforsaken weeks we suffered apart, you've stuck with me." He cupped both hands on Sean's cheeks. "You've become my world, and I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you." Harrison poured his passion into his next kiss, and Sean answered back, wrapping his strong arms around Harrison, dragging him close. Harrison broke the kiss to catch a breath and to regain his composure—the night wasn't over yet. But he hoped Sean no longer harbored any doubts about his feelings for him.

"You're everything to me too... Harrison." Sean flushed at saying his name.

A huge grin spread across Harrison's face. Despite inviting Sean to call him Harrison, he never had, although 'sir' would slip out occasionally. He hoped over time, Sean would see himself as an equal partner, because Harrison fully intended to treat him as one.

Movement caught Harrison's eye. He spotted men entering the room and recognized them as the ones who dealt with the setup for the statues and dancers. They removed the pedestals and brought in one card chair, placing it in the middle of the open space. He noticed the orchestra had ceased playing, their night now over, but soon the next entertainment would commence. He'd been told the dancers had been working with a new band, and this would be his first opportunity to see and hear them.

With that thought, the lights in the room shut off, plunging the room into darkness, except for the candles on each table casting their glimmering light around the room. Off in the distance, the quiet sound of a lone, quirky clarinet sounded, accompanied by a piano and drum. A trombone broke in, sliding in a lazy, but light, repetitive tempo. A murmur went up from the men in all the booths. Harrison had never heard any music like it before. It was jazz, at least the instruments sounded like it, but not the fast, hopping music he'd heard before. This sultry melody spoke of dark, hidden clubs, cigarette smoke clouding the air, and cheap liquor—nothing at all like the Dionysus.

The music enthralled Harrison, sweeping him away in its erotic rhythm and provocative melody so thoroughly, he didn't notice the first dancer creeping into the room until Sean nudged him in his side. He glanced at Sean who had a grin from ear to ear and eyes open wider than Harrison had ever seen them. He turned back to see the young dancer now sitting in the chair. He wore a simple black-and-gold mask, his dark hair ungelled and messy, giving him the

appearance of having just gotten out of bed. It made him look even more alluring. The only clothing he wore was a simple, tiny loin covering. With a wide spread of his legs, he spun on the seat and straddled the chair facing the other way, and the show began. Slow and graceful, he stretched his arms high over his head then trailed one hand down his other arm and over his firm chest. He elegantly lowered his other and brushed both his hands lightly over his torso. Every man in the room tracked the motions of the dancer's hands. He used the chair like a lover's body, caressing, draping, and arching against it. Harrison found himself crossing and uncrossing his legs at the display, and he noticed Sean and many of the other men around the room were similarly affected.

All too soon the performance was over, and a loud round of cheers and whistles went up. The crowd quieted when the music started again for the next dancer. He emerged from the doorway, his mannerisms strong and forceful. He moved like a predator, his chest covered with hair, unlike the bare-chested dancer before him. His mask was embellished with silver squares and dripped of silver chains.

The next performer—his mask covering only the right half of his face—was taller and slimmer, but just as lithe as the others. He whirled and gyrated about the room, all the while gathering appreciative murmurs from the men. The final dancer brought a groan from Sean, and Harrison looked over to find him gripping his cock. He had to agree, the man was perfect. Built like a god, his tanned body was exquisite in every detail especially his round, high, firm ass. The gold circlet of wire and leaves he wore on his head shone brightly over his dark hair. His golden mask covered almost the entire upper half of his face, its decorative flourishes catching and reflecting the light at his every dip and turn.

His song over, the dancer left the room, but the music picked up again, and all the men waited in anticipation of the next dancer. But instead of one, all the dancers trailed in, the last one first so he was the closest one to their table. Stretched out in a line, the dancers alternated facing in opposite directions and performed a slower, less complicated dance in unison. They circled the room slowly, and when the golden man returned, Harrison motioned to him. He wouldn't know unless he asked.

The man stepped forward and leaned over to listen.

"Are you taking requests tonight for a private dance? If you are, are the rules the same?" Harrison whispered.

The man smiled and nodded. "Yes, sir, we all are. Limits are still the same. No touching of me, but I'll touch you where requested, other than a gentleman's privates. I'll also remove my cloth."

Harrison nodded. "Excellent." He sneaked a look over at Sean just in time to find him scooting over to listen in. "You stay over there," he pointed. Sean snapped his teeth together and grinned, but he watched with avid curiosity. "I'd like you to seduce my friend touching only his legs and hips in any manner you wish," Harrison said quietly. "And remove your cloth, but stop when I tell you."

"Yes sir." The dancer flagged down a waiter to remove the small table.

Harrison glanced over at Sean to find him focused intently on the activities in the room and the other dancers being called to other tables, before he turned to Harrison.

"What did you ask him?" Sean searched Harrison's eyes for the answer.

"Watch and find out." Harrison smirked.

A new piece of music started, the beat of the drums and the accompanying syncopated four-four, pounding out a slow tempo. The trombone slid in, long bends and drops seductively drawing the listener in while the piano player picked out single keys in the background. The trumpet wailed, and the clarinet took over where it left off.

The dancer took up his position in front of their booth, his well-toned back to Harrison and Sean's table, his face turned in profile, what light there was glinting off his mask and crown. He stretched his arms out shoulder high, following the slow beat of the drums. Graceful fingers curled and stretched, and from there, fluid ripples ran down through his body, each muscle group perfectly under the man's control. Fingers to wrist to elbows to shoulders, he rolled his body until he reached his waist and hips. Spiraling and leaning, he twirled himself in a sinuous movement until he faced them and took a couple steps closer. Harrison's eyes locked on the man's flexing and twisting waist. His hips undulated and swayed from side to side. He spread his feet farther and farther apart, dropping himself lower and lower, ending up in a split on the floor. He swung his front leg around and brought them together to next flip onto his stomach. Resting on his elbows, he arched his hips and repeatedly thrust and undulated towards the floor as if an invisible lover lay beneath him.

A choked whine sounded at Harrison's right, and he looked over. He found Sean biting his lower lip and clutching at the seat. Harrison dropped a hand on

Sean's thigh and let his fingers trail up the top of his leg. He leaned in close and ran the tip of his nose along the edge of Sean's ear. Sean turned his head to gaze up at him, his pupils blown wide. "Watch the show, he's for you," Harrison murmured. As if hypnotized, Sean turned back to watch the dancer.

The dancer rose to his hands and knees and, with a tiger's stealth, stalked forward, his eyes locked onto Sean. Harrison moved away, leaving Sean the center of the dancer's attention. Even in the dim light, he could see Sean's cheeks flame red as he stared at the man now kneeling before him.

Graceful hands landed on Sean's knees, and ever so slowly, stroked and massaged their way up to his hips before stopping and making their way back down again. Sean stared in absolute silence, unmoving except for his tongue popping out from his open mouth to wet his lips. The dancer rose to his feet, dipping and weaving around and over Sean's legs until he stood in front of him, his legs spread open, straddling Sean's closed ones. Drawing as close as he could to Sean, he traced his fingers over his loincloth, outlining the generous bulge hiding there. He ran his hands over his tight abs and the insides of his thighs, with Sean's gaze stuck to the motions like a magnet.

Harrison sneaked a look at Sean's groin to find his trousers tented and, at times, twitching. Knowing what lay beneath those trousers, and who it belonged to brought a throb to Harrison's cock and the leak of escaping fluid.

The dancer reached into the front of his cloth and slowly drew on the strings and undid them. Hooking his thumbs under the fabric waistband, he stretched it forward, out and over his perfect erect cock. He drew it down, exposing the red head, shiny, and swollen, down over his long shaft and finally over his heavy hanging balls. A long moan escaped Sean, and Harrison couldn't help but join him.

Stepping back, the dancer let go of his cloth, and it dropped to the floor. With his proud cock pointing straight ahead, he moved forward to straddle Sean again. He rolled and thrust in time to the music, lowering himself until he sat on Sean's thighs. Harrison watched Sean's eyes widen larger than he'd ever seen them. Placing his hands on the seat back, to either side of Sean's shoulders, the dancer ground and rubbed himself on Sean's lap. Sean's hands curled so tightly into fists, Harrison thought his nails surely dug into his palms.

Suddenly, the dancer dropped off backwards, landing on his knees in front of Sean again. He slipped his forearms between Sean's legs and, with one quick, forceful movement, pushed them apart. Sean groaned so loud Harrison was sure the men on the other side of the room must have heard. He glanced

over and found Karl and Theo avidly watching, with Theo rubbing his now exposed shaft.

Dropping his face to Sean's leg, the dancer ran his mouth over his trousers, biting and rubbing each leg, running his hands underneath at the same time. Sean rolled his head back and forth along the seat back, straining to keep his eyes open to watch, but unsuccessfully. Overwhelmed by the onslaught of sensations, Sean trembled and his legs shook. Harrison knew he couldn't hold out much longer.

Sliding over, he listened to Sean closely, and then he heard it. "I can't, I can't," whispered Sean as he grew closer to his impending orgasm. Snaking out his hand, Harrison clamped it over Sean's cock and squeezed. A choked cry escaped Sean's throat, and he bucked. "Please, please, don't stop."

Harrison shot a look at the dancer, who'd halted. He gave a quick smile and nodded, and the dancer backed away.

The waiter moved, quiet as a ghost, replacing the table and disappearing without a sound.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Harrison

“Take deep breaths, Sean,” Harrison whispered. “Deep breaths.” Sean gulped in air and exhaled, over and over until he regained control over his body. Eyes still closed, he nodded and Harrison let go.

A small white box, left by the waiter, rested on the table. Harrison picked it up, set it on the seat next to him, and turned back to Sean. Harrison took a deep breath to steady himself. “Did you enjoy that?” He brushed the back of his hand lightly over Sean’s cheek.

“Yes. If you hadn’t grabbed me, I would’ve spilled in my pants.” Sean grinned lazily and sat up from his slouched position. “But I got the impression you probably enjoyed that as much as I did,” he said, his grin widening.

Harrison smiled. “I certainly did.” He grabbed Sean’s hand and set it over his hard cock.

Sean squeezed and Harrison arched into his touch. The pressure sent tingles racing through his pelvis, and a groan bubbled forth from his chest. He gently lifted Sean’s hand off his groin; if he continued, he’d spill in his own pants, and he still had plans. Reaching over to the white box, he opened the lid.

“What’s in there?” Sean craned his neck to see.

“Essentials.”

“Like what?”

“You’ll find out. But I need you to do something first.”

“What is it?”

Harrison couldn’t stop his wicked grin. “Blow out the candle.”

Sean’s eyes widened, his mouth dropping open.

How many times had Harrison surprised the young man this evening? Elation filled him, knowing Sean would never forget this night.

Sean rose slowly to his feet and leaned over to blow out the candle. As he did, Harrison reached out and ran his fingers in the hot crack of Sean’s cheeks. Sean squeaked in surprise, falling forward onto the table. “Are you all right?” Harrison asked, lightly running his fingers over the seam of his trousers.

His forehead resting on the table, his eyes closed, Sean nodded.

Harrison lowered his voice an octave and drew out his next words. "Good. But you still need to blow out the candle."

Sean's swallow was audible, even in a room beginning to fill with the louder sounds of men enjoying men. Harrison rubbed harder, following the trouser seam downwards then forward, rubbing behind Sean's balls, enjoying both the feel of Sean in his hand and the way Sean reacted to his touch. A whine escaped Sean's throat, and he looked up, scanning the room.

"That's it Sean... Look around you. No one cares. Watch Karl ravish Theo with pleasure." Harrison soothed, his voice deep and throaty. He found Sean's balls through the fabric and gripped them with his fingertips, rolling them lightly. He saw Sean focus on Theo, who was now naked as the day he was born and bent over the far table. The candle still lit, and Theo shouted and grunted loudly, his body rocking back and forth. No guesswork was needed as to what was happening on the other side of the room, even if Karl had hidden himself, which he hadn't.

