The Pirate
by x_art

Summary

What if Pickram got there first?
“Is it possible that he’s fully mad? Half of White Hall whispers it.”

“He’s not mad; he’s just bright, determined, wealthy.”

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Thomas leaned back in his chair and rocked his head from side to side. The pain in his neck, the one that never quite seemed to go away was getting worse. It had to be this new chair and he tested it, hearing the soft squeak and slight crunch. So much for ‘Ergonomically designed, perfect for every body type.’ Idelle had warned him that the brochure was full of it; he should have listened. Of course, it didn’t help that he lived at the office, that he wasn’t getting enough sleep or exercise. He had a mattress that was the perfect level of comfort, access to miles of running trails and a masseuse that knew what she was doing—there really were no excuses.

He sighed and turned back to his laptop to finish the recap. He was staring at the screen without really seeing it when Idelle knocked on the open door. She was dressed for the spring weather in a pink mac, boots and an umbrella. She’d gotten her hair cut and was wearing a new pair of round black glasses. With her aubergine-colored fingernails she looked a bit like a raccoon. A cute, happy raccoon, but still, a raccoon.

“I’m off to Walkers,” she said. “Can I get you anything?”

He smiled. “I’ve eaten already, but thank you.”

She frowned. “‘Eaten already,’ means you ate at eleven which means you ate breakfast at five which means you slept here last night.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“Thomas—”

He raised his hand to hold off the impending lecture. “I know, I know—the project isn’t more important than my health.”

“It’s not.”

“And it’s no good if I’m constantly tired.”

“It really isn’t.”

“And if I were smart, I’d get Whitehall on the phone and give them a piece of my mind.”
“Well,” she shrugged. “It’s not like you’re getting the help you need. Tell them your ‘liaison’…” She actually made air quotes. “…isn’t working out.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll call Whitehall and tell them your—”

“Idelle.” He loved her passion, her fire; if he was a little too tired for both, it wasn’t her fault. “Admiral Hennessey made it quite clear that Lieutenant Pickram is the man for the job; he’s won’t listen.”

She fidgeted with the doorknob; he could see she wanted to say what she’d said months ago when it was clear that Pickram wasn’t working out: ‘Call your father. Let him know what’s going on.’ While he hadn’t gotten angry, it had been there, simmering under his own response, ‘My father can be of no help in this matter; let’s leave it at that.’ Idelle had blushed and hadn’t mentioned Alfred Hamilton again. “I have to work with what I’ve been given. It’s the way it is. Besides, it won’t be forever—he’ll be onto the next assignment by the end of the year at the latest.”

“I understand, but I think if you—”

“Idelle,” he murmured again.

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “Right. Leaving it alone. Minding my own business. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Make it two—I won’t be done with the recap until three or four.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

She nodded and then left, closing the door gently behind her.

Regardless of the exchange, it had been a lucky day for him, the day she’d answered his advert for a, ‘PA with multi-tasking skills, a brain, and a sense of humor; not necessarily in that order.’ She was a little informal, a little nosy, but she was dedicated, discreet and very smart.

He picked up his iPhone and scrolled through the menu that she had organized for him the month before. He found the Walkers entry under ‘TH’s Favs’ and texted:

‘Idelle S on her way for lunch. Charge to my card please.’ He waited a few seconds and received:

‘Got it. Anything for you?’

‘No, thank you. Maybe later.’

He waited again, receiving two emoticons in the shape of a smiley face and a thumbs up. He grinned and sat the mobile on the desk. He liked the staff at Walkers—they treated him like anyone else.

Still smiling, he pulled his laptop closer and picked up where he’d left off: ‘…we must address this issue of income inequality. To ignore it any further is not only morally reprehensible but financially unsound.’

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“Where the hell are you?” he whispered to himself, running his finger over the binder’s spines. The
2012 forecast was here, he knew it. He’d referred to it not three days ago while meeting with—

“Sir?”

He sighed. Speak of the devil.

He turned and pasted on a smile. “Lieutenant Pickram. How are you today?”

Pickram took off his cap. “I’m doing quite well, my lord. And you?”

“The same.”

Pickram was wearing his full uniform, as always. Thomas was never sure if it was meant to be a reminder of Pickram’s status or that he thought he looked good in it. Probably the latter.

The son of a minor civil servant, Pickram was thirty-eight, fair-haired and very much on the make. During the first week, Thomas had suggested that Pickram needn’t dress so formally. Pickram had given him a smile that had bordered on servility and said it was his pleasure. ‘Whatever that meant,’ Thomas had thought at the time. He soon realized what it meant.

He’d long recognized that his looks and status were great draws for social climbers. He’d always thought it a bit sad and had dismissed the few that had tried by ignoring them.

Pickram was another sort altogether.

In the beginning, Pickram had thrown out subtle hints that he’d be more than willing to transition their working relationship to something more intimate. He’d suggested post-work drinks, late-night work dinners and once, using the excuse of needing quiet, he had suggested going to his place because it wouldn’t be quite so noisy. Thomas had schooled his expression and carefully not looked around the large, soundproofed office suite that was meant to hold twenty and politely declined.

Eventually, Pickram got the message, but it was still there: a subtle emphasis on certain words when he spoke, a gleam in his eye when he glanced at Thomas.

Idelle knew, of course. She’d overheard the ‘let’s go to my place,’ invitation and had urged him to fire Pickram. He hadn’t wanted to downplay the very real problem of workplace sexual harassment, but it was ridiculous and more than a little embarrassing. If he was going to be harassed, he’d told Idelle, he wished it could be by someone a little more imposing and better looking than Pickram. Idelle had giggled about that all afternoon.

He smiled at the memory and Pickram answered with his own.

“Up all night?” Pickram said with only a hint of a leer.

“I worked until two, so not all night.” His reputation had been set in stone at Eton after two very public instances of what his headmaster had termed, ‘regrettable hijinks.’ He’d never been able to live them down. Or, sadly, live them up. His life, while not boring, certainly wasn’t the go-all-night and sleep-all-day variety that Pickram seemed to think it was. “Have you seen the 2012 Forecast of the FSC? I was sure it was here somewhere.”

Pickram came up behind him, standing too close. “If I may…” He reached around Thomas and drew out a slim binder from behind the much larger consolidated FSC reports. Silently, he handed it to Thomas. “If it were a snake,” he said softly.

Thomas took the binder, wishing he were the kind of man that used physical violence to solve his
problems. A well-placed jab to Pickram’s gut would feel good right about now. But he wasn’t so he couldn’t and he just said evenly, “Thank you.” He waited; after a moment, Pickram went and sat down on the other side of the desk.

Thomas sat down, as well, and opened the folder and leafed through the pages. “Did you get the figures I requested?”

“I did, though I don’t see how they will help.”

“On their own, they wouldn’t but as part of a combined whole?” he said absently, glancing up. Pickram was pushing his iPhone across the table so that Thomas could see the screen. “I thought we agreed not to use our mobiles for important communications?”

Pickram smiled. “It was just this once.”

“That’s what you said two weeks ago.”

“My lord,” Pickram sighed. “None of this is top secret; what’s the point?”

“The point is that while none of it is top secret, communications between Ms. Guthrie, her contact, and this office are sensitive. If her father finds out that she’s helping us, he’ll do whatever he can to stop her. He’s done it before; he can do it again.”

“My lord—”

He closed the binder. “I have been working on this for the better part of five years, David; longer if you consider the work I put in during university. I don’t want all that work, all our work, to be for nothing because you left your mobile at a restaurant or pub. It’s no exaggeration to say that lives hang in the balance.”

When Pickram didn’t answer, Thomas added gently, “As soon as we’ve presented the project to the committee, then we can relax the rules a bit.”

His tone was too conciliatory and Pickram smiled as if he’d been given a gift. “I’m sorry, my lord. I’ll transfer the data to a more secure device.”

He raised his eyebrow expectantly.

After a moment, Pickram said, “Which I’ll do now?”

“Yes, please.”

Pickram picked up his mobile. “I’ll have it formatted and printed out within the hour.”

“Thank you.” He shook his head as he watched Pickram’s shadow through the frosted glass. That was a mistake, being soft—he should know better.

His mobile buzzed and he picked it up. It was a text from Idelle:

‘back from lunch. everything OK? P-ram looks happy’

‘P-ram’—he loved the nickname. ‘He is; stupid me.’ He could almost see her sigh on the next message:

‘:( TH’
He grinned. ‘See? Stupid.’

‘forget him. come see what i bought you.’

‘Idelle.’

‘come see.’

He put the phone down and went out and down the long hall to the reception area. Idelle’s desk, as usual, was covered with papers, toys and various travel mugs. She would bring one in each day, then forget it at night. Eventually, she’d take them all home, wash them only to start the process all over the next day. One time he counted as many as seven mugs on her desk.

Today, there were only three and he picked up one as he sat down. “I told you to stop buying me things. I can’t raise your salary any more.” The mug was silver and on the side were the words, ‘Keep Calm and Hug Your Boss.’ He smiled and raised it in a salute. “Cute.”

“You better believe it,” she answered, not meaning the mug, adding before he could comment, “And I like buying you things. You don’t have enough people buying you things.”

“That’s because I don’t need anything.” Being wealthy had its downsides but being able to live well wasn’t one of them; he hated when Idelle spent her hard-earned money on him. He sat the mug down because she was waiting with an expectant smile. “Well, let’s have it.”

She pulled a brown paper-wrapped box out of her purse and gave it to him.

He took it reluctantly and untied the string. It was a black, unmarked jewelry box. He opened it up, almost dreading what he would see. Last time she’d bought him a watch she couldn’t afford. He’d insisted she return it and after words that almost became a fight, she had. She hadn’t spoken to him for days after until he’d gently explained why he wanted her to save her money.

This time it wasn’t a watch, it was two silver-colored discs. Their edges were cracked and they were shaped into rough circles. He picked one up and held it to the light. The surface was marked in the middle with a cross, a tiny palm tree and something that looked like a dragon and he bent closer. It wasn’t a dragon but a lion with one paw raised. “They’re reales. Spanish reales.”

Idelle had gotten up and was leaning over the desk. She pointed to the figure. “That’s the lion of Spain, representing King Phillip the Third. These were minted in or before 1622. They were part of a treasure fleet that wrecked off the coast of Panama. Aren’t they amazing?”

“I gather that’s what the seller told you,” he murmured absently. “I hope you weren’t scammed.”

“I wasn’t,” she assured him. “They came with a certificate but forget that: test the weight—you can almost feel the history.”

He picked up the other coin. She was right—they were too heavy, too worn to be anything but real. “Were they expensive?”

“Less than you’d think; I wanted to get you a gold doubloon from 1702 that was part of a haul taken by Blackbeard, but knew you’d scream.”

He smiled because he would have. “Where did you buy them?”

“At a shop near the Olde Rose on Bell Yard. He’s been there for years.”
“The Olde Rose has been there for years?”

She snorted and hit his arm. “The coin man. He’s been there for years. I saw these in the window and knew you had to have them. Just imagine,” she breathed, reaching out to touch one of the coins. “Almost four hundred years ago, these were packed into crates and loaded onto ships to make the long voyage from South America to Spain. And then, bam, out of nowhere, a storm comes up and all the treasure is gone.”

A shiver ran across the back of his neck at her words and he could almost see it—the ship tossed about under a black sky, men running here and there while the captain shouted orders, all trying to forestall the inevitable as the ship was pushed towards a rocky shore… “You should write a book.”

“After all your stories about the West Indies, I’m thinking about it. I’m in love with pirates, too.”

He straightened up, the mood broken. “I’m not in love with pirates.”

She sat back down, grinning unrepentantly. “Who has a bookshelf full of books on piracy and the West Indies?”

He raised his hand.

“Who collects old Caribbean maps?”

He kept his hand up but added a smile.

“See, and who can blame you? They’re so cool!”

He put the reales in their case and stood up. “Okay, back to work and Idelle?” He held the case up. “Thank you for these.”

Her smile was so broad, one would have thought she’d just won the National Lottery. “De nada, boss.”

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He spent the rest of the afternoon trying to work without much success. Pickram had delivered his data as promised but he’d been right—it hadn’t helped other than to underscore the general problem: lack of real world knowledge as to the issues at hand. It was all well and good to talk about solving a problem but nothing much could happen if the problem stubbornly refused to be defined.

At a few minutes before five, he gave up and closed his laptop. He stretched, forcing the chair back, then sat there for a moment, staring up at the ceiling. Without looking, he picked up the black box. He opened it and got out one of the coins.

Four hundred years old. Almost as old as his family. Odd to think one of his ancestors might have handled a coin very much like it. His how-ever-many-great, great uncle had emigrated to the States in the 1700s; he would have used Spanish reales as common currency back then and maybe that currency would have been in circulation because of a pirate.

Idelle had been right. While he’d argue to his dying breath that he wasn’t in love with pirates, he was certainly fascinated by them. They’d controlled such a large empire for a relatively long period of time. And given that they’d had no internal structure and no leaders, they’d been very successful. Popular culture said that pirates were murderers and thieves and while that was certainly true, they had been so much more than that. They’d thrown off the rules of society and—for better or worse—lived the way they wanted, lived the life they wanted.
He picked up the other coin and held them together, imagining how it would be to chuck it all—the title, the money and property, the status. Would it make a difference? Would he even be able to?

“What is that?”

He jumped, sitting up so quick the coins flew out of his hand. “You startled me.”

“Sorry.” Pickram bent and picked up the coins, examining them. “Where’d you get these?”

“I bought them,” he said, the lie coming easily. He out his hand. “In that shop by the Olde Rose.”

Pickram returned the coins, clearly disinterested. “Speaking of, I was just heading over there. Would you like to join me?”

The coins were cool and heavy in the palm of his hand. He meant to give his standard excuse, ‘Not tonight; I’m too busy,’ shocked when he heard himself say, “I think I will, but just for a while.”

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Idelle started texting the moment he and Pickram exited the building. He took one look at her frantic, ‘are you drugged? should i call 999?’ and answered, casually hiding the screen so Pickram couldn’t see, ‘Of course not. Have a good wknd.’ And then, hesitating for a split second, he turned the mobile off. Hopefully, she’d trust him and not do something rash like follow them to the pub.

“So,” Pickram said, nodding to the mobile as they turned up Temple Avenue. “I’ve never asked. Has Idelle been with you long?”

Oh, God—chitchat. Well, it was his own fault. He could have lied and gone somewhere else, anywhere else and he touched the coins in his pocket as if they were a talisman. “I hired her right before you were brought in.” He looked up; the sky was the usual dark grey which meant rain sooner or later.

“She’s a bit of a character.”

“She’s a love.”

“She’s very protective of you.”

He smiled. “She is.” There were very few people about but it was early yet; in an hour the streets would be crowded.

“I thought at first that you two were a thing.”

“No, we’re not a thing.”

“Because she comes on a little strong, doesn’t she?”

They were approaching Tudor Street; a girl on a bicycle rode by, her scarf fluttering in the breeze. “I think she fancies herself a cross between Captain America and Miss Moneypenny. I’m sure if I were kidnapped or put in danger, she’d be overjoyed.”

“She sounds mental.”

He turned and looked at Pickram. “I only meant she’s a rescuer. She took in an eleven-year old dog and a kitten only last month.” He should have never opened his mouth; trust Pickram to view someone like Idelle as ‘mental.’ “Did Miss Guthrie get in touch with you?”
If Pickram knew it was a change of subject, he gave no notice. “No, why? Were you expecting her to?”

They were at the corner and could either go straight or turn onto Temple Lane. Thomas nodded to the right and said, “This way.” He loved this road—narrow and paved with brick, the sound of their footsteps echoed against the walls of the buildings. It was like walking through an open cave. “Actually, I’m hoping for a visit. She said she had news that she wanted to deliver in person.”

“Really?”

“Mm-mm. She has business in Boston and then here in London. She said she was going to ring you to make the arrangements.”

Pickram shrugged. “I haven’t heard from her. She doesn’t strike me as terribly dependable.”

He stopped in his tracks at that. “Eleanor? I’ve never found her to be anything but.”

“What about her venture with that man, Vane—that was hardly successful.”

He was angry, now, but he cooled his temper with a soft, “Eleanor may make a few wrong-headed decisions but she means well. And that ‘venture,’ as you put it created hundreds of new jobs as well as opened up a dialogue with some of the money-men we’ve been unable to reach.” He started walking again. “She has done remarkably well, considering she’s gotten no help from her local government or ours.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you. It’s just that I, like Idelle, hate to see you taken advantage of.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Maybe Idelle was right, maybe it was time to cut Pickram loose and go it alone. Or get someone else. The damnable thing was that he needed the buy-in from the military—without it, his plan had little hope of success. “I’ve an idea,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Let not talk about work.”

With no hesitation, Pickram nodded. “Fine by me.”

They’d reached Fleet Street and finally, here was traffic, both auto and foot. Thomas sidestepped a twenty-something man pulling a rolling rucksack and a woman with striking blue hair who was talking a mile a minute to someone named Richard.

“It appears everyone has the same idea as us,” Pickram said, walking too close.

“It’s the end of the day.”

The pub was only few meters away but a tour bus had stopped at the curb and passengers streamed out, all carrying cameras. They were Germans by the look of them and they surrounded Thomas, pushing him into Pickram. It was an awkward moment made more awkward when Pickram put his hand on the small of Thomas’s back. Not wanting to cause a scene, he used the momentum of the tourists to pull free of Pickram’s loose embrace and then he was through the crowd and through the door of the pub.

“Fucking tourists,” Pickram muttered under his breath. “I should go back out there and tell them who they were shoving.”
He smoothed his hair while he looked around. “You will do no such thing.” The pub was packed with blue-suited men and women; almost every table was taken. “They wouldn’t care, in any case and why should they?”

“My lord—”

“Not here, Pickram.” He edged around a group of five near the bar. “Do you see an empty table?”

“I’ve got that covered.”

He turned and dodged a waiter with a full tray of drinks. “You do?”

“Some of my old friends are here—they’ll be in the back.”

‘Old friends’ could only mean military which could mean any manner of things but he didn’t care as he moved out of the way of a couple that were heading for the door, focused on each other and nothing else. He wanted a drink and he wanted to be out of the line of fire. “Lead the way.”

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Stepping from the front room to the back was like stepping into a different world and he actually sighed in relief. He saw Pickram’s friends immediately, seven in all, sitting at a round table to the right. They were a mixed bunch: as many women as men and different races. Two of the men were dressed as formally as Pickram; the others were not. Just by looking at them, however, he could tell they were military—they had that air.

“I’ll get our drinks,” Thomas said, “why don’t you find us a seat.” He got out his wallet.

“I’ll take a pint of Fosters,” Pickram said.

He nodded and made his way to the end of the bar, edging between two men with a, “Pardon me.” The barkeep saw him immediately and gave him a short nod.

Having to wait wasn’t such a bad thing; he rested his elbow on the bar and looked around. He’d been coming to the Olde Rose for years and it hadn’t changed much. Same dark wood floors, same dark red seat and booth upholstery. It did have, he thought, a new mirror behind the bar and as he examined it, he became aware that someone was watching him. He looked around, finding his watcher with ease.

It was a man, standing at the bar some five meters away. He was in his late thirties or early forties and had slicked-back hair that fell to his shoulders. Unlike most of the crowd, he was wearing a black leather jacket and black V-neck jumper. Surrounded by the sea of blue as he was, the man seemed a pillar of solitude, like an inverse lighthouse. It was a strange sight, made stranger by the fact that the man was staring at him as if he were a long-lost, not necessarily friendly, friend.

“Sir?”

He jerked. It was the barkeep, wiping his hands on a towel.

“Sorry,” Thomas said. “I’ll have a pint of Fosters and…” He hesitated, then mentally shrugged. “And a Captain Morgan’s Dark.”

“Very good.”

The barkeep went off to get the drinks and Thomas quickly looked down the bar. The man was still
there, but his gaze was now turned to the mirror.

Unaccountably disappointed, Thomas paid for the drinks, then picked them up. When he got to the table, Pickram quickly made the introductions, listing the names so fast that Thomas heard only ‘Charlotte,’ and ‘Dooley.’ “He looks like shit,” Pickram added, taking the pint from Thomas.

Thomas frowned. “I’m assuming you’re talking about someone else?”

Pickram smiled. “Sorry. It’s just that someone we all know and hate just walked in.”

“I can’t believe he has the nerve,” one of the men muttered. “After all he’s done.”

“Nothing was proven,” Charlotte whispered. “The inquiry said there was no foul play.”