Harrison listened as Sean drew in deep, ragged breaths through his open mouth. And then... Sean shifted, spreading his legs wider and pressing back into Harrison's hand. Harrison grabbed for his own cock, squeezing hard at the display of trust Sean just gave him. Sean trembled, and Harrison grabbed hold of Sean's balls and pulled. "Not yet. Blow out the candle."

Unsteadily, Sean pushed himself up and puffed at the candle. It didn't go out. He tried again and nothing. The third time, he took a deep inhale and forcefully blew. Their table plunged into darkness.

Harrison removed his hand and snagged the back of Sean's waistband, guiding him back to his seat. He stood, and with shaking hands, unhooked the sheer curtains from both sides of the booth and slid them closed. He looked out into the room and could still see the men, but knew they wouldn't spare a single glance towards the booth. For the gentlemen of the club, they were now "hidden," as if they didn't exist, and even if Sean screamed out his orgasm, they wouldn't pay it mind. A few tables still had their candles lit, like Karl and Theo's, which had a small group of men watching at a respectful distance. As Karl had predicted, Theo loudly proclaimed his pleasure to all and made eye contact with several of the men. Theo might be an exhibitionist and a flirt, but Harrison knew without a shadow of a doubt that he loved and adored Karl, their relationship more faithful and steady than that of many of the businessmen he knew.

Sitting, Harrison faced Sean. "Now, no one will pay us any attention."

Sean sprang off the seat, launching himself at Harrison. Strong arms tightened around his neck, and a fierce kiss landed on his mouth, followed by an invading tongue. Sean shifted his position and squirmed until he got the right angle to rub his stiff cock against Harrison's thigh.

Harrison gripped Sean's arms and peeled them away from his neck. "Not that way," he forced out. "Sit back."

Sean immediately sat back, his attention focused on Harrison. "I'm goin' to die of blue balls if you don't hurry," he rasped out.

Harrison chuckled. "I doubt that." He leaned forward and nuzzled Sean's ear. "Unbutton your vest and shirt." While Sean hurriedly undid his buttons, Harrison nibbled and kissed along Sean's jaw. He ran his hands over Sean's shoulders, pushing his vest and suspenders down his arms. He pulled his arms free of them. With Sean's shirt hanging open, Harrison pushed his Jimshirt up, exposing his already perked nipples. He sucked and licked, licked and sucked, drawing on them harder each time until Sean squirmed beneath his mouth. Reaching down to Sean's trousers, Harrison felt for the hook and eye closures of his fly and unhooked them one by one. "Off your hips."

Sean swiftly pushed them down and over the round, firm ass that Harrison loved to nip. Sean didn't stop lowering his trousers, until he dropped them past his knees, allowing him to spread his thighs wide apart. He grinned boldly up at Harrison and rocked his hips, his erection pointing upwards, a beautiful clear bead of fluid emerging from the slit, wetting it on its slide down his stiff shaft. Unable to resist, Harrison ran his thumb over it, spreading it around the silken head.

"More," Sean begged, thrusting up, but Harrison removed his thumb and brought it to his mouth. Sean tracked the motion, watching as Harrison stuck out his tongue and ran it over his lips, tasting the delicious saltiness of Sean's arousal.

"You're teasing me to death," Sean whined.

"I highly doubt that, but I have a solution to your problem."

"Oh? A solution?" Sean jerked his hips up a few times, a huge grin on his face.

"Yes." Harrison reached for the silk handkerchief tucked into the breast pocket of his evening jacket and tugged it out. "This should cure all your ills."

Harrison moved slowly, stretching out the anticipation. Holding the handkerchief in his fingertips, he trailed it over Sean's straining shaft and balls in long swipes, swishing it up and over with light flicks against the flushed head. Each brush and flick brought a whine to Sean's throat and an arch to his hips as he chased after the fleeting sensations teasing his swollen cock.

"Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I can't take no more." Sean turned pleading eyes to Harrison. "Please, Harrison, please. Touch me," he begged.

The sound of his name spoken with Sean's Irish lilt, caressed and flowed over Harrison like velvet, and he groaned. He gripped the back of Sean's neck, held him still, and smashed their lips together, the kiss bruising and rough, their tongues drinking in each other's flavor. Harrison wrapped the silk handkerchief around Sean's gorgeous, thick cock and gripped it tight, stroking up and over the perfect wide head, twisting his wrist, and moving back down again. Sean writhed wantonly, his cries loud and unintelligible. Harrison knew it wouldn't take much to bring him over the edge. He pulled back to break their kiss. "Look at me, Sean."

Sean opened his haze-filled eyes and rolled his head in Harrison's direction. Those beautiful blue-green orbs had vanished, dominated by fully blown pupils. Sean's face burned a bright red, and even in the dim light, his freckles flamed with his arousal. He loved Sean's freckles, but right now, Harrison wanted Sean to come, to have him spill over his hands, to smell his lover's pleasure. He tightened his grip, jerking faster and harder. Sean trembled, his body shaking uncontrollably. Harrison dove forward, claiming Sean's mouth and swallowed his scream as he came.

Sean was his. This beautiful man was his. Harrison cupped the silk over the crown, capturing the exquisite expression of his lover's orgasm in his palm. He squeezed his own legs tightly together, straining to keep from releasing in his trousers.

Gradually, Sean's body eased back until he lay limp in his seat, and his panting breaths slowed to an easy rhythm. Harrison folded up his handkerchief and tossed it into the box, withdrawing a linen hand towel to wipe away any seed he'd missed on Sean's body. Sean flinched and laughed at the cleanup, gripping Harrison's hand to stop him. Harrison leaned over and peppered Sean's face with kisses before wrapping his arms around the sated young man and holding him close.

"That was amazing," Sean breathed out. "It always is, but that was... I don't have words for it." He looked up at Harrison. "I don't think I'll ever look at my silk boxer shorts the same way again."

Harrison chuckled. "I would've thought you'd already have tried something like that with them."

Sean shook his head. "It didn't even occur to me."

Still hard, Harrison shifted to a more comfortable position, and Sean sat up. He placed his palm over Harrison's cock and ran his hand up and down, a mischievous grin on his face.

"You'd better stop, or else I'll be the one spilling in his trousers." Harrison grunted, thrusting into Sean's hand.

"We can't have that, now can we, sir?" Sean's eyes twinkled, and he slowly slid to his knees, his trousers still bunched around his ankles, his shirt hanging rumpled, and his hair disheveled.

Harrison held his breath, as Sean crawled under the table and maneuvered around, until he'd positioned himself in front of Harrison's knees. Harrison trembled. Hot hands fell on his knees and unhurriedly pushed them apart. Sean's wicked grin told Harrison he was in trouble for all the teasing he'd done.

Sean shuffled closer and reached for Harrison's waistband, his nimble fingers easily finding the hooks and unlatching them from the eyes. Harrison forced himself to remain still as Sean unbuttoned his boxer shorts, reached inside, and pulled out his throbbing cock and heavy balls, already drawn tight and close to his body. It wouldn't take him long tonight, either. The shows combined with Sean created a highly combustible mixture, and all it would take was Sean's hot, wet mouth wrapped around Harrison's aching erection, and he'd explode like a virgin who'd never had a man pleasure him before.

Sean brought his mouth close to Harrison's sac and darted out his tongue. Harrison jolted at the sudden sensation, canted his pelvis forward, and Sean sucked in one of his balls, rolling it in his mouth. Sean stared up at him, never breaking eye contact, as he pushed Harrison's ball around with his tongue. Harrison groaned as Sean pulled off and sat taller on his knees, his hot mouth dropping over Harrison's cock, bobbing on the head before sliding farther down and up, finally letting go with a pop. Sean flicked his tongue rapidly over the sweet spot under the head, bringing Harrison perilously close to coming.

Harrison trembled, his body peaking faster than he wanted. He needed to feel his lover. Harrison reached down, resting a shaky hand on Sean's head. He thrust up into wet heat; Sean took him in as far as he could, wrapping a hand around the base. His eyes still locked on Harrison's face, Sean jerked his hand harder and faster, bobbing quicker. A jolt of electricity raced up Harrison's

spine, and his body stiffened, his hips rising up towards that skilled mouth. His legs shook, the tension winding tighter, his heart rate accelerating. The pressure built, spiraling higher and higher, until it exploded, and he moaned, pushing Sean's head into his groin. He writhed under the onslaught, waves of rapture coursing through his body; his flesh electrified, but it was his heart that sang with elation. Not only was Sean his... he belonged to Sean.

His body relaxed, and when the static in his ears subsided, Harrison opened his eyes. He jerked at the light touch of a tongue cleaning his shaft and slid his hand under Sean's chin. Harrison cupped Sean's face between his palms and pulled him up to kiss him. He explored Sean's open mouth with his tongue—the taste of his spend lingered. Harrison leaned back. "Come sit with me." He patted the seat, and Sean wiggled out from under the table. He pulled up his shorts and trousers, and sat down while Harrison buttoned himself back up. He drew Sean to his chest and held him. They stayed that way as they listened to the other men's expressions of enjoyment.

The evening wound down, and Harrison and Sean straightened their clothing to presentable condition and slipped on their jackets. Harrison took the dinner card and wrote down a hefty tip for the dancers and the waiters before preparing to hand the card to Owen. He tossed the used linens back in the box along with his plain silk handkerchief. Moving the curtains aside and placing them back on their hooks, they slid out of their booth. They walked past Karl and Theo, who once again were giving it another go. Karl nodded, and Theo gave a little wave, too out of breath to talk.

A few couples still danced despite the absence of music, but many customers remained sitting, drinking and making animated conversation. Harrison led the way out through the bar and to the cloak room where he presented their tickets, and they collected their coats and masks. As before, a guard led them back through the alley, knocking on the door to the Parthenon. The window slid open and closed, and the door swung in to admit them.

"Hi, Mr. D," Roy said, greeting them. "Have a good time?" He smiled at Sean, who surprisingly, didn't blush, but instead stood grinning like the Cheshire Cat.

Harrison handed over their masks, and Roy placed them back on the table. "This evening surpassed my wildest dreams, Roy." Harrison dug into his pocket and pulled out thirty dollars and handed fifteen to Roy and fifteen to Howard. Both of the men's eyes widened in surprise.

"Thank you, Mr. D," stammered the two men.

“This is mighty generous of you,” Roy added.

“My pleasure gentleman. You provide a valuable service.”

A knock sounded at the door to the alley, and Roy moved to answer it.

“Have a good evening,” Harrison and Sean said, stepping across the room to the other door.

Howard opened the restaurant door, and they walked back into the hall.

A few straggling couples were still present, eating a late meal, most probably a late-night snack, following the theater. The patrons were strategically placed at the far end of the restaurant, away from the hallway, so Harrison and Sean didn’t attract any attention when they wandered to the front, and Harrison requested his Phaeton. Soon they were on their way home, each immersed in their own happy cloud of euphoria, Sean’s hand resting on Harrison’s thigh.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sean

The taxi driver steered his cab into an open spot in front of Melagrana, an Italian restaurant on Fourth Avenue, and came to a halt. Sean withdrew a leather wallet from his jacket pocket, paid the driver, and hopped out of the cab, slamming the door shut behind him. Isabel and Elise already stood waiting for him on the sidewalk, and he joined them, his heart beating wildly. *Why did I let Isabel talk me into this?*

“What if Trant spots us at the restaurant?” he’d confronted Isabel.

“That’s why we’re going to disguise ourselves,” she’d stated gleefully.

Sean shook his head at the memory of their conversation and escorted the women to the entrance. He held the door open and allowed them to precede him inside. The maître d’, dressed sharply in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie, greeted them and showed them to their table, with Isabel leading the way and Sean bringing up the rear.

Sean couldn’t believe how different Isabel looked, her fashionable elegance discarded in favor of a neutral dress without flourishes. She topped off her outfit with a plain, wide-brimmed hat. She’d pulled her hair back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck and foregone makeup. Isabel was still pretty, but not the stunning beauty which had once evoked a powerful and—he now knew—unnecessary jealousy. It was not only the change of outfit that disguised her appearance, but her entire physical presence. She had dropped her shoulders slightly and shortened her long, confident stride to a shuffling gait. All these things combined to age her ten years—she could pass for Elise’s mother. Harrison had been right about Isabel’s acting abilities. She was playing this spy role to the hilt, and had she passed him on the street, he’d have walked right by and never recognized her.