“It didn’t need to be ‘proven,’” the man said. “He did it. We all know he did.”

Thomas took a sip of the rum; it went down smoothly, the heat of it blooming in his belly. “Who are we talking about?” he asked, not really having to. With a strange prescience, he knew what the answer would be.

“That bastard over at the bar, McGraw,” Pickram said with a jerk of his head. “The one wearing the black leather coat. Look at him: standing there as if he hadn’t a care in the world.”

Thomas was facing the bar and it took no effort to turn his head. McGraw, was still at the bar but standing straight as if at attention. Thomas wanted to point that out, wanted to say, ‘Are you serious? He’s anything but carefree.’ He kept his thoughts to himself, only asking, “What did he do?”

Pickram fielded that, saying, “He killed one of our mates, a captain by the name of Hume.”

“What happened?”

Pickram leaned forward but Charlotte got there first. “It was a crime of passion,” she said. “Hume was having an affair with his girlfriend and he killed them both. See,” she dropped her voice and Thomas had to bend close to hear. “McGraw was dating this woman and he found out she was seeing Hume. He followed them one night and confronted them. When Hume fought back, McGraw drew his service weapon and shot Hume. Only he missed and killed Miranda by mistake. Hume went after him again, only this time McGraw didn’t miss.”

The world had suddenly stilled and he asked through dry lips, “When did all this take place?”

“Almost four years ago. It was in all the papers.”

2013. The year of so many changes. “And her name was Miranda?”

Charlotte nodded. “Miranda Barlow of the—”

“Derbyshire Barlows,” he interrupted softly, staring down at his drink. “The only daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Bellingham.”

No one at the table said anything for a moment, then Pickram murmured, “You knew her?”

“I did. We grew up together.”

Pickram put his hand on Thomas’s arm. “My lord—”

Thomas pulled free and downed his drink. He stood up. “I forgot I’ve a conference call with Admiral
Hennessey at seven,” he said, not bothering to make the lie seem plausible. “I’ll see you on Monday, Lieutenant.” With a vacant nod to Pickram’s friends, he left them. He chose a side path through the tables so as to avoid the bar but it didn’t matter—he knew that McGraw had turned and was watching him leave, his gaze now hard as stone.

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He decided the walk would do him good and he went the long way. It was after eight by the time he got home. He tossed his keys in the ceramic bowl and locked the door.

He ignored the kitchen and any idea of dinner, choosing instead another drink, this one bourbon. He poured a measure, drank it, then poured another. He went to the balcony doors and pulled them open, welcoming the cold air, the sounds of London at night. He sat down in a chair and loosened his tie.

When he was finally comfortable and could feel the buzz brought on by the bourbon, he tipped his head back and sighed.

Four years. Sometimes it felt like a lifetime, sometimes it felt like a week. For so long, missing Miranda had been his occupation, one he’d applied himself to with grim dedication until he’d realized that she would have been the first one to say, ‘Thomas, enough.’

She’d been his biggest champion, encouraging him on when he’d gotten overwhelmed at the scope of the project. But, that had been their dynamic from the very beginning, the give and take of true friends. Even now, he could so clearly remember the late nights in his rooms, at various pubs—the arguments and the laughter because above all, Miranda had liked to laugh.

Even that day at school when their relationship had altered and matured, she’d kept her sense of humor and he closed his eyes, remembering…

…it had been a typical late spring day at Cambridge: a sky so blue it hurt one’s eyes, broad green lawns and students everywhere. He’d been nursing a hangover from the May Ball but determined not to show it. He’d met up with Miranda near the Mathematical Bridge and they had strolled along the Cam together.

He suggested a rest in the shade; they’d settled on the grass and watched the passersby. With the graduation ceremonies coming up, there were as many parents out and about as there were students. His parents, of course, weren’t among the crowd. They were too busy to attend, his father with his politics and his mother with her charities. He didn’t mind, though—their presence would have been an added distraction and he didn’t need any more of those.

He rested his arms on his bent knees and absently frowned at the river. He’d planned this whole thing, what he’d do, what he’d say but now that he was here, moments away, he wasn’t sure he could go through with it.

“Is it that bad?” Miranda asked.

He smiled down at her and reached for her hand. She was wearing a summer dress and the yellow of it set off her tanned skin and brown eyes. She was so beautiful. “When you’re with me, it’s never that bad.”

She smirked at his compliment, then said, “Seriously, what is it? I would have thought you’d want to spend the day in bed after the night you had.”

He grimaced. “Don’t tell me; I don’t want to know.”
She squeezed his hand and then let go. “You were gorgeous, as always, and you know it. The girls couldn’t keep their hands off you.” She hesitated, then said with a smile. “The boys, too.”

It was too close to the bone, that remark, and he deflected easily, “I waited all night to get you alone.”

“I was there, remember? You could have come over.”

“With your friends surrounding you the entire time, never mind Peter?” He hadn’t realized he’d been so put out by that. “What did you two talk about, anyway?”

He’d striven for a casual tone, but Miranda gave him a sharp, rueful smile. “What do we always talk about? You, of course.”

“Thus, the most tedious conversation in the world.”

“Thomas,” she said, sitting up. “What’s wrong?”

He glanced out at the Cam. An Indian family was walking along the shore and he had to squint against the woman’s bright orange sari. He should have worn his sunglasses. “I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

Drawing on courage gained over sixteen years of friendship, he took her hand again. “Miranda, you know how much I care for you, yes?”

“I do.”

“The thing is, I’ll done be done in a year and then I have a choice to make.”

“You haven’t changed your mind about Sierra Leone, have you?”

He shook his head firmly. “Of course not. I’m more determined than ever to go.”

“Then what is it?”

He couldn’t look at her. “I know you’ve had run-ins with Father, I know you don’t like him very well. But the thing is…” He was repeating himself and that wasn’t good. “I want you to go with me. You know the situation in Sierra Leone. You know what the people are facing. With your teaching experience, we could open up a school or maybe schools while I help with the recovery.” He glanced up. “Please say yes.”

“Thomas,” she said very quietly, “are you asking me to marry you?”

He’d made a mess of the whole thing, forgetting the most important part and he sighed, “I am. I love you and want to marry you.”

She said nothing for the longest time. And then she squeezed his hand so hard it hurt. “No.”

It was a blow, but not, he realized slowly, completely unexpected. “May I ask why?”

She pulled free and wrapped her arms around her knees. “You know why, Thomas. We both know why.”

There it was, out in the open. He wanted to be sick. Or storm off, both of which were impossible
because she was right and he couldn’t tell if the feeling in his chest was from relief or grief. “I love you.”

“I know you do, just as you know that I love you. But I won’t be used that way and I won’t let you hide.”

He looked up at her. She was watching with a kind but steely gaze. “I’m not hiding, Miranda.”

“What about your parents? What about Peter?”

“What about him?” The question was out before he could think to stop it.

“That lie you told me after we got back from the Michaelmas break last year,” she said quietly. “You two went on holiday together but you told me you spent it with your parents on Barbados.” When he didn’t answer, she added, “If you’re lying to me, your closest friend, I’m assuming you’re lying to your father.”

He picked a blade of grass and ran the length of it over his palm. “I’ve tried to talk to him—he manages to change the conversation every time.”

“Typical.”

Unable not to, he smiled. He felt odd, light, almost like he’d felt after he’d gone skydiving for the first time, as if his body weighed no more than his soul. “I’ll pass on your regards.”

“Too bad you can’t pass on something more appropriate. Like the bubonic plague.”

He laughed, albeit shakily, and held out his arms. In a heartbeat she was against him, returning his embrace with the whole of herself. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” And he didn’t—he’d never cared about what people thought of him. At least, that’s what he’d told himself when he’d come to terms that he was gay. Maybe his indifference had been more bluster than fact.

“You were thinking of your mother and her constant request for grandchildren. You were thinking that as much as you despise normalcy, there’s something to be said for living like everyone else.”

“Next time I have an attack, hit me over the head until I regain my senses.”

“Okay,” she said, doing as he requested, leaning back to give him a soft blow that made them both laugh out loud…

…he sighed. Unlike most of his other schoolmates, he and Miranda had never lost touch.

She’d met him at Ashbourne the week after graduation when he’d gone to talk to his father. She’d stayed on the terrace while he told his parents why they wouldn’t be getting grandchildren any time soon. It hadn’t been nearly as bad as he’d imagined. His father had shouted for a few minutes but his mother had just nodded sadly, as if she’d long expected the conversion. Still, it had been a relief to find Miranda waiting for him with a drink and open arms.

She’d helped him move into his first flat after he’d gotten his master’s and was finally done with university. She’d needed the distraction, she’d said, to get over a boyfriend that had proved to be, ‘the disappointment of the century. I will never date an ex-Divinity man again.”

He’d been there for her when she told her parents that as much as she appreciated them footing the bill for her business degree, she wanted to do more and had decided to go back to university to get
her teaching degree. Thomas had listened in small sitting room while Miranda’s parents tried to change her mind, telling her that such a career might seem noble but wasn’t worth it. She’d been firm and when she came to get him, she was practically glowing.

She’d been his sounding board when he’d made the decision to shift his attention from Sierra Leone to the British Virgin Islands, when he’d decided that after years of working within shouting distance of his father, he had to isolate himself, if only geographically, and needed a separate office even though he really couldn’t afford it.

He missed her so very much. He’d never gotten the chance to say goodbye.

She’d rang him before her death, talking a mile a minute, so happy, so eager for him to, ‘meet James because I know you’ll love him as I do. He’s a Lieutenant in the Navy and even though he just turned thirty-three, he’s done so much already. He was just given a medal for something that I can’t quite remember right now but he’ll be in town on Tuesday and we’re going on holiday right after to Nassau if you can believe it, so now is your chance. I haven’t said anything as I wasn’t sure if he was the one, but now I know. Please say you’ll come meet us…’

What would have happened if he’d met her as she’d asked instead of putting her off? He’d just opened the office and had been struggling with the bare bones of what was to become his plan. Would she still be alive? Would meeting McGraw have somehow changed her fate in some small way?

After her funeral, he’d made sure that his parents were away on one of their endless holidays, then gone home to Ashbourne. He’d shut himself away from the paparazzi and grieved privately, allowing himself the space of seven days to forget everything but her. It had taken him weeks to get up the nerve to read the news and by then, the story had been relegated to one-paragraph updates. All he learned was that her death had been ruled an accident, that James McGraw had been found not guilty but had been dismissed from the Royal Navy and had fled England in shame.

And now, it seemed, McGraw was back, doing whatever people like him did.

He should be angry to the point of fury that McGraw had returned. He should be on his mobile to his contacts at MI6 to inquire as to why such a dangerous person was walking the streets of London. At the very least, he should want to confront McGraw and demand an explanation because even if he hadn’t been the cause of Miranda’s death, he’d put her in a vulnerable position.

But he remembered McGraw’s expression—not quite shock and not quite fear, but definitely recognition.

He finished his drink and went back inside. He fixed dinner and sat in front of the television to watch the news. At ten, he washed his dishes and caught up on email. It was only after seeing the two messages from Idelle that he remembered he’d turned his mobile off. Swearing under his breath, he turned it back on—there were five texts, ranging from anxiety to full-blown worry, the last sent ten minutes ago.

‘Sorry,’ he texted, ‘Forgot to turn it back on. Am fine.’

She answered immediately: ‘Whew. had visions of you being kidnapped’

‘Nothing like that. Sorry again.’

‘No problemo’

He tossed the mobile down, then rubbed his face. He had a day’s worth of work to get through
before Monday but he was suddenly too tired. He set the alarm, then went to bed.

He was getting undressed when he heard a dull jangle and he remembered. He fished the coins out of his pocket.

He wasn’t so impressed by the years—practically anywhere one stepped in London was much older. No, it was the fact that the coins were a direct connection to the history he’d been researching, the history he hoped to be a part of. The Virgin Islands, along with all the other islands in the Caribbean, had such a colorful, violent past.

He placed the coins on the chest of drawers, side by side, and got ready for bed.

***

The following week went by in a flash, filled with meetings, Skype calls and two trips to Whitehall. It was business as usual and quite a good week given that Pickram had finally gotten the data from Whitehall that he’d been promising for months. At the end of each day, however, Thomas found himself worn out as if he’d spent the hours at the fitness center instead of carefully detailing the first part of his proposal.

He knew why he was depressed. Over the years, other things had reminded him of Miranda and he knew the leftover sadness would pass. He just needed to give it time.

There was one thing that made him happy, however—Pickram announced he was to leave Friday morning, off to do a week long series of naval exercises in the North Sea. It was reason to celebrate and at noon, Thomas closed his laptop.

He stretched his arms over his head, thinking of the coming weekend. He’d work on the proposal, maybe take a drive to the country. There was a bank holiday on Monday; he could close the office completely and work from home. Other than the latest report from Eleanor, he had most of what he needed. Besides, Idelle deserved a bit of a rest—her grandmother was in hospital and she’d visiting every day after work.

Wondering if she’d squeal or shout, he tapped the intercom. “Are you around?”

Her reply was immediate, “Just cleaning out my email.”

He winced; his own inbox was over two thousand messages—that was another thing he’d take care of next week. “I was thinking that with the holiday coming up, we should close for the week.”

It was neither a shout nor a squeal but a loud, “Woohoo!”

He winced again, this time smiling. “I take it that’s a yes?”

“You take it right.”

“Then finish what you’re doing and go enjoy yourself.”

“Boss, you are the best!”

“Don’t call me boss.”

“Will do.” There was a pause and then she said absently, “I’m forwarding my mail. Don’t forget; the caterers will arrive at five-thirty to set up for your party.”

He’d given up trying to convince her that his monthly meetings with his group were hardly a party.
“I won’t.”

“I confirmed that the caterer is sending three people, not five like last time. They wanted to know if you had any special requests.”

“The same as always.”

“No coriander,” she intoned as she always did. “They won’t even use it; it’s the Italian Spring thing, remember?”

“I do, but Lord Philpot hates it and I want him happy when I present the next part of my proposal.”

“Nutter,” she muttered and then, “Sorry, but who hates coriander? It’s delicious.”

He smiled though she couldn’t see. “Go on, take off and I’ll see you a week from Monday.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice. Enjoy your Pickram-free week.”

“You, too.” He hung up, then rose. He began to pack up his notes and reports, mind only half on what he was doing. He stopped.

It had been almost ten months since his last real holiday. He’d given Idelle a week off here and there but hadn’t done the same for himself and he was suddenly tired of work, tired of trying to push an agenda no one seemed to want. His proposal would work, he knew it, but he wanted a break. A few days off from everything BVI related would be a good thing.

He leaned over the desk and tapped the speaker button. “You still there?”

“I am.”

“Do me a favor—email my group and tell them something has come up.”

This time she squealed. “You’re taking a holiday, too?”

“I am.”

“Finally!”

She was typing quickly—he could hear it over the intercom. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Do you want me to ring the property manager?”

“No, but email the Securitech and ask them to keep an eye out on the office. You better let the cleaning people know, too.”

“Will do. What about the caterer?”

“They, as well.”

“George will charge you for the cancellation.”

“I know. Tell him it’s unavoidable. Add a generous tip for the staff.”

“And the plant people?”

“Tell them we’ll be gone but make sure they remember not to water the ficus.” He glanced at the tree in the corner by the window; it was decidedly yellow. “They can get a key from the manager.”
“Will do,” she said absently. “Lord Dunster’s man already replied—he says it’s just as well; his mum is in a clinic for a procedure. I bet ‘procedure’ is actually code for Botox. I’ll send flowers, anyway.”

“Good thinking.”

She didn’t answer for a moment, then said, “I’ve received responses from the Lords Form and Philpott, and Lady Sutton. Lady Sutton’s manager is the only one that seems put out. We both know why that is.”

He did know. Elizabeth Sutton always brought her second-in-command to the meetings, a woman by the name of Alice. Alice was nice enough but she was clearly on the lookout for a husband and thought Thomas’s group the perfect hunting ground. “She’ll get over her disappointment and no, don’t send her flowers.”

“As if.” There was a slight pause. “Lord Lewis just replied so that makes all of them. We also have an okay from Beauclerc at Securitech. He says he’ll let his people know.”

“Then go—have a nice week.”

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By the time he’d wrapped everything up, it was after five.

Outside, the clouds had cleared away and the sky was actually blue. The falling sun glanced through the tall buildings, gilding the edges with varying shades of gold.

He set off, strolling with no thought, navigating absently around the never ending construction. However, when he got to the corner of Tallis and Temple, he found himself going right instead of left. He wandered north, still in that pleasant state brought on by nothing to do and nowhere to be.

It was only when he was approaching Fleet Street that he realized where he was going and he smiled ruefully. He should have known better; he had, after all, thought of both James McGraw and the antiquities shop more than a few times over the last few days.

Bell Yard Antiquities faced the Ministry of Justice buildings and was tucked in between a dentist and a property developer. He’d only done a cursory search and was expecting something dark and gothic, finding instead a small shop, neatly painted a soft white.

A bit disappointed, he opened the door and went in.

Now, here was his gothic atmosphere and he looked around in appreciation at the dark paneled walls and the subtle lighting. The right side of the shop was lined with bookshelves while the left side held glass-fronted display cases. He went to the nearest and bent over it.

“May I help you?”

He glanced up. A gnome of a man stood in the threshold to the back room. He was wearing jeweler’s glasses and wiping his hands on a cloth. “Hello,” Thomas said. “My assistant purchased two silver coins for me the other day and I—”

“The treasure from the Encarnación, captained by the Marqués de Breunes, sailing from Cartagena in 1681,” the man interrupted, coming forward. “The Encarnación was part of the Flota de Tierra Firme, a Spanish treasure fleet. They got caught in a storm and were ordered to weigh anchor. Most managed to sail free but for an unknown reason, the Encarnación wasn’t able to break free of the tide. She was dashed against the coastal rocks and split apart. All except for three men died that day,
Thomas listened hard, almost spellbound. The man’s voice was soft, hypnotic, with a decent Spanish accent. “Who discovered the treasure?”

“A team of American archeologists from the University of Texas found her four—” The man hesitated, head cocked, then added wryly. “No, it was five years ago now.”

The man gestured, guiding Thomas to a map on the wall. It was a beautiful Dutch map of the Caribbean islands, made in 1633. “They were looking for one of Captain Morgan’s ships, you see, and found the Encarnación instead. Except for the damage to her hull, she was in amazing condition. The archeologists found tools, horseshoes, even cloth from the New World. My name is Povey. What is your interest in the Encarnación?”

Spell broken, Thomas straightened up and held out his hand. “Thomas. I’m doing research on the Caribbean islands and—”

Once again, he was interrupted, “You’re Lord Thomas Alfred Hamilton and your research is actually an attempt to return the governing of Tortola to the people of Tortola.”

Thomas stilled. Other than Whitehall and the Admiralty Board, no one knew of his plan. “How did you know?”

“I told him,” came a low voice, again from the rear of the shop.

Thomas turned. It only took a second for him to realize who was standing in the doorway but that second lasted a lifetime as his mind caught up with his eyes.

James McGraw. Wearing the same black jacket, a pair of black trousers and a white shirt that seemed to glow in the dim light. He had a single gold earring in his left ear and two heavy rings on his right hand. He’d tied his hair back and the sharp ‘V’ of his forehead set off his face, giving him a devilish look.

“And why would you tell a complete stranger my business?” Thomas asked. Before McGraw could speak, he added harshly, “And how do you even know my business? Who the hell are you?”

“I understood you knew each other.” Povey said.

“We do not,” Thomas said, unable to look away from McGraw. “I believe we have a mutual friend, however.”

McGraw’s throat worked. “Had. We had a mutual friend.”

He smiled, feeling a cool shell settle of his heart, his body. “No thanks to you.”

“Whatever you think you know, my lord, I can assure you, you don’t.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

McGraw stepped forward. Later, Thomas wondered what might have happened if it weren’t that another person came from the back room. Again, surprise held his tongue for a moment that felt too long. “Eleanor?”

Her eyes widened. “Thomas?” She edged by McGraw and hurried forward. She gave Thomas a brief hug, then stepped back. “What the hell are you doing here?” She turned to McGraw. “Did I
interrupt something?"

“No,” he said, glancing at McGraw. “I stopped in to look at some coins.” He’d only met Eleanor twice in person and, as always, was taken by her beauty. Other than the cursory background check he’d performed at his father’s request, the only thing he knew of her was that her family had come to Tortola in the 17th century and that she was smart, resourceful and had a mouth like a sailor.

“This is the place I was telling you about.” She turned to indicate Povey. “Mr. Povey is the antiquarian that is helping me authenticate the documents.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then shook her head. “Wait; you don’t know about the documents, do you?” She looked up at him with a bright smile. “It’s going to change everything for us, Thomas.”

“Either that or it’s going to land us in prison,” McGraw said, joining them.

Eleanor turned her smile on McGraw. “You’re too cynical—this will work. But, I’ve forgotten my manners.” She gestured to McGraw and then back to Thomas. “James Flint, meet Lord Thomas Hamilton. Lord Thomas Hamilton, James Flint. James is the man that has been helping me with your project.”

Automatically, Thomas had held out his hand when he heard again, ‘Flint’, not ‘McGraw.’ So, the man he’d hired by default was the man who’d had a hand in Miranda’s death not to mention, a liar.

McGraw’s grip was cool and strong but there was an odd look in his eye. It came to him that McGraw was waiting to be found out, waiting for Thomas’s declaration that he wasn’t who he said he was.

He tightened his grip and said evenly, “Good to meet you, Mr. Flint.”

“Call me James.”

“James, then.”

“You’re lucky,” Eleanor said, eyeing them curiously. “Everyone I know only has leave to call him ‘Flint.’”

Thomas ignored that and pulled free of McGraw’s grip. His palm was cold and he stuck his hand in his pocket. “What is this about a map?”

Eleanor glanced around as if expecting to find a spy in the corner. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it; we can’t talk here though I can’t wait for you to see what we’ve found.”

“There’s a pub around the corner; we can use the private upstairs room. Will that do?”

“It will,” she nodded. “Mr. Povey? You have those addresses for me?”

Povey said, “This way.”

Povey and Eleanor returned to the back room, leaving Thomas with McGraw. “We might have just a few minutes,” he murmured, stepping up close, “so you will tell me why Eleanor doesn’t know who you really are.”

“Because she doesn’t need to know,” McGraw muttered in return. “You don’t, either.”

“And why is that?” he asked. McGraw had even features, a deep voice and lovely clear blue eyes.

“Because it’s none of your concern.”
He raised an eyebrow. “That’s up to me to decide, not you.”

McGraw opened his mouth to reply but they both heard Eleanor’s voice, getting louder. McGraw retreated until he was a meter away.

Eleanor came into the room with a briefcase slung over her shoulder and a large satchel in her hands. She handed the satchel to McGraw and glanced uncertainly at them both. “Everything okay?”

“I was thinking,” Thomas said slowly, wondering if he’d lost his mind—he wasn’t sure he wanted McGraw in his home, no matter how beautiful he was. “If you truly want privacy, my place is a ten-minute walk from here.”

“That is even better,” she said slowly, still looking at them both with suspicion.

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The foot traffic made the walk slower than usual and several times the group got separated.

The second time it happened, Eleanor put her hand on Thomas’s arm and slowed him down. She waited until McGraw and Povey were some distance ahead, then murmured, “What is going on between you two? Do you know each other?”

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

He hesitated, then said, “We don’t know each other exactly; we had a mutual friend.”

“What happened to him, this friend?”

“It wasn’t a he, it was a she. I don’t know the details but she and Flint were lovers and there was an accident.” He left it at that, McGraw’s sharp accusation still sounding in his ears. Up ahead, McGraw and Povey had stopped at a corner and were waiting for them.

“That’s impossible.”

“What is?”

“That they were lovers. Flint is gay.”

He stopped. “He can’t be.”

“Of course he can.”

“I don’t understand.” Miranda hadn’t been a fool; she would have known. “Maybe he’s bi.”

“Doubtful.”

“Why?”

“Because he wasn’t buying what I was selling.”

He wasn’t sure if that was a bad pun or not and wanted to answer but they had run out of distance. McGraw scowled at them when they caught up but only said, “Which way now?”

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He let them in, holding the door, then locking it. They trooped in as one and stood looking about. He picked up the mail and quickly went through it.

“Is all this yours?” Eleanor asked, head tipped to stare at the oval staircase.

Nothing but junk mail, per usual. “It was my mother’s childhood home. I’m planning on converting it to flats when I have the time.”

“No,” McGraw and Povey said at the same time.

Thomas looked at them both, eyebrow raised.

“There’s too much of that going on in London,” Povey said. “This house has exceedingly beautiful lines; you should keep it as it is.”

“The lines may be beautiful but it wastes an enormous amount of energy. Everyone is doing their part to conserve. I should, too.”

Povey shrugged. “Maybe there’s some way to fix the heating and cooling systems so that they’re more efficient.”

He’d thought about that and other than closing off the third floor, hadn’t come up with a solution. “And you,” he turned to McGraw, saying, “why don’t you want me to convert it?”

McGraw frowned and muttered, “I spoke out of turn. Where are we meeting?”

He hesitated, then decided to ignore McGraw’s obvious lie. He nodded towards the back. “We’ll use the rear dining room; it’s small and it’s closest to the kitchen. Would anyone like tea or something stronger?”

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They all wanted something stronger and soon they were all sitting around the dining table, drinks in their hands, waiting on Eleanor.

“Eleanor?” Thomas asked. “Is Mr. Povey up to speed?”

“I had to bring him in,” Eleanor said ruefully. “There was no way he could help us if he didn’t know what was going on.”

“I’m not accusing, I just want to know if he needs any explanations.”

“I don’t believe I do,” Povey said, taking a sip of brandy. “You’ve got it in your head that the financial crisis the entire world is heading towards is only being augmented by the fact that large companies, even countries, are concealing money in offshore accounts. Knowing the lobbying power held by these companies, you want to strike at them another way by means of transferring the power from the British Government to the natural citizens of the British Virgin Islands. This will have a two-fold effect: it will cut the cord of an industry that holds over forty percent of the world’s wealth as well as cut the cord to the Crown, thereby balancing out a very unbalanced system.” Povey took a sip of brandy. “You can be assured, my lord, that I won’t mention this to anyone; I’m very discreet.”

Everyone was silent by the time Povey had finished. He looked around, then added, “I googled some of that.”
“Very well put,” Thomas said with a smile. “I should just use your synopsis when I present my proposal. So…” He turned to Eleanor, “Shall we get down to it? What is this thing that is going to change my life?”

Eleanor nodded to McGraw. “Do you have a cloth so I don’t scratch your table?”

While Thomas went to the sideboard to get a couple linen napkins, McGraw sat the satchel on the table and unzipped it.

Thomas handed the napkins to Eleanor, then leaned forward.

Eleanor pulled a bulky box out of the satchel and placed it carefully on the napkins, then gestured to Povey.

Povey drew a pair of cotton gloves out of his breast pocket and said, “It’s what is commonly known as a ‘bible box.’ Most of the ones I’ve seen are made of oak—this is crafted of cherry. Notice the beautiful grain?”

The box was indeed beautiful, carved on all surfaces with a graceful but slightly crude scroll motif. On the front was an elaborately carved, ‘1665.’

Eleanor sat down and clasped her hands together. “I’ll tell you how Flint found it but first, a story.” She gave Thomas a swift smile. “When I was about nine, my nanny told me of a legend that her grandfather had told her, a legend that was passed down from generation to generation.

“Her ancestors had been brought to Tortola during the early part of the eighteenth century as slaves to work on a sugar plantation for a Dutchman by the name of DeGroot. DeGroot’s grandfather had been one of the original settlers, installed by the Dutch in or around 1645. The DeGroot family thrived, somehow avoiding the constant wars that raged among the islands. In 1672, that changed and the British took the island.

“According to my nanny, DeGroot survived by bribing the local governors. In exchange for goods—probably sugar—they allowed him to keep his land and his plantation grew even larger. One day, he fell ill from a snakebite and took to his bed. One of the slaves, a man by the name of Daniel, called in the doctor but nothing could be done. Daniel and DeGroot had grown up together and DeGroot trusted him with his life. Daniel stayed by DeGroot’s side the entire time. The night DeGroot died, he began raving about a treasure to be found in the Spanish church at the south end of the plantation.”

Eleanor’s voice dropped to a whisper and she leaned forward. “Daniel knew of no such church, but he passed on the tale to a fellow slave, a man by the name of Tom Scott. After DeGroot had been buried, his land was sold to an English family, to my family. Daniel and Tom were transferred as property and on the sly, they began to search for the treasure. Unfortunately, they were caught at it and forced to tell what they were doing. My family, or so I was told, began searching as well, but found nothing.

“When I was a girl, I made a half-hearted attempt to find the treasure by visiting the only church I knew. The priest told me that the building was a little over a hundred years old and I gave up.” Eleanor reached out and touched Thomas’s arm. “I had completely forgotten about the story until I got an inquiry from a British lord wanting to hire a local to help obtain historical information about the island. At that point, there was no connection between your plan and the legend but, as I started working with you, I found myself interested again in my own history again, only this time I was older and had made connections with people skilled at treasure hunting. That’s where Flint comes in.”
McGraw nodded. “Eleanor had asked me to gather intel for you on the island’s power structure—who were the movers and shakers, that kind of thing. We had been working together for almost two years when she asked me to look into the legend.”

“By then,” Eleanor said, smiling at Flint, “I’d gone to every church on the islands and had found nothing and I figured, what the hell.”

McGraw reached for the bottle of rum and poured another glass. “I’d been working on a site in Bermuda when she told me the story. It took me five months to track the location of the church and it wasn’t even a church. It was an old stone barn that was falling apart.”

“See,” Eleanor interrupted eagerly. “We think either Daniel heard wrong or DeGroot misspoke because ‘barn’ in Dutch is—”

“Schuur,” Thomas said softly, a chill running up his spine. “Schuur, not church.”

Eleanor nodded again eagerly but McGraw just shrugged. “In any case,” he continued, “I and my crew began to investigate. We had to go slowly as the entire structure was unstable. We shored everything up and then took the barn apart, stone by stone.”

Thomas gestured to the box. “I take it you found that in the barn.”

McGraw nodded. “Under the barn, actually. It was secreted away under a false floor, wrapped in enameled cloth.”

“And it’s not a real treasure else that box would be very heavy.”

“It’s something better,” Eleanor said. “Mr. Povey, please show him.”

Povey gently opened the box. Inside were several documents, folded in half and encased in plastic. Gingerly, Povey picked up the documents and placed them on the table. He unfolded the one and then the other. The first was written in Dutch, the second was much longer, written in English.

Thomas stood and bent over the table. He reached out but didn’t touch, his heart beating in slow, thick thuds. At the top of the English document was an elaborate header. On the left, inside a large, elegant ‘C’ was the portrait of a man in a long black wig. The rest of the space was taken up by intricate flourishes and illustrations and the words, ‘Charles the Second.’

Thomas looked up. “This was from Charles the Second’s court.”

Still silent, Povey pointed to the seals in the corner.

Thomas bent closer. “Is that the royal seal?”

“It is indeed, and a privy seal at that,” Povey said softly, his gloved finger tracing the shape of the seals. “The seal underneath belonged to Algernon Percy, Earl of Northumberland and Lord High Admiral under Charles the First. The seal on the Dutch document is from the hand of William III.”

Thomas turned to the other document. Unlike the British document, this was less complicated but almost impossible to read. “What does it say?”

“In short, that in exchange for aid in repelling the pirates out of New Providence Island as well as payment in the form of three hundred thousand British pounds, the House of Orange-Nassau accepts the British-held islands of Ter Tholen and Virgin Gorda from Charles II, King of England, Scotland and Ireland. The bearer of the letter is to deliver the agreement to the governor of Tortola or any
other legitimate governing body.”

“Which means that Tortola belongs to the Dutch and not the British,” Eleanor breathed. “Which means our plan to separate from the Crown might be that much easier.”

“If it holds up in court,” Povey said.

“Which it will not,” McGraw added darkly.

“Flint—” Eleanor began.

McGraw sat back. “Face the facts, Eleanor. First we have to get it authenticated and that will take months, maybe years. Next, we have to present it to both countries and the Crown will do everything in its power to block that from happening. Thirdly—and most importantly—every single corporation that learns of this will bring pressure to bear. They will threaten and will use force. They will not allow this to happen!”

“You don’t know that.”

“No, but what I do know is if such a deal had been made, why is there no other record? Why go to all that trouble?”

“You said it yourself not two months ago—Charles was distrustful of his Parliament and the country was going broke. He needed cash and he needed the trust of his ministers. He made the deal in secret to retain his power and fund his wars. That’s what you said!”

McGraw and Eleanor began to argue, their angry voices fading to the background as Thomas leaned over the document.

So remarkable. Never mind its import, that the document managed to survive almost four hundred years in such conditions was remarkable. The seals were clear, the elegant writing as crisp as if just written and he imagined it, Charles’s scribe hunched over his desk, writing the words as dictated by the king. And then, when the ink was dry, handing the document over to Charles so that he could seal it. “How did DeGroot come by these? Why did he never present them to the authorities?”

His voice wasn’t loud, but Eleanor and McGraw stopped mid-shout and turned his way.

Eleanor smoothed her hair back, answering, “We’ve discussed that many times and we just don’t know.”


McGraw frowned and stroked his chin. “I think the courier either was waylaid by pirates or wanted to be done with the documents. How they got into DeGroot’s hands, we’ll never know. What we do know is that at some point, DeGroot put the documents in the bible box and buried it in his barn.”

Thomas leaned forward. “But why?”

McGraw thought about that for a moment, then said absently, as if playing the scene out in his mind, “DeGroot was living incognito, surrounded by the enemy. That kind of life would be challenging at best. Simply put, I think he thought it too dangerous and didn’t want to rock the boat. Men, when separated from their homeland by four thousand miles of ocean tend to forget any allegiance to said homeland.”

“That sounds as if you speak of personal experience.”
McGraw looked up, his gaze steady, blank. “I’m hungry. What do you have to eat?”

‘Are you always this rude?’ Thomas wanted to ask, settling for an even-tempered, “What would you like?”

***

What everyone liked was different so Thomas ended up calling the caterer and asked if they still had his dinner on hand, and, if so, could they deliver it quickly?

The doorbell rang ten minutes later, a time made longer as everyone was pretending that McGraw and Eleanor hadn’t almost come to blows.

Thomas let the catering staff in and asked them to set up in the small dining room. He tipped them twice what he normally would have, ignoring one of server’s stares as he took the money. The kid was about twenty and new. His name was Fred, if his nametag was accurate; apparently Fred had a thing for the sons of minor earls.

After the food and dishes were set up, Thomas dismissed the staff, saying they could get the pans in the morning. Fred wasn’t happy about that and said he’d like to stay and serve. Thomas gently told him no and showed them the door.

When he turned, he found that McGraw had followed them and was watching, a cynical gleam in his eye.

***

Needing fresh air, Thomas turned on the heaters and the string lights and they ate on the ground floor terrace. No one said much and that was fine by him. The events of the day were starting to meld together and he couldn’t decide what had been more momentous: the discovery of the documents, Eleanor’s presence, or McGraw himself. The man wasn’t anything like he’d pictured; he couldn’t imagine what Miranda had seen in him.

He was almost done with his post-entree salad when he asked. “Your crew, are they all British?”

McGraw looked up. “Hmm?”

“You mentioned your men and I was wondering where they’re from.”

McGraw finished his steak, then wiped his mouth. “Most are from the UK and they’re not all men.”

Eleanor snorted softly. “Don’t tell that to Anne—she’s as much a man as you.”

McGraw tossed his napkin down. “Anne is more of a man than me. She’s very good at what she does. I don’t know anyone better with a scope.”

“Telescope?” Thomas asked.

“Rifle.”

He frowned. “Is it that dangerous?”

“It can be,” McGraw said with a shrug. “I’ve run up against other treasure hunters bent on taking prizes no matter the provenance, corporate heavies that think their money buys them the right to steal cultural artifacts.”
“Not to mention sharks and other assorted wildlife,” Povey added, speaking for the first time since they’d sat down to dinner. “And then there’s the excavations themselves. I’ve known many an adventurer that met their end under a collapsed roof or floor.”

“Then why do it?”

McGraw smiled faintly. “Because it’s exciting. Because I never know what I’m going to find. I’ve explored oceans and ruins and it’s always a thrill when I find something. It doesn’t even have to be the find of a lifetime—anything is exciting.”

Caught by how the small smile changed McGraw’s face, Thomas nodded absently. “And the documents—are they the find of a lifetime?”

McGraw straightened his fork and knife. “If they’re real, they might be.”

Eleanor sighed. “James—”

“No,” Thomas said with a sharp gesture. “You two have argued enough for one evening.” He turned to Povey, leaving Eleanor and McGraw staring at him, open-mouthed. “Mr. Povey? What happens next?”

“I’ve many colleagues that can perform the authentication but I think it best to have the process done somewhere out of the UK. I’ll need to confer with them. For the safety of all concerned, I think it best that the box stays with Mr. Flint.”

“I agree,” Eleanor added softly.

Thomas looked through the tall glass doors. “I never thought about that—would someone commit a crime to obtain either document?”

“I said any number of corporations would use force,” McGraw answered. “What did you think I meant?”

“I assumed you were exaggerating.”

“I was not.”

He nodded. “And its value for those not interested in destroying it?”

Povey shrugged. “A document from the 16th century in good condition would bring anywhere from a couple hundred pounds to several thousand but this…” He shook his head. “I can’t even begin to estimate it other than it is priceless. My insurers, if they knew I’d had it my property for even a short time would pull my policy.”

He turned to Eleanor. “Where are you staying?”

“Flint and I have rooms at the Crowne Plaza. We’re to—” Eleanor ground to a halt. “Oh.”

Thomas nodded. “If Mr. Povey is leery of keeping the documents in his undoubtedly very secure shop, do you think it’s wise to hold it in a hotel safe?”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

By the look on McGraw’s face, he hadn’t either. “So, what are you going to do with it?”

Eleanor glanced up at the house, then back at Thomas. She smiled. “I suppose you don’t have more
than one bedroom, do you?"

***

While Flint drove Povey home and retrieved their luggage from the hotel, Eleanor and Thomas opened up two of the bedrooms on the first floor.

“We’ll be out by Tuesday at the latest,” Eleanor said as she tossed her purse and briefcase on the bed. “Where do you think we should put the box?”

“My safe is too small so I would suggest keeping it with Mr. Flint. He seems more than capable.”

“He is that.”

“Eleanor?”

“Yes?”

“How well do you know Flint?” He was tired and almost said ‘McGraw.’

“As well as I know you.”

“That’s not very reassuring as you and I have known each other a total of two years and most of that was at a distance.” He straightened the painting of the Ashbourne house. “Do you trust him?”

“Absolutely.”

He nodded and turned to the door then stopped. “One other thing?”

“Yes?”

“What happened to Daniel and Tom after they were caught while trying to find the treasure?”

Eleanor gave him a smile, a singularly bleak smile. “They were killed in front of the other slaves as an object lesson.”

He nodded, feeling just as bleak.

“Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“About our conversation earlier—do you know something about Flint that you’re not telling me?”

He smiled and answered truthfully, “No. I know absolutely nothing about James Flint.”

***

He went downstairs intending to clean up. He took one look at the stacks of plates in the sink and muttered, “Screw it.” He’d take care of it all in the morning.

He returned to the dining room and checked the windows and doors, then went to the table. He opened the box. He wished he’d thought to ask Povey for some gloves but it was just as well—if the documents were truly priceless, the less handling, the better.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”
He didn’t jump but he wanted to. McGraw was standing at the door, removing his coat. “Someone should put a bell around your neck.” When McGraw didn’t answer, he sighed. So much for humor. “And yes, it is very beautiful. How did the box not get crushed under the weight of all that stone?”

McGraw stepped into the room. “It was sandwiched between two beams. They acted as a kind of shield, otherwise…” He shrugged and held something up—it was the keys to the Tesla. “Nice car, by the way.”

He reached across the table and took the keys, ignoring McGraw’s comment. “Mr. Flint?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think the box will be safe here?”

“Worried about your own skin, my lord?”

He cocked his head. “Not in the slightest. I’m just wondering if I should take it to my bank.”

“Unless I have a spy on my crew—and I don’t—no one in England knows I have it. It’s safe here for the moment.”

Thomas touched the corner of the box. “And you truly believe it won’t do anything to further my cause?”

McGraw hesitated, then said, “The mountain before you is too great. A four hundred year-old document isn’t going to change that; it’s just not realistic.”

Thomas straightened up. “Something needs to change; these people need it to change.”