Colorful paintings of ocean waves and white, sprawling seashore buildings hung on the walls of the restaurant. The maître d’ brought them to a table along one of the side walls, and Sean seated the ladies before sitting down himself. The round table was covered with a white cloth and over that, a second red-and-white-checkered one. They were situated far enough away from the windows to avoid being seen from outside, but still had a good view. It was several hours before dusk, and between the sun’s angle and their position in the

shadows of the restaurant, it would be difficult for anyone to recognize them, unless they walked directly by the shop and stared into the cafe. From their table, they had a perfect view of the Bookmark, across the street and one shop down. Once they were seated, the maître d' handed them their menus and walked away.

Sean set his hat on the chair next to him and patted his hair.

"Stop that, darling, you'll ruin your styling. You look wonderful and different. No one will recognize you." Isabel smiled.

Sean snorted. He didn't know about that. How could anyone disguise flaming-red hair and bright-red freckles? Although he had to admit, when he checked in the mirror, slicking back his hair from its usual side part did make him look older. Both women thought it gave him... what did Elise call it? A certain *je ne sais quoi*... That was it.

When Isabel had stopped by the penthouse around three o'clock, vibrating with excitement, Sean immediately grew wary. She'd voiced her plan, and he'd tried to convince her that maybe today wasn't the day Trant would show up at the bookshop. He hadn't shown up the previous weekend. But Isabel stated she was going to go with Elise because she couldn't stand another weekend of staying behind and not knowing what was happening. Didn't he want to see the man caught who'd caused so much misery? Sean wasn't so sure he needed to be in the middle of the action, but seeing as he was already pacing the penthouse, waiting for a call from Harrison, and despite his best judgment, he decided to tag along under the guise of escorting the women to lunch. But not before Isabel made him change into his dullest-colored suit and added matching brown accessories, creating a boring, and forgettable, landscape. He'd looked at himself in the mirror and cringed inside. He'd never dress himself or Harrison like this, at least not since Harrison had taught him about men's attire.

Now here they sat, in the restaurant, sneaking occasional glances out the window at the bookshop, while Isabel and Elise giggled and murmured to each other behind their menus, and Sean stared at his, unable to concentrate on the selections it offered. He prayed Harrison would remain safe.

The waiter arrived, and they ordered soda water sweetened with fruit juice and their desired meals.

Sean looked at his watch: four in the afternoon. Still another whole hour before Trant even got off work, and they didn't know how long it would take

him to arrive. He might eat dinner first, or go home, or he might leave directly from the hotel—which Sean doubted. More than likely, he wouldn't turn up at all. They were in for a very long evening.

The peach and gold rays of the setting sun illuminated the concrete and brick buildings, giving them a warm glow and softening their harsh textures. The shadows crept and grew in length, climbing the edifice of each structure and creating hiding places for anyone who wished to remain unseen. Very soon, any such attempts at camouflage would be thwarted by the incandescent street lights switching on and cutting into the darkness.

Sean glanced at his watch again, like he had numerous times throughout the evening. Seven o'clock. He now doubted Trant would visit the bookshop tonight. Sean shifted in his chair, this was the first and last time he was going to stand watch like this. It was nerve-wracking and boring at the same time and created one big ball of knots in his gut. Besides, his butt was numb from sitting for so long.

Isabel sighed. "Well, my dears, I think he may not arrive today after all." Her usually upturned lips pulled down at the corners in disappointment. "I suppose it's time we left." She motioned to the waiter for the check.

"No, Isabel, I'll pay for dinner." Sean pulled out his wallet.

"Don't be silly, darling. This was my idea. Elise and I would have come here tonight even if you had decided to stay home. But I'm glad you didn't." She smiled at him. "It gave us an opportunity to get to know each other. Now put your wallet away." She patted his hand.

The bill paid, Sean helped Isabel and Elise into their coats, and they headed for the door. Just as they stepped away from their table, they witnessed two patrol cars and a Black Maria pulling up and parking in front of the bookshop.

Isabel came to an abrupt halt in front of Sean, spun around, and grabbed his forearm. Her wide eyes gleamed. "It's happening, it's happening!" she whispered, with barely contained excitement, much of it seeping into Sean via the physical contact. His heart rate kicked up a notch, and he pressed his lips together in renewed worry over Harrison's involvement. Isabel hurried to the door, pulled it open, and rushed outside, ready to cross the street, Elise right behind her.

"Wait, Isabel," Sean hissed, grabbing her arm. "Let's stay here for a few minutes."

“Why? It’s happening now.” She turned towards him, pouting.

“Something is happening, but we don’t know if it’s who we think it is. Let’s wait a bit longer on this side of the street until we’re sure,” Sean explained. “Besides, we’d only be getting in the officers’ way.”

Isabel smiled and lifted her hand, laying it on Sean’s cheek. “You’re right, dear.” She glanced quickly over to the bookshop that now had quite a handful of people gawking from a safe distance. “I do tend to let my enthusiasm carry me away sometimes.”

Sean ushered them over to one of the tall, twisted topiary plants by the side of the restaurant. He checked inside and noted that many of the customers by the windows had stopped eating and were also watching the police activity.

The crowd had grown quite large, and another patrol car had arrived, the officers emerging and immediately directing the gawkers away from the storefront. Everyone waited, not the least bit patiently, for at least fifteen minutes before the first man was brought out in handcuffs. Tall and thin, with brown hair and a large nose, he offered no resistance as the officer directed him into the Black Maria. After another ten minutes, four officers exited the shop. One carried a large gray object, which to Sean looked like a metal box with a lock; another officer was handcuffed to a dark briefcase. The other two policemen grasped the beefy arms of a struggling man: one Mr. Richard Trant.

“I’m innocent,” Trant yelled. “I didn’t steal any of it! I was helping sell it for people down on their luck. You can’t arrest me for that.” An officer standing guard at the rear of the wagon opened the double doors. They tried to get Trant to climb the steps and get inside, but he planted his feet against the edge of the first stair and, with his considerable weight, leaned back. “No, I’m innocent I tell you!” This time a different tall, burly officer stepped behind Trant, grabbed him by his jacket collar and trouser waist, and lifted him into the wagon, tossing him on the floor. They could still hear Trant’s muffled proclamations of innocence through the walls of the vehicle. Once the door was secured, The Black Maria merged into traffic, followed by the patrol car. One set of officers stayed to guard the bookstore and prevent anyone from entering the crime scene.

Sean scanned the crowd and the people exiting the shop at a slow trickle. He guessed they were innocent customers caught up in the arrests. Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty. Sean shifted from one foot to the other, and he chewed on his lip. It was after eight o’clock now, and the only light was from the street lamps and the shop windows. What if they had missed Harrison, and he was on

his way back to the penthouse, only to arrive there and find no one home? He'd surely phone Isabel and find her gone too.

Searching once more through the dissipating crowd, Sean spotted movement at the door and watched as Harrison stepped out, placing his fedora on his head. The tension fled Sean's body, and his shoulders sagged in relief. "I'm going over," he stated.

"We're coming with you," Isabel said. Sean checked the traffic, and they strode quickly across the street. They stopped a slight distance from Harrison, who stood listening to a police officer. He nodded, and the officer got in his patrol car. When the car finally pulled away, Sean stepped forward, and Harrison's eyes widened with recognition when he saw past their simple disguises. A faint smile brightened his tired expression as he watched Sean approach.

"What are you doing here?" Harrison asked, voice gravelly. He slid a hand down Sean's arm before reaching for Isabel and bestowing a kiss on her cheek. Sean cherished that small public touch, but wished he could have received the kisses Harrison gave to Isabel and Elise instead.

"We've been waiting—dying to see if Mr. Trant might pawn his ill-acquired gains." Isabel grinned, her smile brighter than the street lights.

Harrison frowned. "What do you mean, 'waiting'?"

"Exactly that, my dear. We've been hiding in that restaurant"—she pointed at Melagrana across the street—"for the last four hours."

Harrison's frown deepened. "You've been hiding in the restaurant?" His voice rose in disbelief, but he looked around and lowered it again. "Do you know you could have ruined everything if he'd caught sight of you?" Harrison folded his arms across his chest. "I thought you had more sense than that, Isabel." He raised his hand to stop her answer. "I know it was you. Sean wouldn't plan such a thing, especially with"—he waved at her clothes—"the change in attire."

Isabel opened her mouth only to close it again. She bit her lower lip and nodded. "You're right, Harrison. I wasn't thinking, and I apologize, especially to Sean." Isabel turned to him. "My impetuosity could have ruined everything." She gazed at Sean, her eyes asking forgiveness.

"It's fine, Isabel," Sean replied. "I'd just like to go home now." He was tired, and he wanted to sit with Harrison, find out what happened—if he wished to discuss it—and call it a night.

“Unfortunately, I can’t go home with you, at least not yet. The police need a statement, and I want to get it over with, so I’m heading to the station now. Don’t count on me being home for at least the next three hours.”

“Three hours?” Sean complained.

Harrison’s mouth curled down at the corners. “It may not take that long, I just don’t want any of you waiting up for me if you’re tired.”

Sean stepped closer, his shoulder brushing Harrison’s. “I’ll wait.” He smiled.

“We will too,” Isabel agreed.

Harrison uncrossed his arms and shook his head. “I’ll likely be too tired to talk and want to call it a night when I get home. I can tell you all about it tomorrow.”

“All right, dear, we’ll see you tomorrow for lunch. How does that sound?”

“That’s perfect. It’ll give me a chance to sleep in.” Harrison turned to Sean. “You, I’ll see later tonight.” Covertly, he hooked his little finger with Sean’s and smiled.

“I’ll see you later,” Sean said, gazing up at Harrison and squeezing his pinkie tight with his own in a tiny hug.

They parted ways, each hailing a taxi. Sean opened the back door of their cab for Isabel and Elise and then climbed into the front passenger seat. This late in the evening, the car easily maneuvered through traffic back to the Astraea.

“Who’ll serve as manager in Mr. Trant’s place until they find a replacement?” Isabel wondered as they stepped into the foyer.

“I’m guessing Mr. Jensen from the front desk. He used to run a hotel many years ago, but stopped because he didn’t like the management responsibilities. He’s always said he’s happier dealing with the customers.” They stopped in front of the main elevators, Isabel and Elise each placing a kiss good night on his cheek.

“We’ll see you tomorrow afternoon. Give us a ring when Harrison is ready for us to come over,” Isabel said in parting.

“I will.” Sean shuffled over to the penthouse elevator, his feet dragging in the aftermath of the evening’s stressful events. He entered the elevator and inserted the key. He couldn’t wait to get back to the penthouse. In about an

hour, he would call down to the kitchen and order some food for Harrison, who likely hadn't had a thing to eat since this morning. With a muted *ding*, the doors closed quietly, and the elevator ascended.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sean

“I can’t believe Mr. Devaux is letting me eat lunch with everyone and listen in on what happened,” Henry said excitedly as the elevator doors slid open.

“He likes you,” Sean said with a smile. He steered one of the serving carts, and Henry followed behind with the other. Once inside the penthouse, they made for the dining room. Since there would be three guests for lunch, Harrison wanted to use the larger, formal table rather than the more comfortable living room seating with its ottoman. Sean surveyed the place settings on the bright-white tablecloth and the cut-crystal wine glasses and tumblers. He wanted everything perfect for today’s lunch. He placed two buckets filled with ice on the dining buffet. Perhaps he’d suggest Harrison purchase a small refrigerator to keep his drinks cold. It’d be more convenient than the ice buckets, and some of the refrigerators he’d seen in advertisements were designed with a cover to match the furniture. He was certain Harrison would like the idea.

“Have Miss Greene and Elise introduced themselves to you yet?” Sean asked as he helped Henry finish laying the final table settings and linen napkins.

“Yes, when they first moved in.” Henry placed the covered serving dishes on the table. “Miss Greene asked me to call her by her first name... Isabel.” He stopped with a platter in his hands, his brows furrowed. “It’s odd calling her by her first name, but she insisted. I’ve never known anyone, especially a lady of her status, to insist on having someone like me call her by her first name.”