“You’re playing with fire.” McGraw said.

“Perhaps I am,” Thomas said evenly. “If we don’t do this right, it could make their lives worse. Which is why we need to do it right.”

“The Crown will fight you every step of the way.”

“I’m sure that is true.”

McGraw scowled. “I’ve lived on the islands, I’ve seen the disparity. I’ve also seen how big and powerful these companies are—they’re ruthless.”

“So you expect me to do nothing? The average worker in the Territory makes fifteen hundred pounds a year while those in the financial sector earn twenty-seven thousand.”

McGraw shrugged dismissively. “It’s the way it is.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Right or wrong doesn’t enter it.”

He stepped forward. “Right or wrong is all that matters, Mr. Flint.” He felt a spark, a fire he thought long dead. “Never mind the instability of the financial world, no other animal treats their kin the way we do. We lie and cheat which is bad enough, but then we add money and power to the mix to disastrous results.”

“Says the man who has more money and power than he can possibly use.”
Stung to the quick, Thomas felt his cheeks flush. He nodded once. “You’re right,” he answered quietly. “I do have more than I can use. I am well aware that I can do what I’m doing because of that money and power. But James,” he leaned forward once more, “None of that matters. This disparity is a worldwide epidemic and we have to start somewhere or more people will die in pain and misery. More children will grow up without clean drinking water, precious little food and no education. Do you really want to live in that world?”

McGraw didn’t say anything and the moment grew to a silence that was heavy and uncomfortable. Finally, he swallowed and then said, “You sound like Miranda.”

That actually hurt. It had been his idea to address global income inequality but it had been Miranda who’d listened and encouraged. When he got stuck on a detail, she’d been the one to suggest alternative solutions. “If I could ever be as clever and enthusiastic as she was, I would count myself lucky.”

McGraw leaned over and closed the box, the tension between them fading. “Whatever else, I find it hard to believe the Ministry of Defense is allowing any of this to proceed.”

He smiled wryly. “Well, they can’t really stop me from planning, can they?”

“You haven’t told them?”

“Not as such. I’ve been waiting until everything is ready.”

“And Pickram? What does he say?”

He raised an eyebrow. “How do you know he’s working with me?”

“I just do.”

Thomas thought on the wealth of implications behind that simple statement but just said, “He doesn’t know the extent of my ambitions.”

“Because you don’t trust him.”

It wasn’t a question. “No, I don’t. I’ve found the Lieutenant’s interests to be…” He hesitated, then finished with a weak, “Less than professional.”

“Meaning he wants to use you to climb the ladder as much as he wants to get in your pants.”

He laughed, a sound shockingly loud in the quiet room, but Christ, it was funny. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“Talk to Hennessey, tell him what’s going on.”

“The Admiral has intimated more than a few times that I was lucky to get anyone. I wish—” He stopped and shook his head.

“You wish what?” McGraw said softly, reaching for the back of the chair.

“Nothing,” Thomas said, pushing away the odd thought with a wave of his hand. “It was nothing.”

“My lord?”

“It’s ‘Thomas’. ”
McGraw ignored that. “About Miranda…”

Just like that the mood changed and he turned to close the draperies. “I think we’re done for the night.”

“I need you to listen to me.”

“It’s been a very long day. Can’t this wait for a more suitable time?”

“I had nothing to do with her death.”

He sighed and didn’t turn. “According to all the reports, you were very much involved.”

“I wasn’t. Not like anyone thinks. I loved her.”

“Everyone that met her loved her. Their love didn’t end up with her dead.”

He heard a soft noise and suddenly McGraw was at his back, taking his arms and turning him around. “I loved her. I followed them to Regent’s Park that night like they all say, but it wasn’t because I was jealous! It was because that bastard Hume was drunk and I was worried.”

McGraw’s grip was painful but he didn’t pull free. “What happened?” In the low light, McGraw’s eyes gleamed a dull silver.

“I’d just gotten in from out of town and received a text that Hume was out of his head and Miranda was with him.” McGraw let Thomas go but didn’t step back. “I went to her place but they were already in the car. I followed only I got stuck in traffic and lost them on the bridge. By the time I found them again, they were already inside the park. I took a short cut by climbing over the fence. When I caught up with them, they were by the lake. Hume had his service weapon out and was saying something about showing Miranda how to shoot it. She said they should go home, but he tried to force the gun on her. I was afraid he was going to hurt her.”

“So you grabbed it instead.”

McGraw drew away and began to pace, short angry strides that took him to the sideboard and back. “I had so much training. I knew not to get in the way, not to startle him, but I was so fucking—” He made an aborted gesture, as if slashing the air with a sword. “I jumped him at the wrong moment and he pulled the trigger. Miranda dropped to the ground. I tried to go to her, but Hume grabbed me and the gun went off again. I pushed him off and ran to Miranda.” McGraw stopped pacing. “The next part is a blank; I think she was already dead but I’ve never been able to remember. Apparently I rang 999 and then Hennessey.”

Thomas nodded, realizing he’d been nodding the entire time like an automaton. “What happened next?”

McGraw chuckled, a small laugh that held no humor. “I remember that clearly. Hennessey and the police fought over jurisdiction while I knelt in front of Miranda’s body. The paramedics arrived to take her away. I can’t remember the next part, either, but I’m told I got angry and tried to stop them. The next thing I knew, I was in an interrogation room and someone was asking me over and over if I’d killed her. My hands and shirt were covered with blood.”

“What happened then?”

McGraw shrugged. “Hennessey got me released.”
“Just like that?”

McGraw’s jaw tightened. “Just like that.”

The rest had been the truth; this was a lie. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It is not.”

McGraw ran his hand over his hair. “It’s as near to the truth as you’re going to get.”

That, he could accept, as galling as it was. “If you were innocent, why did you resign your commission?”

“Hennessey thought it best.”

“Another lie.”

McGraw chuckled again, this time with a faint trace of humor. “Very well, I didn’t resign.”

“So they sacked you?”

“I can’t tell you what happened after that.”

“Why not?”

“Thomas,” McGraw said, looking at him for the first time without anger or mistrust. “I can’t tell you; please don’t ask again.”

It wasn’t the ‘please,’ that did it—it was the way McGraw said his name. “Okay, I’ll let it go.” *For now.*

Whether or not McGraw heard the caveat, he made no sign. “Thank you.”

Again, a silence grew between them, this one not heavy but weighted and somehow still. He wanted to press McGraw about his release, wanted to ask what he was truly doing in the Caribbean. He wanted to ask what had happened between he and Miranda because she’d been in love and it made him almost ill, the idea that she might have been fooled by McGraw.

But the moment was over and he could say nothing but, “Well…”

McGraw nodded. He picked up the box, then went to the door. “My lord?”

“A minute ago it was ‘Thomas.’”

McGraw nodded. “‘Thomas,’ then.” He shifted from foot to foot. “If you’re going to go through with your plan, perhaps it would be good to have all the facts.”

“And how would I accomplish that?”

“Come to the islands with me. Come meet the people and see how things work.”

It wasn’t a new idea but he’d dismissed it every time, thinking that the root of the problem wasn’t housed on the islands, but now… “Very well, Mr. Flint, I’ll think about it.”

McGraw smiled, an unexpected, entirely delightful smile. “A minute ago it was ‘James.’” And then
he was gone, leaving Thomas to stare after.

***

When he went down to the kitchen the next morning, he found Eleanor in the kitchen eating breakfast. “Good morning,” he said, feeling anything but good. He hadn’t slept well.

Eleanor grinned as she got up and went to the stove. “You look as good as I feel.” She hadn’t combed her hair and was wearing an old t-shirt and pajama bottoms. Her toenails were painted a pretty aqua blue. “It wasn’t your bed, mind you. Just the change in the climate, I think.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He glanced around the kitchen; everything was spotless; the caterer’s dishes and equipment were stacked neatly on the side counter. “Thank you for cleaning up.”

“That wasn’t me. Flint did it all, including this.” She held out a plate of eggs and bacon.

He took the plate. He wasn’t fond of scrambled eggs, but food was food. “Speaking of, where is he?”

Eleanor sat back down and picked up her coffee. “I was getting ready to tell you.”

“He’s gone, isn’t he?” He really didn’t have to ask; he somehow knew the minute he’d gotten up. The house felt empty, as if James’s presence and now absence had changed the pressure of the very air.

So much for traveling to the islands together.

“Mr. Povey rang with a list of names. Flint was worried about keeping the document here, so he’s on his way to deliver it to the appraisers.”

“Where is that?” He took a bite of the eggs; they were surprisingly good.

She hesitated, then sat down her coffee and said in one breath, “All right, promise me you won’t tell because he didn’t want you to know but Mr. Povey has a contact at the Smithsonian Museum in the States and Flint is taking it there.”

“That’s an odd request; why didn’t he want me to know?”

“I didn’t ask. Flint is a cagey bastard but he always has his reasons.”

“Is he returning to London?”

“No. He took a job on New Providence Island.”

“What about the work with you?”

“He’s done what I asked him to do. If I need anything else, he’ll find the time.”

He’d finished the eggs in an embarrassingly short amount of time. “Did he say what this job entailed?”

Eleanor picked up her plate and took it to the sink. “He did not.”

“Eleanor?”

“Hmm?”
“Tell me about him, about Flint. If I’m to work with him, I need to know he’s not going to endanger the project.”

She washed the plate and put in the rack. “There’s not much to tell. He and I met through a contact of mine, a Hal Gates. Hal was taking him on a tour of the islands. Apparently, he needed some downtime because of a romantic disappointment.”

“Romantic disappointment?”

She grinned. “That was Hal’s term for it. I think Flint had gotten his heart broken and needed to chill.” She sat back down. “Anyway, I don’t know a lot about him other than he’s a rags-to-riches kind of guy only he’s not rich. Hal told me he’d been in the navy but I’m not sure if that’s true. It makes sense, though—he’s a hell of a sailor.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“Other than he’s touchy and will bite you as soon as look at you, yes, it is.”

He sighed. None of that information helped. He knew as much about James as he had the day before. Google hadn’t helped, either. And that was odd, wasn’t it? No matter how careful one was, it was impossible to stay entirely clear of the online world. Which meant that James had somehow deleted his entire self from the internet.

“What are you thinking?” Eleanor asked.

*That you’re working with a ghost.* “Nothing; I’m just tired of waiting.”

“At least it will give us time to review your progress. The last time we spoke, we were still waiting on the data from Pickram.”

He’d taken a bite of the bacon when he remembered. “Oh.”

“What is it?”

“I’m on holiday. Or rather, I’m taking a holiday while Pickram is out playing war games.” He waved the bacon. “It doesn’t matter; we can go into the office and get everything.”

“Are you sure?” Eleanor asked with a frown. “Every time I call, you’re working. Maybe a vacation would be a good thing at this point. I’ve some business for my father to see to, though it’s not pressing.”

He finished his bacon, an idea coming to mind that wasn’t really his. “Eleanor,” he said with a growing smile, “how would you like to take a ride in my father’s favorite toy?”

***

Eleanor sighed and stretched out on the leather sofa. “I could get used to this.”

“It is nice, isn’t it?” It was a bit of a lie. He considered the jet the epitome of waste; he and his father had engaged in many arguments about it. When his father had told him he was giving the jet to him as part of his inheritance, he’d turned him down. He didn’t regret the decision even though he’d had to endure his father’s snide, ‘So now you need it, do you?’ when he’d asked to borrow it for the week. It did, however, make flying across the Atlantic much easier. “If we get time, I’d like to visit the site where you found the box.”
“Of course.”

“And I’ll want to talk to the locals. Can you arrange that for me?”

“I’ll email Mr. Scott. He knows everyone worth knowing.”

“What about your other contact, Max? Will I get a chance to meet her?”

“I believe she’s off the island for the time being. Vane will be around if you want to meet him.”

“Maybe so.” It was Max he wanted to talk to. Of all of Eleanor’s connections, she seemed the most elusive. All Eleanor would ever say of her was that they’d met when Max had facilitated a delicate deal on behalf of the island.

She folded her arms behind her head. “Remember what I told you. Charles Vane is an—”

“Acquired taste,” he finished for her. “I remember.”

“Just don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she murmured, her eyes closing.

“Why don’t you get some sleep. It’s a nine hour flight.”

“Sounds good.”

She fell asleep and after awhile, tired of looking out the window at the grey-blue ocean, he did the same.

***

He was woken up some hours later by a hand on his shoulder and Eleanor’s soft voice in his ear. “Thomas? The captain just came in. We’ll be landing in Nassau in a few minutes.”

***

By eight o’clock, Thomas and Eleanor were standing on the main street in Nassau. Thomas had been in the Bahamas before, but only on the bigger islands and only as a tourist. Odd that Nassau was the largest city in the Bahamas but was situated on such a small island. If he stood on its highest peak, would he be able to see from one end to the other?

“What do you think?” Eleanor said, coming to stand next to him.

“It’s beautiful.” The sun was setting and the sky faded from a bright, clear gold to a deep, deep blue. To the north lay Paradise Island, home of that monstrosity, the Atlantis Hotel. “I wish I could have seen it before it was commercialized.”

“Then you would have had to have visited a very long time ago. Come on.” She nodded up the street. “We’re this way.”

“I never asked—how will we find Flint?”

“He has a place out on Eastern Road but we’ll have a better chance of catching up with him at the Blue Parrot.”

“Will Signor Ferari be in attendance?”

Eleanor looked quizzically up at him. “Who’s that?”
He shook his head. “Never mind.” It was a stupid joke, indicative of his state of mind because it had come to him while staring out at the sunset that this was a crazy move, flying all this way to take up James on his offer. In polite company, one would call it following; in less polite company one would call it stalking.

He was getting ready to suggest they settle in at their hotel first when Eleanor said, “It’s down here.”

She steered him around the corner to a bar at the end of the street. Bright yellow light spilled out on to the dark road in front and music filled the air, a combination of rock and reggae.

When they got inside, the noise rose to ear-bleed level. Eleanor touched his arm and he leaned down in an effort to hear her.

“They’ll be on the lanai,” she shouted. “This way.”

This time she led him to a door on the side that opened to a large patio. It was crowded but as soon as they crossed the threshold, the din dropped and he was able to hear himself think again.

Eleanor looked around, then raised her arm. “Hal!” she called out.

A man sitting by the rail turned and shouted in return, “There she is!” Everyone at the table turned and looked.

As Eleanor made her way around the tables, Thomas scanned the group. Should he be relieved that James wasn’t there or disappointed? The latter won out but he didn’t have much time for it—Eleanor made the introductions, naming each of the crew ending with, “And this is my good friend, Hal Gates. Hal Gates,” she gestured to Thomas, “may I introduce Thomas Hamilton.”

Thomas held out his hand, leaning over one of the women. Gates was built like a bull with a bald head and a dark mustache.

Gates reached over the table and shook Thomas’s hand with a grip like a vise. “Good to meet you. I take it you’re here on business?”

He glanced at Eleanor. “And a holiday.”

“Well, you’re in the right place. Come on over here and sit by me.” Gates patted the bench, then growled, “Hey, you lot, move on down and make way for our guest.”

Feeling more than a bit of an overdressed tourist, Thomas found a place for his overnight bag and sat down. “What are you all drinking?”

“What else,” a man across the table from him said as he held up his glass.

“Beer,” came the chorus.

Thomas smiled. “Then pass me a pint.”

***

He didn’t get drunk but he managed to enjoy himself. He kept forgetting the crew’s names but they didn’t seem to care. A few stood out: the girl, Anne, because she was a girl and because she was a little intimidating; Bill, because he was a six-foot plus giant whose beauty matched his height.

From the conversation, Thomas gleaned that the crew had been together for almost two years, each brought in by James as the need arose. Gates had started out in the field but was now the project
manager. Dufresne was their accountant-slash-purchasing agent and Billy was the crew chief.

They clearly enjoyed each other’s company but he didn’t miss the friction when an Aussie named John asked about the next job.

It was after eleven and the other customers were gone but even so, Gates glared and muttered, “Quietly, if you please.” Thomas looked around in confusion and Gates explained.

It was to be an underwater extraction off a nearby beach. They’d been waiting on the official okay and were anxious to get started. It seemed the bone of contention was what they would do with the treasure if they found any. Bill, Anne, and Dufresne said whatever it was should go to a museum. John and Jack said they should act as the owner’s agents and sell it to the highest bidder.

They were arguing about, their voices rising, when Gates pounded on the table. “Shut it!”

In an instant, they all closed their mouths.

“No,” Gates said, giving Thomas a quick smile. “According to Flint, what is the dumbest thing someone can do in our profession?”

Thomas was surprised to hear the crew recite, “Count our chickens before they’re hatched,” like a group of school kids. Even Eleanor mouthed the words and Thomas had to hide a smile.

“And what,” Gates added, “will Flint do if he finds out we’ve made plans before the deed is done?”

“Kick you off the crew so fast your head will spin,” came a soft voice from dark.

They all jumped and Gates clutched his chest. “Damn you, you bastard. Give me a heart attack why don’t you.”

“Sorry,” James said, strolling up the stairs that led to the back of the building. “But you all know how I feel abo—” He had seen Thomas and he ground to a halt. “Lord Hamilton? What the hell are you doing here?”

All eyes turned to Thomas and he was used to this, the way expressions changed, ranging from avid curiosity to deep suspicion all in a split second. He shrugged. “I meant no deception; I should have told you but there wasn’t a right time.”

“Saying, ‘It’s Lord Hamilton, to you,’ would have done the trick,” John Silver murmured, gazing at Thomas, his head cocked. “What are you lord of?”

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“Do you mean the main family holdings?” he answered evenly, doing his best to ignore the fact that James was watching him with a frown. “The town is called Ashbourne as is the house.”

“I’ve heard of it,” Bill said quietly. “I grew up near Sheffield.”

“That’s beautiful country up there,” Thomas replied, not surprised when Bill didn’t smile or expound on the boring topic of the English countryside—the mood was broken, the camaraderie gone. “Well,” he said, draining the last of his pint, “it’s been a long day. Eleanor? I’m off to the hotel; can you point me in the direction of a cab?”

Eleanor made to stand up but James waved her back, saying, “I’ll take you. It’s on my way.”

“You don’t know where I’m staying so how can it be on your way?” James shrugged. “The island is small. Every way is my way.”
It was a ridiculously arrogant comment and Thomas’s irritation grew sharp. “Mr. Gates…” He held out his hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you. If you get the chance in the next few days, I’d like to hear more about your experience as a treasure hunter.” He stood and said to the crew. “Everyone, thank you for an enjoyable evening. I hope to see you again. If not, good luck with the excavation.”

The crew mumbled their replies and Eleanor stood and gave him a quick hug. “I’ll see you in the morning. We’ll talk then.”

He picked up his bag and jacket and nodded coolly at James. “I hope you have a car. You’ll need it.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the western end of the island,” Thomas said without turning around. “To a place called the Island Inn.”

***

James did indeed have a car. It was a mid-90s, soft-top Land Rover that needed a new master cylinder. Every time he shifted, the gearbox whined before it engaged. It was a common problem, one Thomas had faced with his own vehicles. It was also a fairly easy fix; he could instruct James on the details, if he wanted.

But that would mean speaking and he didn’t want to speak. He was still angry, mostly at himself. There had been enough red flags as to James’s character and he’d ignored every one, instead choosing to trust his spoken assurances. There had to be a reason why James was demoted or whatever it had been. Though he didn’t know Hennessey well, he’d never struck Thomas as vengeful or capricious.

“Here we are.”

He looked up. They’d arrived at the inn. He got out of the car. “Thank you for the ride, Mr. Flint.” He expected no answer and wasn’t surprised when he got none.

***

Though it was almost midnight, a man and a woman were at the reception desk as if they’d been waiting for him. Thomas checked in, then was shown to his unit, a separate house near the swimming pool. Though he had no luggage, he tipped the porter and then locked the door.

He didn’t bother looking around. He took off his shoes and socks, then brushed his teeth and turned off the lights. Then, feeling as if he were diving into a dark pool, he fell on the four-poster bed as he fell into sleep.

***

“Well?” Eleanor asked, coming to stand beside him. “What do you think?”

He took his sunglasses off and smiled. “I think it’s extraordinary.” He wasn’t exaggerating. Like a curved blue sheet, the Atlantic lay before him, dotted here and there with land masses that seemed too small to be called ‘islands.’ New Providence was to the right, and below, their launch bobbed gently in the calm, clear water. “So beautiful.”

“I told you Andros has a way of healing the spirit. The Spanish used to call it El Espíritu del Santo.”

He’d woken up in a quiet mood. Eleanor had met him for breakfast and had taken one look at him and said she was going to play tour guide and their first stop would be neighboring Andros. “It’s fitting.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“What else is there?”

“Amazing hiking trails, deep blue lakes that are more holes in the earth, a Mennonite factory. I even have a friend at one of the environmental research labs. Which one first?”

He put his sunglasses back on. “The blue lakes sound intriguing but I’ve got to see the Mennonite factory.”

***

As before, they ended the day at the Blue Parrot Bar and as before, Flint’s crew was on the patio only this time James was there at the table.

Thomas sat down and was greeted with subdued hellos.

“What happened to you?” James demanded as Gates slid a pint Thomas’s way.

He took a sip of beer, glancing down at his torn shirt and the bandage on his forearm. “It was nothing.” For once James was without his black coat—he was wearing a white t-shirt that was torn at the collar and sleeves. He must have come from the site because he had a smear of black oil on his jaw and his hair was a tangled mess. “Just an accident.”

Eleanor bumped her shoulder with his. “Tell the truth, Thomas—you did it while saving me.”

Gates grinned. “I take it a story is about to be told?”

“It was my own fault,” Eleanor said when Thomas just shook his head. “I was showing Thomas around Andros and we were on one of the cliff paths. I bent to look at the flowers and I slipped. If it hadn’t been for him, I would have fallen.” She raised her glass to him. “Who knew English lords had such quick reflexes?”

Before Thomas could answer, James growled, “I thought you were out here to do research, not to hop about on the islands.”

Everyone at the table held their collective breaths as Thomas slowly looked up at James. “Mr. Flint,” he said in the voice he used when talking to a particularly pigheaded Member of Parliament. “I need a ride to the hotel to change my clothes. Do you have your Land Rover?”

Without a word James stood and gestured.

Eleanor put her hand on Thomas’s arm and he patted it, whispering, “Don’t worry; we’ll be fine.”

***

This time, the ride wasn’t silent. They’d barely gone five meters before James burst out, “That was an idiotic thing to do. Those cliff paths are dangerous; people fall there all the time. Eleanor should have known better.”

“And now you’re angry with her, too?” he asked calmly. “Tell me Mr. Flint, who aren’t you angry with?”
Flint clenched the steering wheel, his knuckles going white. “Don’t you think it would be incredibly stupid to get hurt out here, now that your goal is within reach?”

“I almost don’t know how to answer that,” Thomas said, then added before James could speak, “Wait, I do.” He took a deep breath. “A: You said you didn’t believe my plan would work so my goal is hardly within reach. B: Even if I got hurt to the point of incapacity, the project doesn’t rely on me solely and will continue, and C: I wasn’t in any danger. Eleanor fell and I grabbed her. If either of us had fallen, we would have landed on a ledge only a few meters down.”

Flint didn’t say anything for the longest time and then he muttered, “All right.”

“All right?”

Flint nodded. “And I was wrong about the project. I still believe it’s foolish but I’m starting to see the possibilities.”

Thomas turned in the seat. “Truly?”

“Truly.”

He turned back to look through the windscreen. It was Sunday and there was a lot more traffic than there had been yesterday. “Huh.”

“I’ve been thinking about what you said, about the bigger picture and I think you’re right. One of the driving forces behind global problems could be income inequality.”

“And?”

“And, people will object and governments will try to stall you, but maybe not as much as I first thought. The document, even if it’s proved authentic might still be rejected by the courts but that might not matter. If it’s presented in the right way to the public, they might force the issue for you.”

“I’ve a firm standing by to take over the PR and marketing initiatives. They don’t know what they’re in for but they’re good—they’ll at least be able to get the word out.”

“I was thinking if it came to it, if the Crown insisted on sealing the records, I could announce the find to the wrong crowd. Gossip and social media could do the rest.”

Once more, he turned to look at James. “You’d do that? Risk your livelihood in such a way?”

James shrugged. “No one expects much from treasure hunters—we’re all seen as thieves and pirates.”

“Be that as it may,” Thomas said firmly, “it’s too great a risk. If we have to take such an extreme measure, it would be better to come from me—I’d be protected by my name and position.”

James glanced at him from the side of his eyes. “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“About yesterday—I was surprised to see you. That’s why I was so abrupt.”

“You told me I should see Tortola for myself.”

“I know.”
“But you didn’t expect me to take you up on your suggestion?”

“Eleanor told me that she’d asked you to come out before.”

“I was always too busy.”

James was silent for a long time and then he muttered, “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry. About outing you yesterday.”

He snorted at the unintended pun. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. You wanted to be one of the guys and I pointed out that you weren’t.”

“How did you know?”

“That you don’t like the attention?” James shrugged again. “Miranda told me. She said most of her posh friends used their position to stay in the spotlight but it had always made you uncomfortable.”

He turned to stare out the window screen once more.

James cleared his throat. “I was wondering…”

“Yes?”

“Do you still miss her?”

He turned and gave James a crooked smile. “Almost every single day.”

***

This time when they got to the inn, he told James to drive around to the side so he wouldn’t have to go through the main building. He got out. “I can hire a car if you need to get back to the bar.”

James hesitated, then said, “I’m in no hurry.”

“Then park the car; I’ll wait.”

While James drove around to the lot, Thomas strolled to the overlook.

From this height, he could see Paradise Island, Andros, and far to the north, a string of islands that had to be part of some archipelago. He needed to get a map. Maybe the islands were attached to New Providence or Andros. Of course, he thought as he heard the crunch of boots on the shelled drive, he could just ask an expert. “Those islands out there,” he said. “Do they belong to Andros or this island?”

“They’re actually part of the same land mass. See…” James came up beside Thomas and pointed. “From there to there; it makes a big curve that continues all the way down to Long Island.”

“How many years has it been since they were all above water?” he asked, turning to the gate.

“Depending on which scientist you talk to, maybe none,” James said. “The only thing anyone agrees on is that those we can barely see will be covered within fifty years.”

He swiped the security panel with his key card. “I was reading that in the last hundred years, the
world’s oceans had risen as much as five inches.” He opened the gate for James.

“I think it’s closer to eight.”

It was depressing, the idea that so much was being lost, that so much was yet to be lost. The problems created by wealth inequality weren’t just the obvious ones like hunger and hopelessness. There were subsidiary issues such as environmental exploitation, child labor abuses—issues so deeply entrenched every country’s culture that they might well be the culture itself. It was going to be a complicated process, this thing he was trying to untangle—he just needed to find the right strand that would release the whole.

He pulled the gate shut and nodded to the bungalow on the other side of the swimming pool. “I’m over there.”

Two women were sunbathing; their husbands or maybe boyfriends were in the pool, shouting. Americans, if their loud shouts were anything to go by. The women stared openly at Thomas and James, tracking their path like big game hunters.

“Why are you staying clear out here?” James asked. “Nassau is full of hotels.”

Beyond, nearer the main building, the staff was setting up for dinner. “I told Eleanor she could pick any place and she chose this one. She said she’d been dying to stay here ever since it opened.”

“She can’t afford this.”

He turned and looked at James.

After a moment, James shrugged uncomfortably. “That was rude.”

“It was.”

They were at the bungalow and he opened the door with the key card. Inside, it was cool and quiet. James hesitated at the threshold. “My boots are muddy.”

“Then take them off,” he said over his shoulder. He’d gotten in so late and had left so early, he hadn’t a chance to really see the place and it was fairly stunning in its simplicity. The walls were painted a soothing buff, with one side covered with some sort of grass-like wallpaper. The floors were a dark, polished wood with furnishings to match. The chandelier was the only off-note—it was far too elaborate for such a setting.

“Where’s Eleanor’s room?”

He turned. James was standing by the small dining table. He had taken off his boots and socks and was barefoot. Odd that such a small change, from wearing shoes to not wearing shoes, could be so sexy and everything Thomas had been pushing away for a week came flooding back, making his throat dry and his stomach ache. “Is that your way of asking me if we’re sleeping together?”

“Are you?”

“No. Her bungalow is behind this one, facing the ocean.” When James didn’t say anything, he tossed his sunglasses on the kitchen counter. “It’s my turn.”

James frowned. “Yes?”

“Were you sleeping with Miranda, because I’m confused. She was in love with you and by your
own words, you were in love with her.”

James swallowed. “I was.”

“Then why the hell was she seeing Hume? She called me before she died to tell me about you. She was so happy, she almost delirious.” He took a step forward. “She was never faithless—what happened between you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“She was like a sister to me so, yes, I think it is my business.”

“She was more than that,” James said darkly. “She told me you asked her to marry you.”

“I did. She said no.”

“Why?”

He tipped his chin up. “Because I’m gay. Because she knew it wouldn’t be right.”

James swallowed again, his face turning a faint red.

“What happened?” Thomas said, knowing the answer but needing to hear it from James himself.

“We had an argument.”

“What about?”

“You.”

He drew back, laughing a little. “Me? You don’t even know me.”

James gave him a look that burned but said nothing.

Feeling as if he were standing before a wall that offered no purchase, he prodded, “Why did you resign from the Navy?”

“I didn’t resign. I told you that.”

“I know, but—”

“I didn’t resign. I was reassigned.”

Thomas frowned. “What does that mean?”

“It means that Hennessey decided my specific skill set would be of more use at another level of the government.”

“Are you saying that you’re a spy?”

“No.”

“But it’s some type of undercover work?”

James hesitated, then nodded. “I can’t tell you anymore, Thomas, truly.”

“Should I be worried that you’re privy to my plans?”
“Pardon?” James frowned and then shook his head. “Of course not and before you ask, what I do for the military has nothing to do with my treasure hunting day job. I needed a cover and it helped me keep busy.”

That brought up a new host of questions that James would no doubt deflect but it answered the question as to why he hadn’t been able to find any online photos of James McGraw. The Navy must have found a way to wipe them from existence. “What was this specific skill set?”

“My capacity for violence,” James said, watching Thomas carefully.

“Is that intended to frighten me?” Thomas said after a charged moment.

“No.”

The wall was still there, but Thomas thought he might be able to see daylight, far above. “Does Eleanor know any of this?”

“Some, not all.”

He nodded, then rubbed his forehead. “We should get back; she might be worried.”

“I’ll ring her while you change.”

He nodded and went to the bedroom. He stripped off his shirt then went to the bathroom and washed his face. Still drying off, he leaned back to look through the door, half hoping he’d see James standing by the bed. The bedroom, of course, was empty. He got a clean shirt from his luggage.

When he was dressed, he went out to the main room. James wasn’t there; he was out on the tiny patio, facing the pool. He’d put his socks and boots back on.

Thomas picked up his jacket, then went outside. “Is she upset that we’re late?”

“No, but everyone wants to go over to Paradise Island to do some gambling.”

“Where are we to meet them?”

“About that…”

“Yes?”

“I’m not big on gambling and I was wondering…” James turned. “Would you like to see where we’re working? We’ll have to hurry because we’re losing the light.”

James had put on mirrored sunglasses and Thomas could see his own small reflection in the lenses. “I’d like that very much.”

“Get your swim shorts if you brought any—you’ll need them.”

***

James drove fast, pushing the Land Rover hard, heading east and then south.

Most of the land along the coast was developed with endless rows of vacation homes, most guarded by walls and foliage. It was at one of these that James finally stopped. He pulled into a gated drive and then leaned out the window to tap in a code on the security kiosk. The gate swung open and they were through.
The road was lined with dense bushes and tall pines. Thomas couldn’t see any sign of the house until they got to a fork and the view opened up. There before them was a sprawling plantation-style home. It was painted a bright yellow and had a wrap-around porch. “Who lives here?”

“A man by the name of Jonathan Underhill.”

“And why has this Mr. Underhill hired you?”

“It’s better if I show you.”

“All right.”

They took the left fork and drove around the house. James parked near a side entrance, then got out and reached in the back for a knapsack. “This way.”

Steering clear of the home, James led him along a dirt path through a stand of trees that divided the beach from the property. Beyond, in the water itself, a rough stone breakwater stretched into the ocean for out about thirty meters and then took a right angle. Near the seawall, a floating dock bobbed gently. “Is this an actual harbor? Isn’t the water too shallow?”

“It is,” James said. “Come on.” He tossed his gear down and began to strip.

Thomas followed, only having to take off his shirt and runners. He told himself not to stare but he couldn’t help taking sly peeks. James was wearing swim briefs under his jeans, black of course. It was obvious he spent his time doing manual labor as his body was powerful, his muscles sleek and defined. And—as Thomas had wondered more than a few times—his freckles didn’t stop at his shoulders.

Afraid he’d do something stupid, he turned away and made a show of untying his shoes. What would be like to run his tongue over James’s skin, over each freckle, connecting dot to dot to—

“You coming?”

He looked up.

James was standing in shin-high water and tying his hair back with an elastic band. Standing there in the clear, calm surf, he suddenly seemed elemental, as if he belonged in the water or the water belonged to him…

Swallowing thickly, Thomas sat his shoes on the sand and nodded. “I am.”

He stepped into the warm water, catching his breath at the pleasure of it. He needed to remember this when he got back to cold, grey England—how the sand beneath his feet was firm and giving at the same time, how the water felt on his shins, then thighs, then hips. James was a few feet away, the water almost to his chest. If he wanted, he could let the waves carry him closer until he was up against James’s back.

“This breakwater is over a hundred years old,” James called out without looking around.

“It certainly looks it.”

“It was intended to be a safe harbor for turn-of-the-century tycoons but it was only used a few times.”

“That’s a shame.” The water was at his shoulders now.
“You’re going to need to swim in a moment.” James turned. “You can swim, can’t you?”

He made a face. “Do you honestly think I’d let you drag me out here if I couldn’t?”

James had the nerve to grin. “Just checking.”

Irritation cleared his mind of lust and he caught up with James easily. They swam out together. When they got to the dock, they grabbed it at the same time.

“Okay,” James said, barely breathing hard at all. “The seabed is only about thirteen feet down so we’re going to free dive. We’re just going to have a look, then come right back up. I’m hoping that the sun at this angle will make it easier to see.” He grinned, a challenging glint in his eye. “Ready?”

“What do you think?”

With a snort, James flipped like a seal and was down. Thomas took a deep breath and followed less gracefully.

He thought the water would be as clear as glass, but it wasn’t. It was a murky blue with a line of sight of about five meters. The sea floor wasn’t quite as he’d imagined, either. It was barren of everything but white sand and the occasional sea plant. Even the marine life was sparse, though a few striped fish darted here and there. He wasn’t much of a swimmer and it felt strange, being down so far, his senses dampened by the water; he wondered if he was going to panic.

James, though, was already on the sea floor; he looked up and waved.

Somehow that eased Thomas’s apprehension and the pressure on his chest faded away.

When he joined James on the floor, he saw that an area roughly four meters by three had been marked with weighted tags. James began to clear the center, brushing away the sand to reveal a flat, dark length of material. It was a piece of a plank, Thomas realized with a jolt of surprise—stupidly, he’d been expecting a chest full of gold. He bent and touched the plank. It felt rubbery, not like wood at all and he brushed more sand away, trying to see how long it was, how thick it was.

James tugged on his arm but he pulled away. There was a bit of decoration on the lower end, maybe a—

James made a sound, expressed in bubbles. He grabbed Thomas’s arm and pushed off the sea floor; they were up in an instant.

Thomas reached for the dock, holding on tight as he caught his breath and rubbed the salt water from his eyes. “That was amazing. Is it just a bit of wood or a whole plank? It can’t be a whole ship, of course, because this area is far too shallow but what if it was? I’m sure there’s a way to date the wood. How old do you think it is? It would be too much to hope that it—” Seeing James’s expression, his deep frown, his excitement ebbed and he ended with a sour, “I suppose you’re angry with me again. What is it with you and—”

James leaned forward and kissed him.

A brush of lips on lips but it shut Thomas up as desire hit like a bolt of lightning. Without thinking, without caution, he let the waves push him forward.

James’s lips were cool but his mouth was warm, sour from the beer, sweet from something like mint. Thomas let go of the dock and grabbed James’s shoulder, tipping his head for a better angle. With a groan, James wrapped an arm around his waist and opened to him. He dove in, a coil of warmth
flooding his belly.

Just that, kissing in the buoyant water, losing his grip on James’s shoulder only to find it again, heart shaking because James had managed to slip a few fingers under the band of his swim briefs. Who would have thought a man prone to such anger, who had been rewarded for his ‘special skill set’ of violence could kiss like that? The thought made him shiver and he pulled away.

The falling sun burnished James’s hair and skin a sharp red-gold. His eyes were wide and so very blue, almost the color of the water.

“Well,” Thomas said.

James smiled. “Well.”

***

James had driven to the site at a breakneck pace but now he drove sedately, as if he had all the time in the world. It was a little frustrating and Thomas told himself to calm down, that James—and the big bed—weren’t going anywhere.

So he busied himself with focusing on the mundane: the fact that he wanted to learn more about the wreck, that he really needed to work out more because that swim shouldn’t have tired him so, and that he really, really hated wearing wet clothes.

“It will take us about fifteen minutes to get to your hotel,” James said, glancing over. “I’ve got some jeans in the back if you want to change.”

Thomas stopped fidgeting. “It’s all right.”

“No one will see.”

James had put on his sunglasses, but he was smiling, just barely and Thomas’s heart jerked. “I can wait.”

***

This time, when they got to the pool it was empty but the dining area was not. Dinner was full on—waiters scurried here and there, taking orders and serving drinks. The two women who had stared at them earlier sat at a nearby table. Their companions must either be at the bar or doing whatever drunk American companions did.

“Should I stay out here while you change your clothes?”

He hesitated, then turned around. James had stopped as well. He’d taken off his sunglasses and was gazing at Thomas with narrowed eyes and a blank expression. He started to ask what was going on when James glanced, very quickly, at the women.

His acceptance of his sexuality hadn’t been a large, momentous event. Barring the incident with Miranda and telling his parents, he couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t known he was gay and he had never much cared who else knew.

But he’d had the benefit and security of his status; James had none of that. Even in this day and age, even with the newfound acceptance practiced by the military, there was no way to weed out historical bigotry. Surviving in that world would have required a certain amount of subterfuge and lying. Who could blame James for lying to himself?
He went back to James, close enough that they wouldn’t be overheard but not close enough to make him uncomfortable. “I’m not going to try to convince you to ignore them, that even though they don’t know you, their opinion doesn’t matter. I’ll just say that I like you and want to spend time with you, however way you want. Whether you stay here or come with me, it’s your choice.”

James’s mouth tightened to a thin line but he didn’t argue or deny. He just nodded shortly and said, “After you.”

***

“First thing’s first,” Thomas said calmly, wanting to keep things casual and non-confrontational. He sat the key card and his sunglasses on a table. “I have got to get out of these wet clothes. They’re driving me crazy.”

He went into the bedroom without waiting for an answer and turned on the bedside light, then began to strip.

He’d taken of his shirt and was peeling off his wet shorts when he felt an odd weight come over him, that same feeling of before, as if the air pressure around him had changed. He looked over his shoulder.

Once again barefoot, James was in the doorway, watching him, his gaze direct and open with an underlying expression that Thomas couldn’t parse.

So much for casual, so much for caution, and Thomas dragged his shorts down, then kicked them away. He turned and waited.

Like a rushing wave, James was on him in a moment, pulling his head down, kissing him again and again, almost biting, muttering something too low for Thomas to hear. He pushed, shoving Thomas back until his knees hit the edge of the mattress.

Thomas fell onto the bed, onto his back, deliberately displaying himself. “Your turn,” he murmured, stroking his own chest. “Take off your clothes for me.”

James made a low, rough sound and pulled off his t-shirt and then jeans and then finally, slowly, his damp swim briefs.

It wasn’t a performance, just the simple effort of discarding clothes, but Thomas felt as if it were, felt that while James uncovered his body he was revealing his soul. He held out his hand and once more, James was there, crawling onto the bed, crawling between his legs and settling down.

The first touch of body to body was always a shock and Thomas groaned, loving the cool feel of James on him, his heavy weight pushing him into the giving bedclothes and mattress. It wasn’t quite enough, however and he pulled James in tight, kissing whatever he could reach.

James bit his chin and then his jaw. “I don’t have anything.”

The feeling of James’s breath on his throat was making him a little crazy and he grabbed the back of James’s head, silently asking for more. “Neither do—” James bit his neck and he arched, losing track of what he was saying, needing a moment before he could finish, “…I, which means we’d never make it in the Boy Scouts.”