Sean noted the perplexed expression on Henry’s face and nodded. “I know, it was strange for me at first too. But Isabel is a very... interesting woman, not like any I’ve ever met before.” He swiveled the wine bottles into one of the ice buckets and added bottles of juice to the other.

“Hello, Mr. Devaux,” Henry called out.

Sean turned around and watched Harrison stroll into the dining area, dressed in his dark-gray herringbone suit with a silver-and-black-striped tie and silver handkerchief. Sean never grew tired of gazing at the handsome man. If only Harrison would fill *him* soon. Now that The Plan was completed, maybe he would. Heaviness grew in Sean’s trousers, and he clamped down on any further fantasies, willing his erection to subside.

“Good afternoon, Henry.” Harrison nodded in greeting. “I’m glad you could attend.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” Henry beamed. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“You’re a friend of Sean’s, and I’d like you to consider me a friend as well.” Harrison smiled and stepped close to Sean, brushing their arms together.

Henry’s eyes widened. “Gosh, Mr. Devaux, I don’t know what to say.”

Harrison waved him off. “Nothing to say.” He walked up to the table. “Please seat Isabel to my left and Elise next to her. Sean will sit to my right, and after you’ve served everyone drinks and removed the platter covers, you may sit next to Sean. We’ll help ourselves to the food. Leave the open wine bottles on the table.”

“Serve yourselves, sir?” Henry’s gaze jumped from Harrison’s to Sean’s and back again.

Sean stifled a laugh. Henry’s reaction reminded him of when he first started to serve Harrison and the unexpected requests and orders he’d been given.

“Yes. This is an informal lunch between friends.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sean and Henry had just completed setting the table when they heard “We’re here, darlings” coming from the entryway. Sean picked up his jacket from the back of the sofa. He slipped it on, buttoned it and waited beside Harrison, who brushed the back of his hand with his own. The small gesture warmed Sean, and he smiled over at Harrison, who grinned in return. They greeted the women when they turned the corner into the living room.

“Hello, dears.” Isabel kissed their cheeks as usual, as did Elise. Sean and Harrison offered their arms and escorted the ladies to the table.

Once Henry served everyone their drink of choice, Sean urged Henry to sit down, which he did reluctantly. “It’s all right. Har... Mr. Devaux doesn’t insist on formalities between friends.”

“Sean is quite right, Henry,” Harrison said, catching Sean’s attention. He smiled at Sean. “Friends are friends no matter their occupation. I value trust, kindness, and loyalty more than how much income a person has. In fact, I’d like to make a toast.” He picked up his glass. “To good friends.”

“To good friends,” they chimed in, clinking their glasses together before sipping their wine or juice.

“I’m anxious to see what we’re having for our meal, Harrison,” Isabel said, as she looked at the food on the platters.

Harrison looked over at Henry. “If you wouldn’t mind doing the honors, Henry.”

Henry grinned and rose to his feet. “First, for the cold dishes, we have gravlax with dill, capers and lemon slices, and a variety of cheeses. There’s a side of sour cream also. For the hot dish, there’s roast beef and turkey slices, with browned potatoes, and gravy in the covered bowl. Today’s vegetables are new green peas *au beurre* and asparagus tips. Finally, for dessert—a new chef specialty—cupcakes with chocolate or vanilla hand-iced frosting.”

Harrison coughed discreetly, and Sean looked over to find him with a pink tinge to his cheeks. He sent Sean a hint of a smile, which Sean returned, feeling the heat rising in his face. He glanced across the table and caught Isabel watching them with a knowing grin.

“Excuse me, please go on.” Harrison took a sip of wine.

“That’s all, sir.” Henry resumed his seat.

“Excellent choices,” Harrison said. “Shall we get started?”

It didn’t take long to fill their plates, and they conversed about mundane topics for some time until Isabel tapped her forefinger on the table impatiently. She turned to Harrison. “Don’t keep us in suspense any longer, darling. I think we’re all dying to know what happened at the bookshop yesterday.”

The four of them turned their attention on Harrison expectantly.

“Very well.” Harrison put down his fork and reached for his wine glass, draining it and refilling it once more. “I couldn’t give you any details before, but I can now, only—please—keep it among yourselves, until the trial is over, although I doubt there will be much of a trial. The prosecutors expect Mr. Trant will accept a plea bargain in order to skip further public humiliation.” Harrison took another bite and chewed slowly, sending a wink to Sean.

“Stop that, darling, you’re such a tease.” Isabel poked his forearm lightly.

Harrison laughed silently, his shoulders jiggling. He swallowed and continued. “I’ll start with a little background. It seems there is a lucrative trade in collectible books.”

“No!” Isabel gasped softly, and Elise’s eyes widened. Sean dug his fingers harder into his thighs, alarmed at the additional complications of The Plan he had had no idea about.

Harrison nodded. “Quite lucrative in fact. Detective Lyons is working with a group that’s diligently hunting down the thieves who sell the books to men like the proprietor of the Bookmark. From there, the thieves fence them to other buyers. No one knows where the books end up. It turned out that when they caught this particular proprietor, he quickly struck a deal for a lighter sentence by naming those involved with bringing him items other than books. One such person was Mr. Trant. Detective Lyons was all ears when the man gave him Mr. Trant’s name.” Harrison reached for Sean and gripped his forearm. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you, but Detective Lyons insisted that the less the people involved knew, the better, especially since you three were already involved in helping with the jewelry ‘heists.’”

Sean felt Harrison’s foot slide against his under the table, and he nodded. He didn’t doubt Harrison would have told him if the detective hadn’t insisted he keep quiet.

“Was capturing Mr. Trant dangerous?” Isabel asked in a hushed tone.

“Not so much dangerous, as ‘stealthy.’” Harrison replied. “The proprietor wasn’t known to carry weapons, and he needed the officers to catch Mr. Trant in the act in order to receive the lighter sentence. He was willing to cooperate.” Harrison slid his hand down Sean’s arm before pulling it back. “We were informed Mr. Trant usually arrived after five o’clock. I stress the ‘usually.’” Harrison looked pointedly at Isabel.

“Yes, Harrison,” Isabel said. “I understand we should have stayed away, and I apologize for my thoughtless behavior.”

“No need to apologize again. But now you know why it was necessary to stay away.” Harrison continued, reclining in his chair. “In the back office, there happened to be a small hideaway room that the proprietor would use in emergencies. Three men could comfortably fit, sitting down. The door was hidden behind bookshelves and random holes were drilled in the shelves so we could peer through and watch the transaction take place. Once five o’clock arrived, we entered the room and waited. The signal of Mr. Trant’s arrival was for the proprietor to have the secretary tell Mr. Trant to wait in the front, until he finished some necessary task, and to say he would be ready in a few minutes. Evidently that was not uncommon for the owner to do.”

“How thrilling!” Isabel breathed.

Sean held his breath. He didn’t find it thrilling at all. True, Harrison was safe, but he put himself in a dangerous situation, and he was lucky he wasn’t hurt. Harrison’s warm leg pressed against his, and Sean relaxed.

“More boring than thrilling, Isabel,” Harrison said dryly. “It was like your stakeout, only more cramped and dark, with no food or drink. We had to keep perfectly quiet.”

“You poor dears.” Isabel laid her hand on Harrison’s arm.

Harrison had been starving two hours later when he’d returned home from the police station. Thankfully, Sean had ordered enough food for the two of them. Harrison was so tired he’d hardly said a word and after eating, took a hot bath that Sean drew up for him, after which he immediately went to bed. They’d climbed in under the covers, wrapped their arms around each other, and were soon fast asleep.

Harrison poured himself another glass of wine. “Around half past six, Mr. Trant showed up.”

“We watched the bookstore the entire time and never saw him enter,” Sean said.

“I believe there’s a back alley he had a taxi drive him to. He came through a side door.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate.” Isabel sat back in her chair.

“How so, Isabel?”

“We wanted to see him show up at the front door.”

Harrison shook his head at her comment. “Mr. Trant sat down, and the owner locked the door. Unbeknownst to Mr. Trant, a plain clothes officer, posing as a customer, positioned himself near the office door to stop him should he try to escape, which he did.

“Oh, how exciting.” Isabel’s eyes glittered.

Sean heartily disagreed. Isabel had an unusual definition of the term ‘exciting.’

“Before that happened, however, Mr. Trant handed over the jewelry. The proprietor checked it over then paid him in cash. Once Mr. Trant put the cash in his briefcase—all the numbers written down by the police beforehand—we

emerged from the hidden room and confronted Mr. Trant. He was furious and picked up the banker's lamp to strike the proprietor, but Detective Lyons took it away. Then Mr. Trant rushed out of the room and practically into the arms of the waiting officer, leaving his briefcase behind."

"Oh my!" Isabel fell back into her chair, her hand resting dramatically over her heart.

Sean checked around the table at the other guests. Elise had raised her delicate fingers to cover her mouth, and Henry's eyes were as big as saucers. "What happened at the police station?" Sean asked, wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers.

Harrison turned to him. "Detective Lyons invited me to watch along with him—through a one-way mirror—while two of his best officers questioned Mr. Trant. It was quite interesting." Harrison rubbed at his eyes. "Mr. Trant tried to pass off the jewelry, first as gifts from residents, namely the resident on the second floor who was the undercover detective and a few other tenants, including you, Isabel." Harrison shifted his attention to her.

"What an odious little man," Isabel fumed, her usually beautiful face set in a hard frown. Sean nodded his concurrence with that statement.

"When that didn't work, he confessed to the employees stealing, giving names and saying they did it for the money, and he was helping the employees out. He said the thieves should all be arrested for ruining the reputation of a quality hotel."

Sean paled at what he heard. "They know my name?" he whispered, staring at Harrison.

"Yes, but don't worry. The officers set him straight. They informed Mr. Trant that you were working with the police, as were the residents and the three other employees."

"Three?" Sean asked in surprise. "I know about the officer's wife, but who are the other two?"

Harrison stared at his wine glass for a moment before speaking. "Clara and Benji," he said shaking his head.

Sean slouched in his chair. How had they slipped his mind? Patrick guessed months ago something was going on with the two of them. They'd suffered Trant's blackmailing longer than he had. Sean's heart went out to them.

“Clara and Benji?” Henry asked. “I didn’t know that. They never said anything.”

“Neither did I, but the undercover maid found Clara crying one day, and Clara broke down and confessed that Mr. Trant was blackmailing her.” Harrison rubbed at his temple and sighed. “The maid talked to her husband, who talked to Detective Lyons, and they decided to bring Clara and Benji in to help. He wanted to keep us separate from them. So, Clara and Benji don’t know anything about Sean unless he wishes to tell them.” Harrison looked over at Sean.

“Do you think I should?” Sean fingered the hem of the tablecloth nervously.

“I think it’s up to you,” Harrison said gently. “But it might help them feel better, knowing they weren’t alone in what they went through. It also might help you to talk with someone who experienced the same things.”

Harrison rubbed his calf up and down over Sean’s shin, and Sean gave a hint of a smile. “I’ll think about it,” he murmured.

“That’s pretty much the story.” Harrison sat back in his chair. “Detective Lyons will contact the people who assisted with The Plan for an appointment. He wants to interview each of you separately, and he’s allowing the interviews to take place in either my or Isabel’s residence. He thought you might prefer that to the police station.”

Sean nodded, and Isabel and Elise agreed.

“Very well, I’ll inform Detective Lyons Monday morning.” Harrison sent Sean a reassuring smile.

Sean felt a tug on his sleeve and looked over to find Henry leaning towards him. Sean leaned closer. “Does that mean Mr. Ormsby will come back?” Henry whispered.

“Why don’t you ask?”

Henry shook his head.

“Go on. He won’t mind you asking questions.” Sean saw Harrison watching them.

“Is there something you wanted to know, Henry?” Harrison asked.

Henry bit at his bottom lip before speaking. “Is Mr. Ormsby coming back to work here?”

“I’ll have to ask the—”

“Darling, stop being so proper,” Isabel chided. “Ask Mr. Ormsby yourself.”

Sean stared at Harrison. *What did Isabel mean? What did Harrison have to do with hiring the staff?*

Harrison shifted in his chair and narrowed his eyes at Isabel.

“What does she mean, Mr. Devaux?” Henry asked, mirroring Sean’s thoughts. “Can you hire the staff?”

“See what you started?” He muttered to Isabel.

“Didn’t you say we’re all friends here?” she asked with a raise of her brows.

“Yes, but you know I don’t like interfering with the way the hotel is managed,” Harrison grumbled.

Isabel shook her head. “I think you’ve already gone far past ‘interfering,’ darling.”

“But what does she mean?” Sean needed to know. He looked back and forth from Isabel to Harrison.

Harrison ran a hand over his face before speaking. “I own most of this hotel, and I usually lead any meetings dealing with major decisions on its operation. However, I prefer to let the other members handle matters of its day-to-day affairs.” Sean and Henry stared at each other then back at Harrison.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.” He gave Sean an apologetic look. “I didn’t want you to become any more intimidated by me than you already were.”

Sean sat stunned. Harrison wasn’t just rich. He was filthy rich. “You said we’d...” Sean began, the hurt creeping into his voice, but then stopped.

“I know. I’m sorry. Can we please discuss this later?” Harrison’s eyes begged Sean for forgiveness.

“I’m sorry, darlings,” Isabel broke in and directed her attention towards Sean. “I’m sure he would have told you after all of this was over.” She turned back to Harrison. “Wouldn’t you, darling?”

Harrison nodded. “Actually I had planned on speaking with Mr. Ormsby, and after I found out if he did want to come back, I would have mentioned it. We needed to get the blackmail business taken care of first.”

Sean nodded. More people were involved in this than he’d known, the whole matter worth more than his feelings being hurt. And Harrison got involved because he wanted to help him. He would’ve told him the information

when they had some time alone. He smiled at his lover, and Harrison mouthed a silent “Thank you” back.

“I don’t care if you ask Mr. Ormsby or if someone else does, Mr. Devaux. The staff would just like him back,” Henry interjected. “But can we please finish lunch now? I’d really like to try one of those cupcakes. They look delicious.”

Lunch and dessert were finished with enthusiastic acclaim for the cupcakes. They rose from their chairs and retired to the living room, settling back with cocktails and light conversation.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sean

“A party?” Isabel exclaimed in delight. “When, darling?”

“On the Fourth of July,” Harrison answered, sitting in the club chair while Isabel and Elise reclined on the chaise. Sean and Henry sat together on the sofa. To get more comfortable, both Harrison and Sean had removed their jackets after lunch.

“You haven’t had a party in ages.”

“I know, and I think it’s about time.” Harrison looked over at Sean. “What do you think? I know it’s short notice, the holiday is only the day after tomorrow. Do you think you can arrange a party? Say late afternoon four o’clock? We’ll make it a buffet rather than a sit-down dinner. That should be easier to set up.”

Sean nodded. “I think so.”

“Good. Not too many people: Isabel and Elise and, Henry, you and your family.”

“Me and my family?” Henry asked, his voice a whisper as he sat shocked into stillness.

“Of course. You’ve been a tremendous help to Sean and myself these last few weeks. I’ll inform whoever is the manager that night that you’re invited. And I’d like to invite Patrick too. Plus Karl and Theo, and Charles and his family. Although, on second thought, maybe not Charles.”

“Why ever not?” Isabel asked, arching a brow.

“Because he’ll end up gloating about how his advice saved my liver,” Harrison grumbled.

Everyone laughed.

“I think you can suffer him for one night, Harrison.” Isabel chided him with a smile.

Harrison chuckled. “Very well, invite Charles, oh, and Gilbert too.”

“Gilbert?” Isabel asked. “I don’t believe I’ve met him.”

“No you haven’t. He can sometimes be aggravating, but he’s an entertaining conversationalist and keeps a party from stagnating.” Harrison gazed towards Sean again. “Besides, I’d like him to meet Sean.”

“I think there’s a story there somewhere,” Isabel said, shifting her gaze between the two.

“I don’t know if my wife will want to be a burden with our son here, Mr. Devaux,” Henry said hesitantly, interjecting himself back into the conversation.

“Don’t worry, Henry. If Charles attends, and I’m almost positive he will—the man loves his gatherings—he has three children, the youngest child a boy around two. Would your son be comfortable playing with him?”

“Yes, sir, he’s two himself.” Henry smiled.

“Then that’s settled. Nothing formal. I insist on casual. It’ll be fun to watch the revelers from up here. Sean will let you know tomorrow what time to arrive.

Sean looked at everyone in the room. “If anyone has any food favorites or preferences, please ring me or send a note by tomorrow afternoon.”

Isabel clapped her hands together. “I love parties, and Elise loves children, so I think it’ll be wonderful.”

Harrison stood and stretched. “Good. I’ll place the necessary calls tomorrow. Henry, would you please invite Patrick and find out if he’s free and also confirm with your family?” Harrison yawned and covered his mouth. “I apologize, but I’m still a bit tired from yesterday’s endeavors. I’d like to call it an early evening.”

“I’ll clear the table,” Henry replied.

“Place what you can on one cart and take it down. Leave the rest on the other cart outside the front door. I’ll call for breakfast, since I plan on sleeping in.”

“Yes, sir.” Henry moved off to the dining room.

“And I think that’s our cue to leave, my dear Elise.” Isabel and Elise rose from their seats. “Thank you for the wonderful luncheon and conversation, darlings. We can’t wait to see you on Tuesday. It’ll be so much fun.”

“*Merci.*” Elise kissed them both on the cheek. Isabel followed up with more light kisses.

“We’ll see ourselves out. Good night, dears.”

Henry soon had the table cleared and the carts full. He pushed one cart outside into the hall and returned for the other. "Thank you very much for the lunch and party invitation, Mr. Devaux. I had a great time." Henry's smile was huge and full of genuine appreciation.

"You're quite welcome, Henry. Sean and I are looking forward to seeing you on Tuesday."

"I can't wait, sir. 'Night, Sean." Henry waved and headed for the door.

"Please lock the door on your way out," Harrison called.

"Yes, sir. Good night."

Sean heard the door shut, and as soon as it did, Harrison's arms snaked around his waist and pulled him tight against his chest.

"At last, we're alone." Harrison lips crashed down on his, and Sean opened his mouth, sliding his arms up around Harrison's neck.

Harrison walked backwards until his knees hit the sofa, and he sat down, dragging Sean along with him. Sean planted his knees on the cushions, straddling Harrison's thighs. Hot hands roamed over Sean's back and wet kisses rained down upon his throat. He rolled his hips over Harrison's, earning himself a deep, throaty growl from the man. Harrison broke off the kiss with a nip to Sean's lower lip.

Sean planted his palms on Harrison's shoulders and laid his forehead against his. "It's over. It's really over," he whispered.

"Yes, pretty much." Harrison ran his hands along the sides of Sean's thighs. "The trial will be a formality."

"So," Sean said, pulling back enough to stare into his lover's blue eyes.

"So?" Harrison arched his brows, meeting Sean's intense gaze.

"Yes... So..." A grin grew on Sean's face.

"Ah, I see. So..." Harrison teased, biting his lower lip in the sexy way that drove Sean crazy.

"Augh!" Sean wrestled Harrison to the side and forced him to his back on the sofa, sitting on top of his groin.

A sharp burst of laughter exploded from Harrison. "Are we anxious for something?" He gave Sean a wide-eyed innocent look that didn't quite fit his masculine features.

Sean playfully punched Harrison on the shoulder. “You need acting lessons from Isabel because you don’t fool me in the slightest.” He laid his finger on Harrison’s lip. Slowly he pulled his hand downwards, tracing over his lover’s chin until he reached the top button of his vest. He unfastened every button before getting to work on the shirt.

Harrison grabbed hold of his wrists just as Sean reached the third to last button. “I’ve got something to ask you before we go further.”

“What’s that?” Sean frowned, focused on his goal of relieving Harrison of his shirt. He twisted his wrists out of Harrison’s grip and aimed for the buttons again. Strong hands clamped over his and held them against Harrison’s chest. Sean scowled. “Can’t it wait?”

“Sean, I need to ask this,” Harrison stated firmly.

The serious tone in Harrison’s voice halted Sean’s attempts to free himself. He leaned back and nodded. Whatever it was, it was important enough for Harrison to stop him; besides, he’d waited months already, what were a few more minutes?

Harrison cleared his throat. “Do you remember the joke I made a while back about making virgin drinks, and you blushed, as did I?”

Sean nodded, not at all sure where this question was leading. Still, with the memory, heat flared to life in his face. “I remember.”

Harrison gave Sean’s hands a squeeze, which worried Sean. “I… Sorry, but I need to know if you’ve ever engaged in sexual acts with a man the way we will tonight.” His concerned gaze searched Sean’s face.

Sean’s body locked, and his jaw clenched. He wasn’t expecting that sort of question at all, and he paused before answering. Harrison brushed his thumbs over the backs of Sean’s hands, and that small presence reminded him of his lover’s protective nature. But the question still had him burning with embarrassment. Sean didn’t need to see his face in a mirror to know his blush shone bright enough to light a room. “No, I haven’t,” he whispered.

Harrison watched him silently. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said calmly, continuing to run his thumbs over Sean’s skin.

Sean frowned. “I’m almost nineteen.” He jerked his hands in Harrison’s grip, but his lover didn’t let go.

“True. But I’m not asking to embarrass you, but because if you haven’t experienced any—” Harrison cleared his throat. “—buggery, the way men

sometimes have between them, you won't know what to expect." Harrison watched him closely. "And I need to know if I need to take it slow. Sometimes the first time isn't always the best."

"It can't hurt that much," Sean replied nonchalantly. "Not if so many do it."

Harrison snorted and shook his head. "And that's why I had to ask. That is a misconception, and I care because I don't want to hurt you. If you get hurt because I moved too fast, think, we won't do it again until you're healed. Is that what you want?"

Sean's shoulders slumped. "No. But I'm not some fragile flower."

"No, you're definitely not fragile," Harrison said, his mouth quirking up at the corner. "Now, I have a few more things to discuss."

A loud sigh escaped Sean. He attempted to create a woeful expression, a la Isabel. "We are goin' to do it tonight, aren't we? This isn't a diversionary tactic?" Sean complained.

A loud laugh broke from Harrison's throat, and he brought Sean's hands to his mouth, kissing each one, before replacing them on his chest. "Yes, we definitely will. But if we don't talk about this now, my mind won't stay focused on us."

From the few short months Sean had worked with Harrison, he knew the man spoke the truth, and Sean wanted all his attention on them. "All right, I'm listenin'." But he reminded Harrison what he was missing by rolling his pelvis over Harrison's.

Harrison growled and let go of Sean's hands to take hold of his hips, stilling them in his firm grip. "You are sneaky, but you shall not distract me from my goal," Harrison chortled with a smile then sobered. "Did you know I 'rent' the whole of the eighteenth floor and not just the south side?" Harrison asked.

Sean nodded. "I figured as much. I know there's never been anyone else living up here since I took over the duties."

Harrison broke eye contact, letting out a long exhale before looking back at Sean. "The northwest apartment houses my wine and liquor collection. I'll show that to you before the party, since we'll need to refresh our stock, and I owe Karl a Cognac. However, the northeast quarter is vacant. That's the section above Isabel's apartment. It's larger than hers and has three bedrooms, an office, library, three bathrooms, and a living room. There are also four fireplaces." He bit the corner of his lower lip. "I hope you'll spend most of your

time here with me, but I have to take into consideration what society will say when they wonder about you never leaving my penthouse. And it's not if, but when, they'll wonder; the hotel rumor mill *will* gossip. So I thought you might consider moving out of your current lodgings and use the smaller penthouse as your home. You could also entertain your friends there if you wished."