James stopped kissing, then slowly looked up.

“What?” Thomas murmured, reaching up to stroke the faint trace of beard along James’s jaw, then
tugging at a thick length of his wet hair. “I can’t make a joke?”

It was odd, the moment, one he stored away for the future because it was as if he’d fit a key into James’s lock. James said nothing but his expression cleared, exposing the thing he’d been trying to hide: hunger. Was this what he’d been like when he’d met Miranda? Defenseless, almost vulnerable, with no hint of hidden rage or anger?

It made Thomas unutterably sad, incredibly grateful, and he reached for James’s hand. Making sure he was watched, he kissed the tips of James’s fingers, one by one. When he was done, he tugged again, this time wrapping his leg around James’s thighs. Sighing at the pressure, at the way James had closed his eyes in delight, he murmured, “Never mind anything fancy, we’ll make do with just us, okay?”

James kissed him and stroked his thigh. “Okay. Just us.”

***

Someone was singing outside, a soft rhythmic up and down that seemed familiar. Thomas opened his eyes.

They’d forgotten to turn off the light after the second go and the bright yellow made his eyes ache. He craned his neck to see the clock—it was ten-thirty.

James was still in his arms, draped over him, fast asleep. His hair tie had come off and his damp hair was all over the place. That was Thomas’s fault—during the second time, James had gone down on him and he really had lost his mind. He couldn’t remember the whole thing, just that he’d quoted something right before he came. If that weren’t enough, he was pretty sure it hadn’t been Shakespeare.

He grinned, not caring at all, still caught in a post-sex daze.

Normally, he never slept after sex. Normally, he gave it some time so as not to insult his partner, then got up, cleaned up, and went back to work. Popular culture said that men were designed to pass out after sex. He hadn’t found it to be so, but maybe that was just him.

What did it mean that he’d almost passed out after that second time and had slept long and hard? That he was just tired or getting old? He was almost forty-three, after all.

He was still wondering when he heard a slight buzz from the other side of the room. It was a soft sound but loud enough and James jerked, then groaned. “Is that yours or mine?”

“I think it’s mine. Can you…?”

James rolled to his back.

Thomas got out of bed. “It’s probably Eleanor.” He went to his bag and fished through it. The mobile stopped ringing and then immediately started up again. “We’re leaving for Tortola tomorrow; maybe—” He stilled as he remembered. “Shit!” he muttered, pushing clothes out of the way.

He’d been in a rush earlier, trying to find his swim shorts because he’d been sure he’d packed them and James had said they needed to hurry. He’d left his mobile behind and— “There you are.” He found it and turned it on. There were messages, all right—a handful of missed calls and eight texts, all from Idelle, all increasingly frantic.

“Do you want me to give you some privacy?”
He looked up at James, absently saying, “Of course not. It’s just my assistant.” He debated texting versus calling and decided that she deserved to hear from him directly.

She answered on the first ring. “If you’re not in emergency, you better get there because I am so—”

“I know, I know,” he said soothingly, running his hand over his hair. “I’m sorry. I forgot to—”

“I’ve been texting and texting. You promised. You said you’d ring as soon as you landed and when you didn’t I told myself, well, he’s on holiday even though it’s also a business trip but then you didn’t ring and I didn’t know what to think.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “It won’t happen again.”

“I almost rang your parents, that’s how worried I was.”

He grimaced. “I’m glad you didn’t—my father doesn’t know I’m down here.” He glanced up to find James on his side, propped up on one elbow, watching him.

“Well, that’s all right then,” Idelle said with a sniff, “If he rings, I’ll tell him you’re on a fact-finding junket.”

He grinned at her pretend snooty tone. “Why are you even up? It’s, what, two in the morning not to mention the weekend?”

“I just got home from a do at Eme’s. I’m still buzzed.”

He closed his bag, then went back to the bed. “Make sure you sleep in.”

“Wait, before you go, I transferred the phones and someone called, a Lord Somebodyorother—I wrote it down; hold on…”

Before he could get into bed, James picked up a pillow and turned it sideways. Thanking him with his eyes, Thomas got in, back against the pillow.

“Here we are,” Idelle said. “A Lord Monty Montague called to see if you two were still on for Friday. Lord Monty? I thought I knew all your peerish friends.”

“That’s just Lord Dunster; he was having some fun with you.”

“He was being a jumped-up ass, you mean.”

He snorted and relaxed back in the pillow. “He thinks he’s funny.” He reached for James’s hand. “Email him and tell him, yes, we’re still on for Friday.”

“What about the luncheon thingy next week? That’s still a go, right?”

“Yes, the luncheon thingy is still a go.” He laced his fingers with James’s and held both against his own chest. “Any news on that front?”

“No one has called or emailed to cancel. You’re going to have a full house, Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“P-ram called. I told him you were out of town and he asked where. When I told him I couldn’t give him your location, he freaked out. What should I do if he rings again?”
Pickram. No doubt he was the one that had left all those messages. “Just ignore his calls for the time being. If he presses the issue, ring me immediately.”

“I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Yes, Idelle, you were very right. I should have listened to you.” James had begun to stroke Thomas’s chest with his thumb.

“Hmph,” she said and even over the phone, he could hear the satisfaction in her voice.

“I’ll ring tomorrow, I promise.”

“If you don’t, I’m coming down there.”

“Next time you will, but for now, just be patient. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the next few days, okay?” When she didn’t answer, he asked again more firmly, “Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

He smiled again. “See you next week. Take care of yourself.”

“You, too.”

He disconnected, tossed the mobile on the bedside table and slid down to face James, taking the pillow with him. “Did you get any of that?”

“Only the first bit. Why was she angry?”

“I promised I’d ring and forgot. She’s got an imagination that to call ‘vivid’ would be an understatement.”

“Did she think you’d been eaten by sharks?”

“Either that or kidnapped by modern day pirates.”

“There were plenty around these parts a long time ago but not so much now. What did you mean about listening to her?”

“It’s just Pickram.”

James pulled away and sat up. “What’s he up to?”

Thomas raised one eyebrow. “If I tell you, are you going to jump on the next plane to go beat him up?”

“Don’t be stupid,” James muttered.

“It’s just P-ram being P-ram.” He ran the back of his hand over the pale ginger hair on James’s thigh. “And, yes, before you ask, that’s Idelle’s word for him.”

James lay back down, only this time he pulled Thomas close. “‘P-ram.’ I like her already.”

“Of course you do.”

James stroked Thomas’s hip, lightly tracing the faint scar he’d had since university. “Thomas? Did you know that I was in line for Pickram’s position?”
He stopped James’s hand. “Pardon me?”

“I was to be your liaison, not Pickram. Hennessey had groomed me for it—I spent almost ten months preparing. Hennessey said he needed someone who was smart but also discreet. He couldn’t tell me what the work entailed, only that I’d be working with Lord Alfred Hamilton’s son and that I might need to establish a base somewhere in the Caribbean. I read up on the area and created a list of contacts that might be helpful; I even visited Tortola a couple times to get the intel I needed. That’s how I met Eleanor.”

“Why did Hennessey choose Pickram? What happened?”

James’s face grew dark. “Hume happened, Miranda’s death happened. By the time I was cleared of all charges, it was too late. Your father had been pressuring Hennessey to make a decision and he chose the next candidate.”

“Pickram.”

“Yes.”

He rested his head on his arm and edged his leg between James’s. What would have been like to work with James instead of Pickram? Pickram wasn’t a complete idiot but he had no imagination, no fire. He’d never gathered lists of contacts, had never stepped foot on any of the British-held islands. He’d gone to Nassau once, but that had been a two-day gambling holiday. “James?” he said absently.

“Mm?”

“I’ve been thinking—when did you get the message? The text that told you that Miranda was in trouble?”

“A few minutes before I landed in Heathrow.”

“Who sent it to you?”

James opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“In all that followed, you never thought about that, did you? It was from a stranger, wasn’t it?”

James nodded.

“And this trip you were on, it was in preparation for working with me, wasn’t it? Who else knew about it?”

James nodded again, this time a frown forming. “Only a few people, Hennessey among them.”

“So you return from a mission that’s not secret but not common knowledge, either, and a stranger calls you right when you land to tell you that someone you care about is in danger. Don’t you think that’s odd?

“What are you getting at, Thomas?”

“You tell me that you were in line for a posting, one that would no doubt advance your career, one that you had worked on for almost a year and then suddenly it’s gone?”

James pulled away and sat up again. “Are you saying that Pickram sabotaged me?”
“I’m saying that Pickram was either very lucky or very sneaky.” He pushed up on one arm and took James’s hand. “Think on this—why would Hume drive all that way to Regent’s Park? You said you’d gone to Miranda’s flat, right? That’s a good three miles away. More importantly, why would she even go with him? She wasn’t stupid and she wasn’t careless.”

“No,” James said thoughtfully, “she wasn’t.” And then he shook his head. “It just doesn’t make sense—how could Pickram know Hume would have a gun?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it wouldn’t have mattered. What would have happened if there’d been some bad press involving you, Hume and Miranda? Say, a lover’s triangle gone wrong? Would you have received the promotion?”

“No,” James said slowly. “If the press got wind of it, they’d hound Miranda and I for days, maybe weeks.”

“And in the meantime my father is pressuring Hennessey to make a decision. If I know my father, and I do, ‘pressuring’ is too kind a word; ‘Threatening’ would be more like it.”

Neither of them said anything for a long moment, then Thomas murmured absently, “The thing that still bothers me is Miranda. She was too smart to fall for any tricks.”

James looked down. “Miranda may have been smart but she wasn’t in the best of moods when I saw her last.”

“When was that?”

“Two weeks before she died.”

That would be about the time that James had left for Tortola and he remembered Eleanor’s words about a ‘romantic disappointment.’ “What happened?” he asked slowly, not sure if he wanted to hear the answer.

Gently, James withdrew his hand from Thomas’s and clasped his arms over his knees. “We were at dinner and she made a joke about the couple at the next table. They were having a fight and it turned out the husband had cheated on the wife with her best friend. Miranda said that would never happen to her because her best friend was a man.” James looked up. “She meant you.”

He was right—he didn’t want to hear this and the lovely post-sex feeling disappeared. “What did you say?”

James shrugged. “Nothing for a moment. She asked me what was wrong and I just—” He winced and then shook his head again, as if shying away from a great pain. “I told her I had to speak to her. I paid for dinner, then got up and waited for her outside. We walked a while and then she asked what was wrong again and I told her.”

“That you were gay?”

James frowned and looked away. “I said I was bi and that I wasn’t sure what that meant, just but she had to know.”

He told himself not to be angry at James’s prevarication and then gathered the sheet over his hips, knowing what the gesture meant, unable to help himself. “How long had you been seeing her?”

“Six months.”
Don’t be angry, don’t be angry... “What happened?”

“What do you think?”

He gave James a steely look.

“Sorry,” James muttered, adding, “She shouted, then cried. I felt awful, Thomas, truly.”

He nodded, unable to speak.

“I shouldn’t have asked her out in the first place but she kept after me.”

He cleared his throat. “She was hard to resist when it came to things that mattered to her and you obviously did.”

James rubbed his chin on his arm. “I always wondered if she ever had time to hate me for what I’d done to her. When she was dying, I mean.” He glanced over at Thomas. “Do you think she did?”

He pushed away the mental picture of Miranda on the cold ground, her blank eyes turned towards the night sky. He couldn’t think about that right now. “Miranda didn’t have it in her to hate like that; it wasn’t her way.”

“You’re mad at me.”

“I’m not mad, James, I’m—” He broke off, unsure what to say because he kept hearing, ‘I know you’ll love him as I do.’ Jesus Christ.

Miranda had been a remarkable woman but she hadn’t been a saint. When he’d lied to her by asking her to marry him, that had been one thing, a mistake born of his true love for her and a weak attempt at convention. She had loved him, but she’d fallen in love with James had that would have been a different kind of love. Knowing her, she’d jumped into the relationship with her wholeheart because she’d never did anything by half. “She started dating Hume after that?”

“I think so. They’d would have only had the opportunity to go out a few times.”

It didn’t sound like something Miranda might do but maybe she was clutching at straws at that point.

“Should I go?”

“I don’t know.”

James frowned and shoved the covers out the way.

“James?” he said quietly. “I’m being honest here.”

James hesitated, half turned. “I know.”

“The love I felt for Miranda—” He shrugged away the sharp pain. “I’ve never experienced anything like it. We met when we were five. Every problem I ever had, every problem she ever had was made easier because of each other. If she had allowed it, I would have gladly married her. We would have worked around the sex, but we would have been so happy, I know it.”

“Thomas, I—”

“I’m not finished.” He reached out and touched the back of James’s hand. “The problem is, there is something between you and I. I know that, as well.”
James nodded slowly.

“When I saw you at that pub there was a moment where I was sure I knew you.” He saw it again, felt it again, that brief point of time, the world around him growing dark, leaving James the only bright spot... “I don’t understand it or know what to call it, but it meant something to me.”

James turned his hand to hold Thomas’s. “Me, too.”

“I’ve known you less than forty-eight hours but the thought of not seeing you again—” He broke off and squeezed James’s hand. “I just need some time to process it, that’s all.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“No, but you needn’t stay if you’re uncomfortable.”

James gave him a long look, then lay back down.

This time it was Thomas that rested against James, gingerly, as if James were a bomb that would explode any minute. “Are you hungry? I could order room service.”

“I’m fine.”

“What are you plans for tomorrow?”

“I need to pick up some equipment and then take it out to the site.”

“You’re starting work tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

The tall windows looked out over the ocean and he could see the full moon. It was just behind a tree and shone a clear, bright white. It was the kind of moon one would see on marketing brochures or television adverts. Talk about a cliché: the full moon, the ocean. If he asked James to go for a walk, what would he say? Yes? No? Either would be unbearable because James might be here with him in body but he was barely breathing, his spirit so far away, he might as well be on that bright, white moon.

Thomas wouldn’t have thought he could relax in such a state, but he did, lulled to sleep by the steady beat of James’s heart. He even slept soundly.

When he woke at dawn he was surprised and not surprised to find that the sheets were cold and that James was gone.

***

He went to Eleanor’s room after ordering a breakfast he couldn’t eat and rang the bell. When she opened the door, she didn’t say a word; she waved him in and then poured him a glass of bourbon.

***

“So what do you think?” Eleanor said, hands on hips, gazing at the complicated diagram made up of a whiteboard, a rainbow of Post-its and Eleanor’s rather sloppy handwriting.

‘I think I bit off more than I can chew. I think Father is never going to agree to any of this. I think I’ll
“go mental if James doesn’t return my calls.” “I think we have our work cut out for us but I think it’s doable. The only red flag I see Max. Are you sure she’ll be able to pull off her part?”

“Trust me, Max can handle herself. She’s been working the drug cartels for a while now—with the incentives we’re offering, she’ll be able to convince them that their presence in Tortola won’t pay off in the short term or long term. Some will be a problem but most will not. Tortola hasn’t been a cash cow for them for a long while because of the uptick in arrests and fines.”

He nodded. “We just have to establish a foothold.” He straightened a Post-it. “What did she say when you told her I was here?”

Eleanor gave him a sideways glance. “Does it matter? You’re leaving tomorrow.”

“It matters if she feels you’ve betrayed her trust. You did tell me that she wanted to operate on the sidelines and keep me at a distance.”

Eleanor shrugged. “I’ll tell her tomorrow. I have to go to Nassau, in any case.”

“I thought you said she operated out of the Dominican Republic?”

“She does. She’s going to see Anne.” She gave him another glance. “They’re a thing.”

“Oh.”

“That’s between you and I. Anne would kill me if she knew I told you—she’s a very private person.”

He glanced down at his mobile sitting innocently on Eleanor’s desk. He’d had recent dealings with another very private person; it wasn’t a comfortable position to be in. “My lips are sealed.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on between you and Flint?”

“No, I am not.”

She raised her eyebrows at his tone. “Okay, then I need to know if it’s going to be a problem.”

He started to tell her to mind her own business, then remembered his conversation with James. “No,” he said with a slight smile. “It won’t.”

“Good, because we need to condense all that—” She nodded to the white board. “Into a two page document that your average MP can understand.”

“We’re doomed.”

“You said it.”

***

Thomas left Tortola on Wednesday.

All his efforts to get in touch with James had been in vain. He told himself there could be a dozen reasons why James hadn’t called him back, the most reasonable being that he’d pissed James off and James was dealing with it by ignoring him.

That seemed, however, too juvenile. James had, by his own admission, run from issues before but that meant little. If James’s real job was as secretive as it seemed, anything could have happened;
anything probably had.

He could always hire a boat to take him to the site. It would be embarrassing if his worries were for nothing, but at least he’d know.

But no; he was just going to have to trust that James had understood why he’d said what he said, why he’d needed time.

It was ironic and probably cosmic payback—he’d asked for time and he’d received it. Next time he’d ask for something a little more specific, like an hour of space, maybe two.

Snorting softly at his own conflicting desires, he settled back in the seat and picked up a newspaper only to set it down immediately. He wasn’t in the mood to read, wasn’t in the mood to work and he wasn’t tired. He should have brought a crossword as those generally put him right to sleep.

He’d picked up the paper again and was reading an article on blueberries and why they were so good for one, when his mobile buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and turned it on. It was a text from Idelle:

‘r u on yr way?’

He texted back, ‘I am. Should be there by midnight.’

‘good cause i need to talk to you’

‘Are you all right?’

“sorry. didnt mean to worry you. Im fine. Ive got a friend that needs a job’

‘What kind of job?’

‘Anything. She’s done with university and needs work.’

‘We’ll talk when I get home.’

‘ur the best boss evr. dont tell her i told you but shes the daughter of your friend, lord Ashe’

It took him a minute to parse the note, then he sent back: ‘Abigail? Yes, I know her. Bring her by the office next week.’

‘cool’

‘See you in a few days.’

Idelle answered by sending him a half dozen emoticons, all in the shape of various smiley faces. He grinned and was about to set the mobile back down when he realized he hadn’t gone through his messages. They would all be from Pickram, of course, but it was best to make sure and he rolled his eyes at his own self-deception. He’d had his mobile on stand-by for the last three days. If James had called, he would have known.

The first message was from his mother, reminding him that his father’s birthday party was less than five weeks away and she still needed to know if he was bringing any of his women friends. It was her subtle way of asking if he’d suddenly come to his senses and had turned straight. He deleted her message gladly.

The next three were from Pickram, asking how he was doing, asking what he was doing. He deleted
those with equal pleasure. The next four were from Idelle. It was good he’d called when he had—
she was almost incoherent with worry in the last one.

He’d need to make it up to her in some way and he muttered, “Damn,” cursing his distraction. If he’d
been thinking right, he would have bought her something in Tortola or Nassau; a scarf, a mug—
she’d appreciate anything. He’d make it up to her in the summer by giving her a week off and a
plane ticket to wherever she wanted. That decided, he listened to the last message from an unknown
number.

‘Thomas, it’s James.’

He’d done such a good job at convincing himself that he wouldn’t be hearing from James that he
actually dropped the mobile, turning it off when he grabbed at it. “Damn it,” he swore again, turning
it back on.

Why did Apple make these things so slow? You’d think for a flagship product that cost almost eight
hundred pounds, they could make it a little faster. Finally, it was up and running; he found the
message and listened intently:

‘Thomas, it’s James. This isn’t the coward’s way out, I promise. You’re asleep and I don’t want to
wake you. I just got a call from Gates. There’s a problem with the equipment order and I need to fly
to Florida to straighten it out. I have no idea how long I’ll be but it will be at least three days. You
said you were leaving on Wednesday which means I probably won’t see you for a while. I’ll try to
call before then. If not—’

James stopped speaking and Thomas heard a noise, a soft sound and then a muted grind. James had
just shifted the gears on the Land Rover.

‘Sorry, I’m at the airport and I gotta go. I just wanted to let you know that I—’ There was a long
pause. ‘Anyway, take care of yourself. I’ll be in touch.’

And that was it. It wasn’t a, Thanks for the great sex; have a good life goodbye, but not what he’d
been hoping for, either. It served him right. He should have just kept quiet about Miranda. He’d hurt
James, even though he’d spoken nothing but the truth.

In a thoroughly bad mood, he reclined the seat and closed his eyes. He might as well relax and rest
up for the week to come.

He managed all of maybe two minutes before he reached for the phone again to listen to James’s
message one more time.