The entire northwest penthouse was filled with liquor? Sean couldn't believe what he'd just heard. No wonder Harrison never ran out of alcohol. He stared at Harrison in disbelief and spotted the panic growing in his eyes. The grip on Sean's thighs tightened, and Harrison's mouth pulled down at the corners. The storage of the liquor was a surprise, but not that large a concern anymore since Harrison rarely drank now. The biggest worry was how would he possibly pay the cost of rent on the offered northeast penthouse suite? He couldn't. He shook his head, his shoulders slumping even more.

"I can't afford to live there, even with what you pay me." He watched as the tension left Harrison's body, and he relaxed. He reached for Sean's hands, lifted them, and turned them over, kissing his palms.

"It'll be part of your employment arrangement." Harrison smiled. "My assistant needs to be close by so he can attend to my needs." He offered a sly grin.

Sean couldn't help his smile, but he shook his head. "I can't let you do that."

Harrison dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. "Is it because you don't trust me? Or is it because you desire to remain independent?" He looked back at Sean, his eyes filled with hurt. "I swear I will never toss you to the street again. I'll write it up in the contract that you'll always have the penthouse as your home unless you choose to break the contract."

Sean pulled his hands out of Harrison's grasp and leaned forward from his sitting position until he lay flat on top, his legs stretched out along Harrison's. "I trust you." He placed soft pecks on Harrison's lips. "I feel as if I'm not earning my keep."

"Believe me, you are, a million times over." Harrison ran his knuckles down Sean's cheek. "But if it makes you feel better, how about if I take care of the rent, and I'll charge you a small token, a fraction of the cost, and you tithe that amount to the church? I know the church has helped you. It's a win-win for everyone. I'll also add the stipulation about your residence there into your employment contract." He craned his neck up to kiss Sean. "Please, I want you near me." Hope shone in Harrison's eyes.

Sean needed to get over his unhealthy habit of not accepting help. He valued his independence highly, but not if it stopped him from enjoying the benefits others wished to happily bestow on him. “All right, I’d be foolish not to accept. Just don’t get upset if you hear any loud parties, especially if I invite Patrick over.”

“Thank you.” Harrison beamed. “You have no idea how happy you’ve just made me. Now where were we before I derailed our private party?” He grinned, pulling the tails of Sean’s button-down and Jimshirt out of his pants then slipped his hand underneath to run his palms up and down the bare skin of Sean’s back.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Sean

“Come on,” Harrison said, grabbing a butt cheek and squeezing. “Let’s move this somewhere more comfortable.”

Sean reluctantly climbed off Harrison’s body, but not before giving the man one last hard grind of his pelvis. He offered Harrison a hand up, and he took it.

Harrison tried to lead Sean back to the bedroom, but Sean wanted both his hands on his lover and slipped free, tucking them up under the front of Harrison’s shirt and into his waistband. Sean chuckled at the awkward walk they made down the hall, with him plastered to Harrison’s back, and Harrison teasing him with seductive sways of his hips.

They entered the bedroom, and Harrison approached the foot of the bed. The sun—its golden light casting warmth into the interior—had hours to set, so they left the lights off. Harrison stopped and turned. He lifted his hand to run his thumb over Sean’s lower lip, and Sean flicked out his tongue to lick the digit. Harrison’s eyes widened, his mouth dropping open. Sean shuddered as his lover threaded dexterous fingers through his hair and wrapped his arm around Sean’s body, pulling him close, bringing their mouths together in a bruising kiss. Their tongues danced to unheard music, and Sean ran his hands over the strong back, Harrison’s body heat seeping into his palms. They broke their kiss, and Harrison reached for Sean’s vest, deftly popping the mother-of-pearl buttons through their holes and letting the piece of clothing drop to the floor. Sean smiled, letting him do as he pleased, and next he slipped Sean’s suspenders off his shoulders, with a hook of his thumbs. Soon the buttons on Sean’s shirt were undone as quickly as the vest’s. Just as eager to see Harrison naked, Sean hurriedly stripped his lover of his clothes until there was nothing left between them but air.

Harrison’s bare chest and dark nipples tempted Sean, and he gave in to the urge to suck them. He bent his head and fastened his lips around one, licking and nipping as his hands caressed the firm muscles of his lover’s upper body and narrow hips. Harrison’s warm palm cupped against the back of his head, holding him in place while Sean bathed attention on the nub. Faint grunts and loud pants slipped past Harrison’s lips as he pushed his chest forward. He grabbed a fistful of Sean’s hair, pulled his head to the side and leaned down,

licking a stripe along Sean's chin. He whimpered at the strong, demanding tug of his hair and Harrison's possessive lick, his lips just out of reach.

"Get on the bed for me," Harrison whispered into his ear. Sean straightened up and drifted away, dragging his hands up and over Harrison's shoulders and down his arms, letting their hands meet, palms sliding across each other, fingertips touching. He sat down on the bed and watched Harrison walk into the bathroom.

Sean flipped over, crawling on the bed to the end table, pulling open the drawer. He took out the petroleum jelly, unscrewed the lid, and set it by the jar. He knelt and quickly drew back the covers to reveal bright, white sheets. He pushed the covers off the foot of the bed and moved to the middle of the mattress. He settled onto his stomach, spreading out his arms and legs.

Finally. Now that all the talking was out of Harrison's system, he would take him. Sean spread his legs farther apart, digging with his knees and grinding his cock into the mattress. He closed his eyes to focus on the crisp, cool smoothness of high-quality cotton rubbing against him. Not like silk, but worlds beyond the barely adequate bedding at his boarding room.

A choked moan sounded behind Sean, and he twisted to look over his shoulder. Harrison stood at the foot of the bed, several towels draped over his arm, his free hand slowly stroking his stiff shaft as he stared at Sean's ass. Sean smirked, bent his head between his forearms and ground harder, letting his whimpers and pants grow louder.

"I'm not a swearing man," Harrison said, his voice rough. "But, Sweet Jesus, the view."

Sean chuckled. Of all the habits Harrison could've picked up from him, what did he choose? Cursing. He dropped his head to peek between his body and the bed, and he caught sight of how his cock and balls moved and rolled. Harrison must be getting quite an eyeful from the rear view. "You'd better hurry," Sean panted. He could feel Harrison's gaze burning him with want, and he undulated and rolled his hips harder.

"Don't stop." The low command rolled over Sean's skin like thunder, and he shuddered.

Sean swallowed at the sudden touch of Harrison's warm hand sliding between his butt cheeks, gliding up and down. Harrison stopped with his thumb resting over Sean's hole and circled his thumb pad around the opening. Sean

moved back against the digit, trying to sink it into him. Instead, Harrison teased him, circling and pressing, only to withdraw every time he shifted back.

Sean huffed. "I think you enjoy teasing me too much."

Harrison chuckled and removed his hand, walking up beside the bed and laying the towels on the sheets. He picked up the jar from the bedside table. "And I think you are much too impatient. I'll have to teach you the virtues of taking things slowly."

Sean rolled onto his back and grinned. "Maybe some other time." He watched Harrison crawl onto the bed then up onto his knees. Sean wanted his lover closer so he could taste him. "Right now, I want you to—What are you—" Sean's eyes widened, and a quiet "Oh" of surprise passed his lips as Harrison straddled his face, knees close to Sean's ears, giving him the most magnificent view of Harrison's heavy hanging balls and long cock. Sean licked his lips, raised his head, and swiped his tongue over those balls. Harrison sucked in a breath.

"Wait! Not yet." He grabbed one of the down pillows and scooted towards Sean's feet. "Lift your hips."

Curling his back, Sean raised his hips, and Harrison tucked the pillow underneath them, elevating them off the mattress. Next thing he knew, he was bent farther in half, his knees hooked behind Harrison's armpits, his feet pointing at the ceiling. Cool air brushed over his hole as his cheeks spread open. A small whimper escaped Sean's throat; he was completely exposed to whatever Harrison wished to do to him. He shivered in anticipation. They'd pleased each other numerous times during the week since the celebration with the cupcakes, but Harrison had never attempted anything this intimate.

Sean wiggled his bottom, as another tremble of excitement rushed through him. "Better get goin', or I'll fall asleep here."

"Oh, I don't think you'll fall asleep with what I have in mind," Harrison hinted seductively.

The heavy, warm scent of Harrison's sex surrounded Sean, and he inhaled deeply. He turned his face to the side, rubbing it along the inside of Harrison's thigh, the dark, fine hairs there creating a pleasant friction on Sean's skin. He reached his hands up and around Harrison's waist, pulling him lower until he lay almost directly on his face. Sean grabbed hold of the long cock and slowly stroked, while laving the dangling ball sack hanging, oh so temptingly, above his mouth. He nudged it with his nose, grinding his face into Harrison's

genitals, spreading the man's scent over himself. When he opened his mouth to engulf one of the balls, he felt Harrison pull the cheeks of his ass apart and a wet tongue swipe over his hole. Sean yelped and jerked in surprise, all thoughts of what he was about to do, forgotten.

"Hold still," Harrison mumbled between nipping and lapping at the tender skin between Sean's thighs.

"I can't," Sean breathed. "Do it again, what you did."

"Do you mean this?"

A pointed tongue flickered over and around his opening before pressing into the center. "Sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Sean gasped. Soft whines broke free from him every time Harrison's talented tongue caressed his hole. He canted his hips towards Harrison's mouth as hard as he could. Lips surrounded his opening and sucked. Sean buried his face behind Harrison's balls, whimpering from the onslaught of attention to that one small spot on his entire body—one highly sensitive spot.

Sean managed to collect his thoughts when Harrison focused on his inner thigh, allowing him to reason that if he enjoyed it so much, maybe Harrison would too. The jelly was too far away so he brought a finger to his lips and sucked on it. Once it was good and wet, he felt for Harrison's hole. He'd barely touched it when Harrison groaned and pushed back his ass. "Yes, do it," Sean heard him whisper. Carefully he pressed in, but Harrison's hole was tight, and he withdrew to try again. Harrison scooted back.

"Keep going, don't stop."

Sean pushed in, and slowly Harrison's entrance accepted his finger. At the same time, he felt Harrison's finger, thick and slippery with jelly, at his own entrance. Harrison's finger tapped at Sean's hole, and a hot wet mouth wrapped around his cock. Two could play at the teasing game. His lover's shaft hung rigid and heavy at the perfect angle and location, and Sean grasped it, aiming it for his mouth. He licked at the glistening head like a lollipop, as Harrison moaned around his throbbing cock, the vibration sending a delicious shiver through him. Sean wrapped his lips around Harrison's silken hardness, pumped his head, and stuck his finger as far as he could up Harrison's ass. Suddenly Harrison jumped, his breath growing more rapid. He grunted and rocked on his knees, driving himself back onto Sean's finger and forward into his mouth. His sucking on Sean ceased and was replaced with quiet pants and exclamations of pleasure. "Ahh, yesss. Right there."

Whatever the little round lump was Sean felt under his finger must sure feel good because Harrison had forgotten all about him. Sean removed his mouth from Harrison's penis. "Don't forget about me," he complained.

Harrison chuckled breathily, slowing his body's movements. "Better remove your finger, or I'll be coming all over your face." Harrison twisted his body and looked at Sean, his face flushed, his eyes burning with desire.

Sean widened his eyes and grinned. "Really? I'd like to try that." As soon as he said it, Harrison's cock twitched, and a translucent string of wetness pulsed from the slit. Sean opened his mouth in time to catch the salty substance.

Harrison lowered his face to Sean's aching cock and moaned. "You are going to have me spilling before I'm ready, with that kind of talk."

Sean's grin grew wider. "Then help me catch up." He tilted his hips. He took it as a challenge to see how close to the edge he could get Harrison, before he spent, and he knew just what would do the trick. But before he could start, Harrison shoved a second slick finger into him, and Sean canted his ass higher. The stretch stung a little but not badly. He wanted Harrison to go faster, and the best way he knew to do that was to pleasure the man. Sean leapt to the task, running his tongue over his lover's balls and sucking one into his mouth. Harrison mimicked his move, taking one of Sean's in his. Sean released Harrison's balls and flicked his tongue over the expanse of skin from behind Harrison's sack all the way to his hole. At the same time, he massaged his thumb right behind Harrison's balls, and his lover moaned, pressing his pelvis down onto Sean's face and tightening his thighs. Sean whimpered. Caught between his muscular legs, Harrison's scent enveloped him—heavy, full, with a hint of sweat, as he mouthed the skin. Sean pushed up, urging Harrison to raise himself.