***

Tempus fugit, my ass, Thomas thought sourly as he stared out the window at the ugly grey river
beneath the ugly grey sky. Time didn’t fly. It trudged, it stalled, it fucking plodded.

It wouldn’t be so bad if he’d had any word from Eleanor other than, ‘Still verifying,’ and, ‘Waiting
on Flint.’

It also wouldn’t be so bad if James would just call. He’d sent a single text, ‘Am in the middle of
something; will contact you soon,’ two days after Thomas had gotten back to London and that had
been it. Ten days now and nothing more.

“Still no word?”
Idelle was standing in the door, her faint self showing in the window’s reflection. “From Pickram or Eleanor Guthrie?”

“Either?” Idelle said. “Both?”

“Eleanor said she’s waiting on some information from one of her contacts,” he lied easily, turning to sit down at the desk. “As to Lieutenant Pickram, I’m sure we’ll hear soon.” There’d been a very brief email from Hennessey asking for Thomas’s patience while they worked out a small issue of protocol.

Idelle came and sat on the edge. “Is that contact Mr. Flint?”

“It is.”

“What’s up with him, then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Flint. I mean, you’re fairly tight-lipped about him.”

“And?”

“And, he’s Miss Guthrie’s main contact down in the Caribbean, right?”

“He is.”

“But you don’t know anything about him.” She picked up the crystal seagull paperweight Miranda had given him when he’d got his master’s. “At least, not that you’re telling me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Got it.” She sat the paperweight down. She kicked her heels against the desk, saying absently, “I wonder what happened to P-ram. One day he’s here, the next he’s not.”

They’d been through the Pickram discussion more than a few times and he was as tired of it as he was tired of everything else. “Have you finished your work for the day?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “It’s not yet ten.”

He shrugged. “Let’s play hooky.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“It’s been ages since I’ve been to a cinema.”

Her entire face brightened. “Seriously? What would you like to see?”

Anything that will help me forget the project. Anything that will help me forget James. “Anything you want.”

She raised her eyebrow, giving him a doubting look. “Are you sure? I go in for action and sci-fi.”

He turned his laptop towards her. “Take your pick of venue and title, my treat.”

***

In retrospect, letting Idelle pick the film might not have been the best decision. The new Mission Impossible was one thing, but the new Mission Impossible on the giant BFI Imax screen was
something else and as they exited the tunnel that brought them up near Waterloo Bridge, his ears were ringing.

Still, it had been a great way to kill a few hours. He’d forgotten everything in the chaos of the plot, fast cars, and Tom Cruise hanging off an airborne plane.

He glanced at his watch. “It’s only three. Feel like stopping by the Olde Rose?”

“I didn’t shut down my computer,” Idelle said around her unfinished Pepsi.

“That doesn’t matter. We’ll pick up our stuff; it’s on the way.”

“Then lead on.”

He nodded to the waiting line of taxis. “Tube or cab?”

“Let’s walk,” Idelle said. “That will give us time to chat.”

He smiled and gave her his elbow. “What about?”

“The film, what else? You always have to pick apart a movie after you’ve seen it. Didn’t you know that?”

“I didn’t but I’m game; I’ll even start: Tom Cruise managed to wreck a significant amount of automobiles.”

“Yeah, he did, and he looked hot while doing it.”

He tipped his head, conceding the point. “That’s true, thanks to all that surgery.”

She pinched his arm. “He never.”

He grinned. “Do I sense a crush?”

“Ever since I was ten.”

“Ten? You started out young.” He’d been a closet geek at the age of ten, head buried in every adventure book on he could find.

“Please. Eme and I were cutting out pictures of Leonardo DiCaprio from People mag when we were six. Well,” she added with a shrug, “maybe nine; my mum didn’t like us using scissors.”

“He probably used Botox, too,” he said, glancing at her out of the side of his eyes.

She reacted joyfully, telling him why he was wrong, all the way across the bridge and up the Embankment.

***

“No, she didn’t.”

“Yes, she did.”

“You’re lying.”

He laughed outright at her horrified expression and gestured for her to exit the lift. “I am not. I met her; she clearly had work done.”
Idelle’s face crumpled in a pretend frown. “Don’t tell me any more. You’re ruining my childhood.”

He got out his keys. “I’m sorry,” he said, not contritely.

She started to answer, then stopped short and grabbed his arm. “Thomas? Someone’s in the office.”

There was indeed, two someones by the look of it, though he could only see their shadowy figures through the frosted glass. “It might be the cleaning crew getting a start on the weekend,” he murmured, thinking anything but. Unless the cleaning crew cleaned by standing still, they had visitors.

“I locked the door.”

“I know you did; I saw you do it.”

He started off down the hall but she grabbed his arm. “Where are you going?”

“To see who it is. Stay here.”

“I don’t think so,” Idelle whispered fiercely. She dug through her purse and brought out a small canister of pepper spray.

He couldn’t help a small smile. “Just keep me out of the line of fire if you use that thing. I like my eyes the way they are.”

“They might be industrial spies. What if they have knives or guns?”

“They won’t.” He was a few meters away from the door. “And I hardly think our operation would be of any interest to any type of spy, industrial or otherwise.” ‘I hope,’ he added silently as he reached for the doorknob and opened the door.

He was right; it wasn’t industrial spies though he wasn’t sure about the ‘otherwise.’ It was James and Admiral Hennessey. James was at the bookshelf with a book in his hand while Hennessey was sitting in a chair. “You see, Idelle?” Thomas said with false cheerfulness, unable to look at James which was all right because James was looking everywhere but at him. “Not thieves or spies.”

“My lord,” Hennessey said as he stood and smiled with no small amount of embarrassment. “I got your key from Lieutenant Pickram. We were just leaving.”

A very obvious lie but Thomas just said, “I take it this visit has something to do with my missing liaison?” Idelle had come to stand beside him; she was practically drinking the drama in.

Hennessey glanced at Idelle. “If we could talk in private?”

“He gestured to his office, giving James a lightning-quick once over. He was wearing a black wool suit with a pristine white shirt and a pale blue tie. He’d gotten his hair cut, trimmed even with his jawline; his earring and rings were gone.

Feeling dizzy, as if he’d just stepped into an alternate reality, Thomas asked, “Would either of you care for some tea, coffee or water?”

“No, thank you,” Hennessey said. “We’ve got to be at Whitehall in …” He peered at his watch. “Forty-five minutes.”

James said nothing.
Thomas nodded and closed the door on Idelle’s frustrated face, giving her a, ‘Sorry. I’ll tell you later,’ look. He waited until they were all seated before saying, “What happened to Lieutenant Pickram?”

“About that…” Hennessey glanced at James. “Lieutenant McGraw will give you the details.”

Thomas glanced sharply at James. ‘Lieutenant McGraw.’ So James had told the truth—he’d never been sacked and seemed to be back in the fold. Thomas wanted to apologize, but of course couldn’t.

James cleared his throat and said, “After you left Nassau, I contacted Admiral Hennessey regarding your suspicions about Lieutenant Pickram. He asked that I fly back to London to investigate.”

“You’ve been in London these last two weeks?”

“I have.”

That was upsetting to say the least, but he just nodded calmly. “What did you find?”

“Emails and texts dating back five years. Messages sent on official devices via official channels that Pickram never deleted.”

“What did they say?”

“I’ll take that one,” Hennessey said with a slight grimace. “We discovered that Lieutenant Pickram along with another officer under my command conspired against Lieutenant McGraw to deprive him of his position in the most heinous way possible. The result of which resulted in Lady Barlow’s accidental death.”

Thomas picked up a pen. “Are you sure it was an accident?”

“Quite sure,” Hennessy said softly. “Until last week, I was unaware of your connection to Lady Barlow; I’m very sorry.”

He shrugged that away; he didn’t want to discuss his relationship with Miranda with a relative stranger. “I’m assuming the officer in question was Hume?” James still wouldn’t look at him and it was beginning to piss him off.

Hennessey nodded. “It was.”

“So, Pickram convinced Hume to what, seduce Miranda?”

Hennessey crossed his legs. “Their plan was that Hume was to come between Lieutenant McGraw and Lady Barlow in any way possible, in as public a way as possible. They had tipped off various members of the media. When that didn’t work, when James left on holiday, they decided to try something else.”

“Was Hume truly drunk that night or was that all an act, too?”

“Unfortunately, that was very much not an act. He’d been reprimanded in the past and was on his way out.”

“So he saw this as a nothing-to-lose situation?”

Hennessey tipped his head in acknowledgement. “Something like that. In several of his emails, Lieutenant Pickram referenced a reward. We can only assume he meant a monetary one to be given to Hume after he’d been made your liaison.”
He dropped the pen, frowning. “I don’t understand how James’s relationship with Miranda could be used against him. Even if it involved a third party, who would care?”

Hennessey coughed again, shifting as if he were suddenly uncomfortable. “I have known James since he was a boy; because of that I’m sometimes—” Hennessey paused and recrossed his legs.

“You’re harder on him than he deserves because you’re afraid of showing favoritism?” Thomas said calmly, coolly. Finally, that got a response from James, just a flicker of his eyelids, but still…

Hennessey nodded. “Precisely. At the time, there was a lot going on and we’d had several incidences involving the media on unrelated matters. I wasn’t as diplomatic as I should have been. I was adamant that whoever took the position must be as discreet and above board as possible. Lieutenant Pickram knew that and used that.”

He took a deep breath. “So, Hume is dead but Pickram is not. What are you going to do with him?”

“That is none of your concern.”

He straightened up, staring Hennessey straight in the eye. “You’ll have to do better than that. You placed a liar in my employ. He had access to sensitive information that included access to personal email accounts of myself, my assistant and all my contacts on Tortola, as well access to my organization’s financial data.”

“My lord, I can assure you that your privacy will not be compromised. I’ve a team of cyber experts ready examine your computer systems here and at your home. My team has already examined all of Pickram’s devices. We’ve found nothing to indicate that this was a broader conspiracy. If we do, however, find that to be true, we will inform you immediately and we will both decide what to do next.” Hennessey cleared his throat once more. “And that brings me to my next subject.”

“And that is?”

“Me,” James said quietly.

“What about you?”

“I realize that we in the department have much to do in order to regain your trust,” Hennessey said, giving James a very brief glance. “To that end, and with your permission, I’m assigning James as your new liaison. He’ll oversee the examination of your computer systems and work with your financial institutions to ensure there’s been no egress. He’ll also continue the work started by Pickram and act as liaison between your organization, Whitehall and the various other arms of the government. If we find any relationships that need repairing, he and I will undertake those together.”

Thomas sat back in his chair. “And that’s it?”

Hennessey glanced at James and gave a small laugh. “It’s not enough?”

“What about Lieutenant McGraw’s reputation?” he said, suddenly so very angry. “How are you going to repair that? I can’t see that anything but a series of well-placed news articles will do the trick. Have you spoken to your PR department about it?”

“My lord,” James said.

“And what about the things he’s lost in the meantime: his rank, his flat, any financial gains he might have made over the years in terms of invest—”
“My lord,” James interrupted again.

He glanced angrily at James but didn’t stop. “And then there’s the issue of his fellow officers. I’m assuming you’ve a plan for disseminating the information of Pickram’s criminal acts because they all think that—”

“Thomas!”

That did it. He wound down and gave James a dark look. “What?”

Finally, James met Thomas’s gaze. “Other than Eleanor Guthrie, no one can know.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of my work in the Caribbean. Not even my team knew who I was. If I’m to leave that life, I need to do it quietly and permanently. I’ll make up some story of retirement and vanish. I’ll continue to liaise with Eleanor, but I’ll do so from my desk here.”

“And you really think that will work?”

“Yes. People on the islands come and go all the time. No one will connect James Flint with James McGraw. Admiral Hennessey has already obtained approval to bring me back in.”

“If anyone does inquire,” Hennessey added, “we’ll put out a story. In any case, much of James’s recent activity for the department has been of an observation capacity. He was very careful to keep a low profile.”

“And the non-recent activity? What was that?”

“I’m not going to tell you and until James has clearance, he won’t, either.” Hennessey said firmly. “It’s as much for your own protection as his, my lord.”

“We’ll see about that,” he thought as he looked at James. “What about the excavation? You’re willing to just give that up?”

“I’ve already asked Gates to take over; he’s good, he’ll keep them in line.”

“And you’re truly okay with this? That people will never know you were set up?”

“I am. It’s my choice.”

“And that brings my to my third topic and then we have to leave,” Hennessey said, straightening up. “James informed me of everything that has gone on in the past three weeks. The discovery of the DeGroot documents is an incredible find as well as a dangerous one. I consulted with a man I trust and for the time being, we’re allowing the documents to stay where they are. Any request the Board makes has to go on record and we feel that petitioning its return would call undue attention to it.

“As to your project, James has given me the details which were kept from me. I believe that it will ultimately be pointless but perhaps not. James has convinced me that the people of Tortola must be allowed to decide for themselves. If the islands do indeed return to Holland and the Netherlands, perhaps they’ll have that chance. Persuading your father of the same is your problem.”

Hennessey glanced down at his hands, hesitating for the first time. “In regards to your personal relationship with James, he has given me the bare details. I can’t say I’m happy about it, but if this is what he wants, I’ll keep quiet.” Hennessey glanced up from under his brow. “I do, however, expect
you to act with decorum. I know about your antics at Eton. I don’t want James embarrassed by default.”

Thomas, stunned at the turn of events, could only say, “I have no intention of engaging in any kind of antic. The last thing I want is for James to be put in the public eye anymore than he already has.”

Hennessey nodded as if expecting that answer, then stood up. James stood as well. “I’ll step out and give you a moment to chat.” He glanced at James. “Two minutes, yes?”

James nodded.

Hennessey smoothed his coat and nodded. “My lord.” He left the room, leaving behind a vacuum of silence.

“Well,” Thomas said after a moment. “Two minutes.”

“He’s timing us.”

“Let him.”


“Good.” He picked up the paperweight, then sat it back down. “Two minutes isn’t nearly enough time to say what I want to say but, ‘bare details?’”

“I had to be honest with him, Thomas. He’d find out in any case.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I spent the night with you.”

It sounded so cold, so formal. “That’s all?”

“It was all I felt comfortable sharing, especially since—” James broke off and shrugged.

“Since neither of us knows where this thing between us is going?”

James nodded.

“When will you be done for the day?”

“Not for another five or six hours, maybe longer.”

“Then here…” Thomas got out his keys and removed one from the fob. “In case it’s longer. That will open both doors. You can also use the keypad—the code is 99825.” He held the key out but James didn’t take it.

“Thomas—”

“James, go—we can talk tonight.”

With an abrupt nod and a reluctant hand, James took the key and left.

He should be angry. He should be happy. He should be many things and he wasn’t sure which should take precedence. He dropped into his non-ergonomic, ergonomically designed chair and
looked up at the ceiling.
Idelle came in right after. “The scary men are gone.”
“I know.”
“Who were they?”
“Admiral Hennessey and Lieutenant James McGraw.”
“James McGraw is the younger one?”
“He is.”
“He’s super hot.”
He smiled. “He is.”
“Are you all right?”
He sat up and shook his head. “No and yes.” Before she could ask for an explanation, he reached for her hand. “I’ll explain everything, I promise, but not until Monday. I need to rethink our entire plan. Things are going to change for us.”
“Thomas, you’re kind of freaking me out.”
He grinned and squeezed her hand, then let go. “It’s not bad, I promise. In fact, it’s the best thing that could have happened to us. Why don’t you take off now; I have a few emails to send.”
“If you’re sure?”
“I’m sure, and Idelle, about Abigail Ashe?”
She paused at the door. “What about her?”
“Ring her up and see if she can come in for an interview on Tuesday or Wednesday. You’re going to need the help.”
“Okay,” she said with a puzzled but happy frown, closing the door behind her.
Okay. He opened his laptop. He’d send a short note to Eleanor to let her know they needed to talk in person as soon as possible and then one to his bank requesting a meeting. Wondering if he had time to run by the chemist, he began typing:
‘Eleanor, I need you to return to London as soon as you are able...’
***
He had just gotten home and was going through the mail, not paying attention to any of it, when the alarm buzzed and the front door was pushed open. James came in, holding a suitcase and a laptop case.
“Hello,” Thomas said, like an idiot.
“Hello.”
He glanced at his watch. It was barely two hours since James and Hennessey had left his office.
“What happened to five or six hours, maybe longer?”

“I almost crashed the car on the way to Whitehall and then I sent us to the wrong floor in the lift. Hennessey told me to take the weekend off and be ready to work by eight on Monday.” James raised the suitcase. “I went back to my hotel and got my gear.”

There were many things he could say, questions he could ask but he was tired of talking. “James?”

“Yes?”

“I know we’ve things to discuss but would you mind if we pretend that last twenty minutes at the inn never happened? We can talk about it later, if you wish, but for now, I just want to be with you.”

James didn’t blink. “What last twenty minutes?”

He hid a slow smile, tossed the mail down, then reached around James and closed the door. He took James’s laptop case and pulled the strap over his shoulder. “Come on.”

He led the way upstairs sedately, keeping his mind blank, worried what he might do. When they got to his suite, he dropped the case onto the chair and turned to ask James if he needed anything before they got to it.

James had stopped at the threshold and was staring at him.

‘Here we go again,’ Thomas thought with a frustrated sigh.

He was preparing a small speech that would convince James that having sex with him wouldn’t bring the wrath of God down upon them all, when James dropped his luggage.

They met in the middle of the room, a confusion of hands and mouths that was more a mutual attack than foreplay. Thomas managed to rid James of his coat and tie and then his own before guiding James back to the bed, gently shoving. With a startled smile, James fell and then lay there, watching.

Thomas stepped between James’s knees, hesitating. He was actually shaking, which was so ridiculous.

“What is it?” James asked.

“I don’t want to tear your new shirt; maybe you should be the one to take it off.”

“I’ve got others.”

“Yes, but—”

James sighed and then grabbed his own shirt and pulled, ripping it apart, fabric tearing, buttons flying everywhere.

Eyes wide, Thomas breathed, “Wow. I’ve always wanted to see someone do that.”

James rolled his eyes and hooked his finger over Thomas’s belt and pulled him down.

Shoes, socks were next, removed between urgent kisses, then trousers and shorts until they were finally, totally, completely naked.

Thomas rubbed against James’s body like a cat. “James?”
James tipped his head back and groaned. “Yeah?”

“If I asked nicely, would you fuck me?”

James wrapped his leg around Thomas’s thigh and grabbed his ass. “Thomas, you don’t even have to ask nicely.”

He grinned and stretched a long arm for the nightstand. Everything was where he’d put them days ago. He tossed the lubricant and the condoms on the bed while James watched hotly.

“You were wrong,” James muttered.

He pushed up so that he was kneeling and opened the box of condoms. “I’m wrong about many things.” He’d never used this brand before—the box promised security and pleasure; the box better be right. “Which specific point of wrongness did you have in mind?”

“The Boy Scouts,” James said with a glance at the condoms. “You stopped by the chemist’s which means you wanted to be prepared which means would have made the perfect Boy Scout.”

“How do you know I don’t have these on hand all the time? How do you know…” He threw the wrapper over his shoulder. “…that I don’t have a parade of men—and women, I might add—through this bedroom on a weekly basis?”

James took hold of his wrists. “Because I know you.”

His smile faded under the force of James’s gaze. “You’re right. I stopped by the chemist’s on the way home.” He gently pulled free. “Here, let me…”

“Careful,” James warned.

He was, careful and gentle, rolling the condom on James’s cock methodically, almost clinically because he wanted this done right. When he was done, he reached for the lubricant. “Give me your hand,” he whispered, his sunny mood gone, transmuted to something more serious. He’d always preferred to make love in the light, figuratively and literally. It made it easier to send lovers away if he kept things, well, light-hearted.

That wasn’t going to work here, he realized as James slipped his slick hand between his thighs. He wanted this too much, wanted James too much even though the wanting was relatively new, a mere three weeks old.

“Thomas?”

He nodded, feeling the slight pressure of James’s finger, then more as James pressed—“Oh,” he whispered. It had been a while and the pain was greater than he’d remembered.

“Do you want me to stop?”

He’d closed his eyes and he opened them to find James watching him with a frown. “You do and I’ll never forgive you.”

“We can’t have that,” James murmured, pushing deeper.

He shook his head or maybe he’d nodded—he wasn’t quite sure and he sat back, taking James deeper.

James added a second finger and Thomas twisted, reached for James’s hand to force him in because
it wasn’t quite enough when James hit the perfect spot and— “Fuck,” he breathed.