Sean grabbed hold of Harrison's long cock with one hand, and with the other, stretched the foreskin over the tip. A buck of his lover's hips told Sean he was on the right track to bringing him closer to orgasm. Harrison wrapped his wet mouth around Sean's cock again, his head pumping to the rhythm of his finger inside his ass. Sean rocked his hips while worshipping Harrison's genitals. He pinched and pulled the foreskin back and forth over the head, and Sean scooped up any drops that appeared at the tip either with his tongue, or he wiped them away with his finger, popping it into his mouth to taste. Harrison also increased the suction and pressure of his tongue on Sean's cock. He withdrew his fingers, leaving Sean to grumble in protest. That protest died quickly when a third slick finger worked its way in. It burned more, but he

wanted it. Sean pushed up against those fingers, moaning as they slipped into him.

Sean's extreme desire to please Harrison consumed him. He jerked the foreskin over the slick head faster, licked Harrison's balls, and with his other hand, rubbed behind them in the spot he knew would drive Harrison over the edge.

"Stop, Sean, you have to stop." Harrison raised himself, removing his cock from Sean's hand, and leaving Sean hungry for more. Sean made a grab for it and squeezed. "If you do that anymore, I'll come."

Harrison returned his attention to Sean's cock, flicking his tongue over the sensitive head.

"No more fingers," Sean said, emphatically, making sure Harrison understood the intent behind his words.

Harrison pumped the head of Sean's shaft a few more times before slowly removing his fingers from Sean's hole. He lifted his leg over Sean's head so he knelt at his side. He reached for a towel and the jelly jar. "I would prefer to prepare you longer."

"I'm not fragile," Sean reminded Harrison.

"I know, but I don't want to hurt you."

Sean grinned. "You won't." And even if Harrison did, it wouldn't matter; he'd wanted Harrison for far too long, and it would be worth it.

Harrison bent over Sean for a quick kiss, and he wrapped his arms around Harrison's neck. Harrison pulled back and smiled. "Spread your legs for me," he urged, and Sean swiftly complied, grinning broadly. Harrison chuckled and moved between Sean's thighs.

Every move Harrison made sharpened into crystal clarity in Sean's mind. He tracked Harrison's hand as he drew the jelly jar closer towards him, dipped his fingers in, and scooped up a dollop of the lubricant. Harrison grabbed his cock in his fist and stroked it, coating his veined length, the foreskin withdrawn to display the large impressive head. Harrison drove his cock into his fist, and faint groans sounded from his lips.

Sean propped himself up on his elbows, mesmerized by the sight of the wide cockhead breaking past the fist's opening and glistening from the jelly. Sean could never get enough of tasting Harrison, and he pushed himself to a sitting position for another mouthful.

“Lie back down and bend your knees.” Harrison ordered, letting go of his shaft.

Sean swiftly got into position and grabbed his knees with his hands, pulling them as close to his chest as possible, offering himself to the man he loved with his whole heart and soul. His own cock throbbed on his stomach, keeping time to the rapid beat of his heart. Clear strands leaked from his slit and bridged the short distance to his abdomen. He looked up to find Harrison’s dark, heated gaze raking over his body before his lover focused his attention on Sean’s ass. Sean craned his neck up as far as possible to watch as Harrison wrapped his fingers around his straining erection and aimed his cockhead at Sean’s ass. Staring fixedly at where he was pointed, Harrison teased Sean’s hole, rimming it with the head and canting his hips, gradually nudging deeper to ease past the tight opening. Sean whimpered in desire, curling his hips and folding in on himself as tightly as he could, begging and offering himself up with his gesture. His gaze flickered between Harrison’s lust-filled eyes and his cock. “Please,” Sean whispered. “Please, stick it in me,” he begged, his voice breaking with need.

A choked groan escaped Harrison, and he stopped moving, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. He paused and took a few deep breaths before looking at Sean. “Don’t say things like that,” Harrison forced out, his voice rough. “I’ll come all over you before I even get inside.”

Sean whined but nodded, licking his lips. He wanted Harrison to spill in him, fill him with his seed. Marking him physically inside, the way he’d already emblazoned his name across Sean’s heart.

Harrison pushed the broad crown against Sean’s ready entrance. Sean shivered with anticipation, his stomach curving in, drawing his ass up, reaching for Harrison’s cock. Harrison shifted, edging closer, easing into Sean’s hole. The burn intensified as the wide head stretched him open, breaking past the resistance. Harrison halted, hovering, his cockhead only partially in Sean’s entrance. *Why is it taking so long?* He was ready. He wanted Harrison in him now. With one strong lift and shove of his hips, Sean drove himself onto Harrison’s shaft, and the head abruptly breached him, sucking past the narrow ring and slipping inside. Sharp pain radiated through Sean’s ass, and he tensed, clenching down around the hard rod in his butt. He grunted and stilled, blinking back the sudden tears that filled his eyes. Harrison gasped.

“Breathe, Sean,” Harrison urged, his voice low and trembling. “Take deep breaths.” His warm palms caressed Sean’s thighs, trailing over his shins,

ankles, and feet, and then down again. Neither spoke or moved until Sean's muscles relaxed, and his ass released its death grip on Harrison's shaft. Harrison chuckled. "I might have known you'd take things into your own hands, so to speak."

Sean huffed, a grin tugging at his lips. The ache in his hole had faded to a dull throbbing in tempo with his heartbeat. "But I didn't break, and it feels better already, so you can move."

"I need to check you first," Harrison said, reaching down between them and running his finger around Sean's entrance where it met Harrison's engorged cock. "Oh, Sweet Jesus," Sean wailed, gyrating his hips. Stretched taut, the caress sent electrifying pulses of pleasure through his clenching and reclenching filled hole. He lifted his head and stared wide-eyed at Harrison. "Wha-what did you check me for?"

Harrison peered at his finger and smiled. "I wanted to check for blood, in case you were injured."

Sean flopped his head back on the mattress and covered his eyes with his palm. "We're never goin' to get goin' if you keep stoppin' to check me." He removed his hand and arched a brow at Harrison. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes." Harrison smiled mischievously.

Sean narrowed his eyes. He was sure Harrison was prolonging this on purpose, the teaser. "Good, because I don't know how much longer before I do take matters into my own hands," Sean quipped.

Harrison chuckled and bent over, placing his palms on either side of Sean's chest, helping to hold his folded legs in place with his shoulders. He slowly inched forward, and Sean rose to meet him. He groaned, the slick cock gliding all the way in until Harrison's sack rested fully against Sean, its heat kissing his skin. Slowly Harrison rocked, inching back and forth, each time withdrawing farther, each drive forward harder than the one before.

Harrison quickened his pace, circling his hips and adjusting his position, his attention completely focused on Sean's face. He made another shift in angle, and Sean threw back his head, crying out, "Oh God. More, more." Sean frantically tried to rock, but with Harrison pinning him to the bed he couldn't. "Up, up," he said, tapping Harrison on the shoulder, and Harrison lifted, allowing Sean to wrap his legs around Harrison's back, gripping his heels at Harrison's waist. Now he could move and thrust up with his hips.

Sean locked gazes with Harrison, drowning in the desire, passion, and love swimming in his lover's dark eyes. The unspoken words reached deep inside Sean, touching his soul, claiming not only his body, but his entire being. He snaked his arms around Harrison's neck, dragging him down into a fierce kiss. Frantically, they devoured each other's mouths, while Harrison pounded into him, hitting the spot that made him cry out with pleasure only to have the sound swallowed by his lover. He moaned into Harrison's mouth and writhed under the relentless drive of Harrison's rock-hard shaft through his highly sensitized hole, sending fiery sparks of pleasure racing through his ass and catapulting him into a frenzy of desperate need. Sean broke the kiss. "Harder," he demanded, undulating beneath Harrison, his legs and arms grabbing at his sweat-slicked torso. Harrison pulled back and slammed forward with a loud grunt, sending Sean inching towards the headboard. Sean wailed at each forceful drive into him, each stroke rubbing the large glans over that mysterious, arousing point inside him.

Harrison lowered himself down onto Sean and buried his face in Sean's neck. He dragged his tongue in a stripe along Sean's collarbone and nipped along the wet path. Sean's leaking cock was trapped between them, every movement grinding his shaft deliciously between their bellies, lubricated with his own fluid. He thrashed under Harrison's intense ministrations, and Sean's mind let go. Only touch, want, and need held his attention. Hot breath on his neck... lips and teeth lavishing his earlobes... Harrison's cock ramming in and out of his sensitive hole. Overwhelmed with sensation he couldn't hold on. "I can't, I can't," he whispered. "Please, I need..." He whimpered, unable to speak more words.

"Come for me, Sean. Come for me," Harrison growled in his ear.

Higher, higher, the fire in his groin spiraled into a firestorm. Tighter and tighter, the pressure grew, so close. *Let go. Climb the fire.* Ecstasy exploded, and he choked on a scream. Body arching, his head tossed back on the bed, exposing his throat. Harrison's loud moan overshadowed the static filling Sean's ears as he flew higher. A hot mouth clamped on his shoulder, and sharp teeth bit down, making both of them groan. Harrison gripped him tight, his fingers digging into Sean's skin, as he rutted into him, until he stiffened, and his hips jerked. Faint in the distance, as Sean rode the wave of his orgasm, he felt the pulsing of Harrison's cock in his trembling hole. Seed spilled, marking him, and he convulsed with pleasure again.

Hearing was the first sense that returned to Sean. Harrison's heavy panting filled his ear. Sean's rapidly beating heart gradually slowed. Harrison's cock

still filled him, but the pressure decreased as it deflated until it finally slipped from his hole. Harrison rose off Sean, the movement allowing cool air to sweep across their sweaty bodies, and Harrison grabbed for one of the towels, sticking it under Sean's ass after removing the pillow. He then took the other and cleaned Sean's chest and abdomen of his spend.

Sean shook his head and chuckled. "Only you would be so careful," he said, his voice raspy. He smiled at his lover as Harrison stretched out beside him.

Harrison hummed. "I plan on us having more fun before morning, and I don't relish the idea of sleeping on a wet spot. And"—he lifted his arm to bring it under Sean's head, and Sean snuggled up next to him—"I don't think you'd care to be itching once it dried."

Sean had no response. His haze of lust gave way to the relaxation of contentment and, despite struggling to stay awake, his eyelids fluttered closed.

"Rest," Harrison murmured and kissed his forehead. "We have all the time in the world."

Sean smiled and drifted off to sleep.

Epilogue

Sean

Sean stretched his arms up over his head and yawned. His bottom felt a bit sore, but he relished this morning ache. Last night was better than he could've ever imagined, and they hadn't stopped after Sean's first time either. They'd tasted each other once more. The sex helped them fall into a deep sleep. This morning, he awoke to Harrison's strong body flush up against his back and his hard cock rocking in his crease. He'd rubbed off between Sean's thighs while he jerked Sean to completion. He could get used to waking like this every morning.

Now they lay in bed, facing each other, their hands skimming along their still flushed flesh wherever they could reach.

"I have an idea I'd like you to think about," Harrison said. He sighed and drew in a long breath.

Sean hummed. "What is it?"

"My sister and her family have a home in upstate New York. They vacation there every summer, and she's been pestering me these last few years to spend the summer with them, but as you know, I haven't felt up to it. She says my nephews and niece miss me terribly and ask each year if I'll visit."

"It sounds like she's using some underhanded methods to coerce you," Sean snickered.

Harrison huffed. "My sister can be as persistent as Isabel and annoying as only a little sister can be."

Sean chuckled. Yes, he knew how a little sister could be.

"In truth, it's beautiful up there, lots of wide-open green spaces and lakes too. I thought maybe, since you miss Ireland, you'd like to vacation up there, and if you found it enjoyable, I could arrange to have a summer home built for us. Or another option is to lease from residents who choose to travel for their summer holidays, and then decide if you'd like a home there. The second option fits better because of my next question."

Harrison pulled Sean close, and Sean felt his arms tighten around him as he waited for an answer. "I'd like that," Sean said, his response muffled against

Harrison's chest. He couldn't believe Harrison would go to all that trouble for him.

Harrison relaxed and kissed Sean's neck. "Good. Now what do you think about a visit to Ireland for a vacation?"

Sean froze. *Is Harrison really considering taking a trip to Eire?* He tilted back his head and searched Harrison's eyes for any hint of a joke. But there was no teasing in his eyes. "You mean it?" Sean whispered.

Harrison nodded. "I do. I would've liked to surprise you, but I needed to ask... After everything you went through there..." Uncertainty shone in his eyes.

Sean grinned. "I'd love to go back to Eire," he said excitedly. "I can show you Killarney and the farm, even though it doesn't belong to me anymore. I also want to speak to the priest who helped me get here to thank him in person." He paused and slowed down. "But most of all, I'd like to visit where my family is buried. And tell them that I'm doin' well. That I'm happy and, most important, to tell them about you." Sean gazed at Harrison through misty eyes. He blinked to clear them.

Harrison cleared his throat and rested his forehead against Sean's. "Then I was thinking we could visit for your birthday? If you like the idea, I can arrange for passage."

"My birthday?" Sean asked, with awe.

"Yes, unless you prefer another time?" Harrison drew away, his gaze checking Sean's expression.

"My birthday is perfect." He grinned.

"Good. I'll look into it this week." Harrison nestled close to Sean again. "While we're there, I'd like to make a contribution to your town's church." He ran his hands up and down Sean's back. "If it wasn't for their help, you wouldn't be here." Harrison clung to him, burying his face in Sean's shoulder, one hand cupped around the base of his neck, while threading his fingers through Sean's hair, the other wrapped tight around his waist.

A contented sigh passed Sean's lips.

"I also thought," Harrison said, pulling back, "since we'll already be on that side of the ocean, we could stop to visit with Earl Maycroft, that is, if he's interested in a visit. I'd like to thank him personally for returning Andrew's

letters. Even if he'd rather not have company, I want to show you the sights of London."

Sean nodded. "I'd like to go. I've never been to London. Is it anythin' like New York City?"

"It's bigger, and rains more often there than here. And it has a lot of history. Many castles and beautiful churches. I think you'd like it."

"There are castles in Killarney, too, if you're interested in visitin' some of those," Sean suggested.

"I am." Harrison nodded. "Speaking of Ireland..." Harrison pushed himself up and reached towards the end table, pulling the drawer open. He lifted out a small red velvet box and closed the drawer. He cleared his throat again.

Sean watched with rapt attention.

"I've been looking for a birthday gift for you." Harrison twirled the box in his fingers.

"My birthday isn't for another month," Sean said, shifting his gaze from the box to Harrison and then back. "And the trip is more than enough."

"I know, but I want to give this to you too." Harrison hesitantly held the box out on his palm.

Sean lifted it from Harrison's hand and opened it. Nestled in the center was a bright gold ring with designs decorating the outside. With careful fingers, he pulled it out and examined it closely. Interlocking Celtic love knots wove their way around the ring. Sean spotted tiny words engraved inside, and he rotated the ring to read the inscription:

To S, You Are My World, Love, H.

He would not cry. Blushing was embarrassing enough. He wouldn't cry. Sean took a deep shuddering breath, threw his arms around Harrison and hid his face in his neck... and cried.

Harrison chuckled quietly and gently ran his hands down Sean's back. "I wasn't sure you'd like it since you don't seem fond of watches or cufflinks."

Sean pulled back and swallowed, swiping away the tears with his palm. "This isn't a watch or cufflinks. This is special." He leaned over and pressed his mouth to Harrison's in a heartfelt kiss. He drew back and looked at the ring again. "Would you mind if I wore it on a chain? I'd like to keep it close to my heart." He gazed into Harrison's warm eyes.

Harrison's smile bloomed. He reached for Sean's hand and closed his fingers over the ring. "Nothing would please me more."

They eventually got out of bed and took time to wash and shave, but Sean couldn't bear to put on a restrictive business suit after spending luxurious hours naked. Instead, he dressed in one of Harrison's robes—he really must buy himself one—and gazed down at the ring on his finger then out at the early morning view from the bedroom window. The shadows crept back into the alleys and into the bases of the buildings as the sun rose, its bright rays reflecting off the windows, brick, and concrete, as the streets grew busier by the passing minute. Soon, he'd call down to the kitchen for their breakfast, but not just yet. A steady calm flowed through him, one filled with contentment. A comfortable peace he hadn't felt since leaving Eire.

Soft footsteps sounded behind him, and he looked over his shoulder to find Harrison strolling towards him, completely naked, his impressive erection swaying with each long step he took. Sean's heart expanded to fill the room, and still it wouldn't be enough to express how much he loved the handsome, virile man.

"Never hide your perfect body from me." Harrison turned Sean to face him and unfastened his waist tie.

Sean crooked an eyebrow. "I was standin' by the window."

"In all your time looking out, have you ever seen anyone look up to our windows?"

Sean shook his head.

"No." Harrison placed a kiss on Sean's nose. "And that's because they are too busy, caught up in their own lives." He slipped his hands underneath the fabric at Sean's shoulders and pushed off the robe, letting it fall in a golden puddle around Sean's feet. His heated gaze raked up and down Sean's form. "Much better."

Lifting his arms away from his sides, Sean held perfectly still as Harrison drank his fill. He placed his palms on Sean's shoulders and ran them over and down his firm chest muscles, over his nipples, flicking them with his thumbs, causing Sean to arch his chest forward. "Have I ever told you how much I love your freckles and red hair?" Harrison murmured more to himself than Sean as he gripped Sean's sides and ran his hands lower, his thumbs tracking over his

solid abdomen and along his hips. With a sharp jerk, Harrison yanked him forward, clasping Sean tightly to his body.

Harrison's burning gaze bore into Sean. "I'd show you off to the world, if you weren't so worried about proper public behavior." He lowered his face and nuzzled Sean's neck. "People can look, but not touch."

Sean smiled at Harrison's possessive words. "Maybe if we go to the club more often, I might consider it. *If* I get used to the idea. No promises though." He'd enjoyed their outing to the club immensely, and watching Karl and Theo was more arousing than he'd thought possible. He was eager to attend again.

"Really?" Harrison drew back grinning. "I'll make sure we arrange more excursions then. But"—he spun Sean around and moved him closer to the window—"no one will see you from up here."

The window seat blocked Sean from moving too close to the glass, and Harrison didn't seem to expect him to kneel on it, so Sean relaxed in his warm embrace. Harrison wrapped his arms around Sean and rested his cheek alongside his. No one looked up. They were more interested in what was causing the blockage in traffic down the street than what was happening eighteen stories up. The only thing looking at them was a pigeon perched on the ledge before it took off to join a flock flying past. Sean stepped out of Harrison's arms to kneel on the window seat and gaze out. Harrison pressed against his back and ran his hands up and down Sean's arms.

Sean let his head fall back on Harrison's shoulder, smiling as Harrison's hands roamed over his body. He closed his eyes as Harrison's touch wandered lower, combing through Sean's pubic hair and sliding lightly over his cock and balls. Sean wiggled, chasing after those fingers that played him like the piano in the living room.

A stiff rod brushed up and down his crack, and Sean spread his knees apart on the cushion. Harrison stepped closer, sliding his cock in between and hitting the back of Sean's balls. Sean placed his hands on either side of the window frame and stuck out his ass. Harrison gripped one of Sean's hips with his hand and, with the other, grabbed his own cock and teased Sean's hole with the head. Harrison's warm body molded over Sean's back, his mouth up to Sean's ear. "Would you? Here?" Sean turned his face to the right and peered into Harrison's already dilating pupils and nodded. Harrison's mouth dropped open, and his tongue flicked out, wetting his lips.

"Hold that pose. Don't move." Harrison hurried away.

Sean chuckled, Harrison probably went to fetch a towel—he was always neat and tidy. Sean turned back to look out the window at the street below. All those people, and no one saw him or understood him like Harrison did. The way Harrison adored and showered him with kindness and love overwhelmed him. And he returned that love with his whole being. He sent a prayer of thanks to the heavens. Hearing Harrison's footsteps, he looked over his shoulder to see him returning with the small jar and a hand towel which he set on the seat beneath Sean. Next, Harrison wandered over to the bedroom's phonograph to turn on the machine. He pulled out a record from his collection, placed it on the turntable, and dropped the needle in place. A soothing melody filled the room, and Sean closed his eyes momentarily, letting his body feel the soft swaying rhythm of the music. He bit at his lower lip in anticipation, waiting for his lover to join him.

"What's this piece of music called?" Sean asked, once Harrison reached him.

"Pachelbel's Canon." Harrison tapped out a pattern on Sean's back in time with the music.

Sean shivered at the delicate, sure movements. "It's different than the music you used to play."

Harrison peppered kisses over Sean's shoulders then pressed his chest flush against Sean's back. "When you first met me, that music expressed how... lost and melancholy I was. This... this expresses how I feel when I'm with you."

Sean's heart threatened to burst from his chest at the words.

Gentle kisses brushed lightly over his ear. "I love you, Sean. I don't know what I did to deserve you loving me. But I will be grateful to the end of my days."

Sean removed his hands from the window frame and stepped off the seat to turn towards his lover. "And I love you too, Harrison." He poured his heart and love into their kiss.

They broke apart, and Harrison gazed intensely at Sean. "Now I have an important decision to make." A hint of a smile danced around his lips.

"Oh? What's that?" Sean's curiosity was piqued.

"Should I have my wicked way with you first? Or, as I promised at the club, teach you to dance?" Harrison stroked his chin with his fingers, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

“Definitely your wicked way with me, sir.” Sean nodded vigorously.

“Oh, sir is it?” Harrison raised a brow and pinched his lips together, holding back a smile.

“Yes, sir.” Sean winked.

Harrison slapped him playfully on the rear and grinned. “Cheeky Room Service Boy.” He made a twirling motion with his forefinger. “Turn around, knees on the seat, and place your hands on the window frame. If your services are good,” he whispered in Sean’s ear, “I’ll tip you in chocolate cupcakes.”

Never had Sean imagined that a simple gesture of kindness to a man with a broken heart would end with him here, naked, in front of a window, with that very same man, whom he loved with his entire being and who felt the same towards him. Sean threw back his head and laughed with pure joy.

The End

Musical Pieces

Chapter 2: Schubert D 959 Sonata Andantino – (Music on the phonograph)

Chapter 9: Mozart Sonata in C Major, K.330 – (Piece at end of the chapter as Sean leaves penthouse)

Chapter 23: “Blue Swagger” (a song by David Tobin) (1973/3)
– (Used for the private dance scene for Sean)

Epilogue: Pachelbel’s Canon (Canon in D)

Historical Tidbits

Men's undergarments:

[Vintage Dancer](#)

[Collectors Weekly](#)

[mental_floss](#)

[The Story of Men's Underwear](#)

Men's Jimshirts:

[The Advertising Archives 1](#)

[The Advertising Archives 2](#)

Men's Evening Wear:

[The Black Tie Guide](#)

Police vehicles:

[Neatorama](#)

Thieves of Book Row:

[Los Angeles Times](#)

Glossary

Quiff – a cheap prostitute or a promiscuous female

Mick – a derogatory term for an Irishman

Ossified – drunk

Balled up – confused, messed up, a mistake

Fair enough – used to admit that something is reasonable or acceptable.

Hard-on – originated between 1890–95

Author Bio

KC is a writer of Gay Fiction. Her stories are character driven, with a touch of humor, romance, and all the fun that entails. She believes in HEA's, or at least a strong HFN, where the men in her stories must work for their HEA, but in the end get their man. KC loves food and will often incorporate scenes of cooking or eating in the stories she writes. She enjoys relaxing with a good book, her favorite genre being M/M, but she reads many others, such as: Fantasy, Paranormal and Sci-Fi.

KC lives in Northern California with her husband and two rescue birds.

Also by K.C. Faelan:

If At First You Don't Succeed

A Little Christmas Magic

Aligning North

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