“Thomas,” James said again, this time almost pleading.

He raised up and pulled free of James’s fingers, then moved back. “Help me—”

James guided him and Christ, there it was again and he pressed, dropping on all fours, hands on either side of James’s shoulders. “If my knees give out, you better not stop,” he muttered.

“If your knees give out I’ll catch you.”

He smiled, opening his mouth to make some quip but James thrust up and his thoughts scattered. With a small groan and a smaller, “James,” sat back, a wildness growing in his chest and mind as he began to rock in earnest.

***

He needed to move and he would but he couldn’t just yet. Not until James stopped stroking his back like that, his touch light and heavy, both at the same time.

He felt good, whole. The tiny pain that had been living at the base of his neck for the past few months was gone, though his lower back was beginning to ache.

James kissed his shoulder, murmuring against his skin, “Are you okay?”

“I should be asking you that.”

“I think I am but maybe not.”

He hid his smile against James’s chest. “That answers itself, yes? Watch out—I’m getting up.” James helped him, hands on his waist, pushing him upright. They looked at each other; he wasn’t sure what James saw but what he saw made him very happy. He slid off and down, landing on his side. It was a stupid move and he winced at the slight pain.

James frowned. “Are you sure you’re all right? I didn’t hurt you?”

“No, and it would be worth it, even if you had.” He reached out and ran his hand over the scattering of hair on James’s chest. “Do I have to ask if you enjoyed that?”

“No, Thomas, you don’t need to ask. In fact…” James closed his eyes and stretched, muscles tightening in sharp relief. He relaxed again, removing the condom with a grimace. He leaned over and kissed Thomas, then got up. He went to the bathroom and returned with a washcloth. “When you’re ready, we’ll make sure it wasn’t a fluke. Lift up.”

“Look at you,” Thomas joked softly, lying back to let James wash him, “making jokes.”

James smirked, then returned the bathroom.

He was still lying at an angle, still on James’s shirt and his own trousers. He tossed the latter to the floor and resituated himself, pulling the sheet and covers up.

He turned on his side. It was only five but it seemed later. It had begun to drizzle, a weak, half-hearted attempt at rain that leached the color from the sky and put a gloss on all the patio furniture. He’d meant to cover everything up but had forgotten. He’d also meant to call his landscape designer to discuss ideas for the summer plants. The privacy screens were starting to look a little run-down; maybe they could put in some sort of ivy or creeper that would cover it all.
The bathroom light was turned off and James came back. He got into bed. “Are you hungry?”

“Somewhat.”

“I’ll make something in a while. That is, if you have anything in your refrigerator than isn’t rotten or milk.”

“I haven’t been to the grocers in a while.”

“Which means you get meals delivered.”

He smiled softly. “That’s what it means.” He looked over his shoulder. James was on his side as well, but there was at least two feet of space between them. “Why are you so far away?”

“I was working my way over; this bed is ridiculously large.” James slid closer and put a cautious arm around Thomas’s waist. “Is that better?”

He covered James’s hand with his own and sighed. When he’d woken up this morning, it had been a day like any other. Who would have known that the day would turn out as it had, that the waiting would finally be over? “James?”

James nosed the slope of his shoulder. “Yes?”

“About this secret mission you’ve been on…”

James sighed. “You’re like a dog with a bone, you know that?”

“Yes, but—”

James squeezed, his arm a momentary band around Thomas’s chest. “I’ve told you all I can, so you have a choice—leave it alone or I’ll need to leave you alone.”

“You’d actually do that?”

“Well, no,” James admitted. “I wouldn’t, but I’d ignore you every time you asked.”

“Hmph.”

James kissed him again, this time on the neck. “You’re too used to getting your way.”

Thomas drew a breath of outrage, then let it go with a long breath. “As much as I hate to admit it, you’re right.”

“It’s the way you were raised. I’ve heard stories about your father, I know how it had to have been, growing up in his house. Determined to live in the past, ignoring the fact that things have changed.”

“That’s Father to a T.” He rubbed James’s hand with his thumb. “James?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me about your parents.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“Don’t.”

James hesitated, then said, “All right. My father worked in a shipyard and my mother cleaned
houses.” He hesitated again, as if waiting for a comment from Thomas. When Thomas said nothing, he continued, his voice somehow firming. “We were very poor so we didn’t have a lot of things. My father wanted me to work in the factory, my mother wanted me to go to university. I remember them arguing about it all the time when I was a boy.”

“What happened to her?”

“She died from cancer when I was fifteen.”

He squeezed James hand, not bothering to offer sympathy, knowing James wouldn’t accept it. “I imagine that ruined your relationship with your father.”

“It didn’t help. He wanted me to quit school but I refused. By then, I’d taken my A-levels and—”

He turned over, pushing James back a little. “You took your A-levels when you were fifteen?”

“I took them on the sly when I was fourteen. My teacher managed to sneak me into a center without my father knowing.”

“What were your subjects?”

“Maths, critical thinking, literature and economics.”

“Wow.”

James smiled. “Don’t be so impressed. I failed econ.”

“Meaning you got a B as opposed to an A.”

James shrugged. “It didn’t matter. My father refused to consider college. He said it was too expensive.” He slipped under Thomas’s arm and settled against his chest. “If it weren’t for Hennessey, I would have probably gone to work at the shipyard.”

He pushed a strand of James’s hair behind his ear. “I was going to ask about that.”

James gazed up at him. “About my relationship with Hennessey? He’s the reason why I am where I am, why I am who I am.”

“Tell me.”

“I was at the shipyard one day, delivering my father’s dinner because they were on deadline and he had to stay late. I was never allowed on the factory floor so I always waited in the office. I was sitting there when Hennessey and his men came in. They were to review the progress of a new frigate but had arrived early. I’ll never forget it,” James said, his voice dropping. “They were wearing their uniforms and they looked so stern. Until Hennessey saw me. He smiled and we started talking about boats. I don’t know how long we talked but it seemed forever. My father came in eventually and the next thing I knew, Hennessey was telling my father that I was too bright to be a laborer. He offered me a scholarship to the college and university of my choice.”

“What did your father say?”

“Nothing. I went on to college and he went on with his life. He didn’t attend any of my graduations, though I did get a letter from him when I got my master’s. By then he was quite ill; he died soon after.”

“I’m sorry.”
James rubbed his cheek against Thomas’s chest. “It was a long time ago and Hennessey was there.”

“I’m glad you had him.”

James looked up at him again, his expression changing. He slid his leg over Thomas’s thighs and leaned up to kiss him. “Don’t be sad. For the most part, my life has been a series of lucky chances.”

“Not with a brain like that, it hasn’t been.”

James frowned but before he could dissemble or change the subject, Thomas rescued him by kissing his chin and saying, “I’m hungry. I believe you mentioned cooking?”

***

“Well,” James said.

“I told you,” Thomas answered.

They were standing in front of the open refrigerator, he in his undershorts and James in his jeans. They were looking at the fridge’s contents, which was limited to a very wilted head of lettuce, an empty egg carton, a variety of condiments and two dried up carrots.

“There’s a Tesco not too far from here,” he added. James’s feet were as bare as his chest. He wouldn’t have thought he had a foot fetish, but apparently he was wrong and it was difficult being this close to James without wanting to have sex again. He craned his neck to look out the far window, needing the distraction. “What’s a little rain? We won’t melt.”

James laughed, an actual, real laugh. “No, it’s all right. We’ll order out, but we’re getting groceries tomorrow.”

Thomas closed the refrigerator door. He wasn’t sure of the rules but honesty was generally the best policy. “About that…” He straightened the magnet that Idelle had given him after her trip to Paris, the one in the shape of the Eiffel Tower. “You’re staying the night, yes?”

James hesitated. “If you want.”

He smiled. “I do want, very much.”

It was a signal and they were up against the refrigerator, exchanging open-mouthed kisses that made a mockery of Thomas’s fears.

“Thomas?” James said, moving down to Thomas’s neck.

“Yes?”

“How hungry would you say you are?”

***

They had sex again, this time in the study off the main living room because Thomas insisted they wouldn’t be able to make it up the stairs and he’d rather hurt his knees than his back. He pushed James into the Georgian era chair that had been in the family for twelve generations and went down on him, conscious only of the slow tick of the grandfather clock and James’s strained breaths as he tried not to come too soon.

***
While James showered, Thomas ordered Thai. It arrived at half past six and he carried the bags and two beers upstairs to his sitting room. He was tempted to join James but held off—he didn’t want to overwhelm James with too much and he needed time, himself.

He turned on the TV and was sitting on the loveseat, watching the new report when James came in. He was wearing his black jeans, a long-sleeved black t-shirt and boots. “Did you find everything?”

“I did.”

“Why are you dressed?”

James busied himself with pulling up his sleeves. “About that…”

With all the black, James looked the part of a secret agent, as if he was getting ready to steal state secrets or kidnap someone important. That Tom Cruise movie with Idelle had been a mistake—his imagination was running away with him. “You have to go to work.”

James looked up. “Just for a few hours. I’ll be back by eleven at the latest.”

Disappointed but determined not to show it, he nudged James’s curry with his chopsticks. “You can take the Tesla. Eat something before you go.”

With a relieved smile, James sat down and began to eat.

***

He watched television until eight, then gathered up the empty containers and went downstairs. He washed what needed washing and put the rest in the recycling. Restless, he wandered from the kitchen to the dining room to the study. He stood at the threshold and stared at the chair. When he’d moved, his mother had given him carte blanche on the furnishings from the house in London. He’d taken two pieces: the chair in front of him because it was beautiful and the Louis IV loveseat because Miranda had always liked to sleep on it after they were done playing when they were children.

He should put both in a museum, they were that good, but he wouldn’t. Each now meant something special; he’d never part with either.

Not happy at the realization that James had just reached the Miranda-level of importance, he went back upstairs.

***

He was trying to stay awake and not succeeding when a dark figure crossed the light from the hall. “What time is it?” he asked.

“Almost eleven.”

“Did you get a lot done?” He reached out and turned on the light. James was standing by his luggage, half turned away, stock still. It took Thomas a moment to realize what he was seeing; it appeared he was in a Tom Cruise movie, after all. “Is that a gun?”

James sighed and turned around, taking the gun from a holster underneath his coat. “It is.”

“Do you have a license to carry it?”

“Of course, I do.”
Thomas sat up and wrapped his arms around his knees. “I’m not fond of guns, James.”

“Neither am I.”

“But you need that?”

“I do when I don’t want to keep it in an unsafe place.” He nodded, indicating the room, the house.

“I’ve friends and cousins with children. When they’re here, that…” He nodded to the gun. “…will stay locked away somewhere.”

“Of course.”

He lay back down, then sat back up. “Just to be clear, do you have any other weapons in that bag?”

Without a word, James got out two leather-sheathed, black handled knives of different sizes. He held them up. “I’ll make sure these are with the gun when guests are here.”

“Good.”

It was only when James had gone to the bathroom that Thomas realized what he’d said, what he’d implied. He’d just promised a future he wasn’t sure he could deliver on, one that James might not accept even if he did.

***

By unspoken, hopefully mutual, agreement, they didn’t have sex again; by midnight, James was fast asleep, one heavy arm over Thomas’s chest.

Unable to quiet his mind, Thomas lay there, thinking. Finally, a little before one, he slid from under James’s loose embrace and padded to his study. He opened his laptop and found the message he’d thrown away weeks ago. He hit reply and typed quickly:

‘Mother, I’ve thought about it and yes, I’m bringing a guest to Father’s party. I’ll call next week to give you the details, but I want to make sure none of your paparazzi friends will be in attendance. I’ll explain when I talk to you. Love, Thomas.’

It was probably a mistake, but it was one he could back out of it. All he’d have to do is keep quiet about it and tell James some story about a family function. James wouldn’t press—he was that kind of man. Of course, if he did tell James, there was the possibility that he would decline the invitation. He was, after all, in a delicate situation and had Hennessey’s dictates to think of.

He closed the laptop and went to back to bed. He turned on his side and it wasn’t a moment before James had curled up close, one leg against his.

It was probably a mistake.

***

So, definitely a mistake. What had he been thinking? James was clearly uncomfortable, watching every exit as if someone was about to shout ‘Fire!’ As for himself, it had been a while since he’d been to one of his father’s parties. He’d forgotten how many friends his father had, though ‘friends’ was being generous—most of them were just sycophants, here to curry his father’s favor.

“It’s not too late,” James murmured. “He hasn’t even seen me yet.”
“Trust me, my father saw you the moment you walked in.” His cousin Geoffrey and Peter Ashe were on the other side of the room near the ice sculpture, watching him. He smiled at them and then turned, using his own body to shield James from view.

James had refused the bow tie but not the suit; he looked striking and beautiful and completely out of place among all these stuffed shirts. “Look, if you really want to go, let’s. I should never have asked you. I just thought you might enjoy it. I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” James said, glancing over Thomas’s shoulder. “Your father has decided to acknowledge your presence.”

With a sigh, Thomas turned again and saw his father coming towards him, moving through the crush of people like an angry bulldog.

His father looked the same as always though he’d gotten his hair cut; it lay against his skull like a coarse, black cap. “There you are,” he said. “Trust you to be late.”

Thomas couldn’t help it—he stiffened. He was rarely late and when he was, he always had a good excuse. “Happy Birthday, Father. You’re looking well.”

“Well, you have me. But you need a haircut.” His father turned to James. “Who’s this, then?”

His smile felt false, strained; he’d talked to his mother weeks ago, explaining James’s circumstances, stating plainly that he wouldn’t be introducing James by name in public and if Albert didn’t like it, he’d just stay away. She’d said that it would be fine and, ‘could you please stop calling your father, ‘Albert?’

“You know who he is, Father,” he murmured, one eye on the nearby guests. “Mother explained.”

“I’ve been in Geneva. She knows I don’t read email and so do you.”

James had been at his shoulder, silent. At that, he touched Thomas’s arm and stepped forward. He held out his hand and answered smoothly, “Lieutenant James McGraw, my lord. I’m your new liaison.”

His father shook James’s hand. “‘Liaison,’ is it?” He glared up at Thomas. “We need to talk.”

Shit. “When?”

“Now.” He gave James a withering look. “You, too.”

Feeling as if all eyes were on him, including those in the upper gallery, he gestured for James to precede him. “Do me a favor,” he whispered, keeping his eyes on his father’s back.

“What is it?”

“This will be bad, but let me do the talking.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I want you to stay out of the line of fire. No matter what he says, do not respond.”

“Thomas—”

Surreptitiously, he touched James’s elbow. “Please.”
With a hesitation that was too long, James muttered, “All right.”

***

“Well?” he said as he went to stand by the fireplace. “What’s this problem that couldn’t wait because clearly, there is something wrong.”

His father went to the desk and poured a brandy. He didn’t offer any to either Thomas or James. “I had a visit from Admiral Hennessey the other day.”

*Shit.* “Yes?”

“He informed me of your progress over the last three months, reports of which I was to receive from you personally.”

“I’ve been busy and as you said yourself, you’ve been out of town.”

“On Friday, you went to the cinema in the middle of the day; how is that ‘busy’?”

He’d long suspected that his father watched his comings and goings—he now had proof. It made him furious, the idea that he was being spied upon but he needed to keep his head. “What are you really angry about, Father?”

His father slammed the glass down on the desk table. “You know damn well what I’m angry about, Thomas! You were to confine yourself to removing the drug dealers that have been plaguing the island, not incite a global crisis!”

“That is exactly what I am doing and maybe a global crisis isn’t such a bad thing.”

“How is that, and don’t give me anymore of that financial inequality rubbish. You’re not a child; you know how the world works!”

“I know we’ve made it this way! We stood by as a collective whole while corruption and abuse were allowed to take root and it’s time we stopped it!”

His father almost laughed. “Do you know what would happen if you actually manage to do what you’re trying to do? Stock markets would fall, the biggest companies in the world would fail!”

“Do you take me for a fool? Of course, I know! I’ve studied the data, I’ve made forecast after forecast! Besides,” he added, unable to help himself, knowing it would set his father off, “the banking crisis of the last ten years proved that there are some companies that are too big to fail.”

His father turned almost purple with rage. “Don’t make light of this! There is no such thing as a recovery, not if this goes through. You cannot and will not do this!”

“And how do you propose to stop me? I have my own money. I have Miss Guthrie and her network of agents. I even have buy-ins from the Admiralty and my contacts at Parliament.”

“Buy-ins I specifically told you to wait on obtaining until I approved the plans!”

James had been silent the entire time but at this, he stepped forward. “The former was my doing, my lord. Admiral Hennessey asked and I told him.”

*James,* Thomas wanted to say but it was too late.

His father rounded on James with barely-hidden glee. “And you—do you honestly think I don’t
know why you’re here? ‘Liaison!’” he said again, as if the word was poison. “I’ve heard the whispers, I know why you wormed your way into the position with my son just as I know what happened to David.”

James frowned. “Lieutenant Pickram? What about him?”

“He came to see me just two days ago. How you managed to sabotage his computer is beyond me but I know you did it. Did you know?” he said, looking up at Thomas. “Did you know what kind of man you’re working with? He was involved with Miranda’s death and who knows how many others. What has been doing all these years down there? Did you even inquire as to his background or did you just see him and decided you needed to fuck him?”

Truly shocked, Thomas breathed, “Father—”

“Enough,” James barked, interrupting them both. “Lord Hamilton, I am not required to explain myself to you and if Admiral Hennessey were here, he’d say the same thing. As to the rest, yes, your son and I are together. So what?”

And here he didn’t think his father could get more red and he tried one more time, “Father—”

“Get out.”

He nodded calmly, back on familiar territory. It wouldn’t be the first time he left his father’s house under a black cloud but enough was enough. “You’ve always accused me of being spoiled and self-righteous, and I suppose that’s true,” he said calmly, “but I’m going forward with my plan. Contrary to what you think, the changes I want to put in place will not incite a global conflict. They will stabilize almost every economy save China, North Korean and possibly Russia.” He shrugged. “Yes, some of the wealthiest companies will take a hit in the first few months and yes, some might move their accounts to other offshore financial institutions but I’m betting that many won’t. If they handle the PR skillfully, they’ll quite possibly thrive, creating a unique, fair system. I’d like you to be part of that legacy, but it’s your choice. As for James…” He reached back and after a moment, James took his hand. “His past is his own. He’s part of my life now; you can accept that or not.”

His father clenched his jaw and repeated, “Get out.”

He nodded. “I’ll say goodnight to Mother.”

He tugged on James’s hand, refusing to let go until they were out in the hall. “Well,” he said, taking a deep breath. “I need a drink. This way.” He jerked his head towards the back of the house; his father always kept the good stuff in his private study. He rubbed his hand; he’d gripped James’s hand so tight, his palm actually ached. “Did I hurt you?”

“We’re not leaving?”

“We will eventually.” As he’d hoped, there was no one in the room. “Right now my father will be ringing my group to coerce them into changing their minds. Philpot might bend but the rest won’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

He made a beeline for the brandy and got out the glasses. “What for?” He’d never brought a date or lover to meet his father and he was feeling odd, as if he couldn’t quite catch his breath.

“You warned me; I didn’t listen.”

“How could you know how he truly is?” He poured the brandy and held the glass to his nose. Just
“What he needed. “You said you’d heard stories but stories never tell the truth.”

“I knew; I knew all along.”

“Trust me, James, what you read in the papers is nothing. Don’t worry too much—Mother will calm him down. In a couple weeks, he and I will be talking again like nothing happened. If not—” He shrugged and handed James a glass.

“It wasn’t the newspapers.”

He took a first sip, then a second. “What wasn’t?”

“The information I have on your father—I didn’t get it from the newspapers.”

He looked up. James was staring at him with an uneasy gaze. “You’ve been spying on him?”

“No.”

He stilled. “You’ve been spying on me?”

James tightened his lips but didn’t answer.

Thomas nodded. “I see.” He looked at his drink, tipping the glass so the brandy tipped with it. “I see,” he said again, like a fucking automaton.

He’d guessed weeks ago that James hadn’t been telling him the truth, and what was that quote about paranoia?

He couldn’t quite remember because his mind was in a tailspin of anger and quickly forming regret. What had James just said? ‘I knew all along?’ Well, he’d known, too, and he’d chosen to ignore his own doubts and concerns. Maybe his father was right this time. Maybe he’d just wanted to fuck James because why else would he—

He made some quiet sound of protest and sat his glass down very carefully. He turned to the door but James grabbed his arm.

“Thomas, don’t—it wasn’t like that.”

He tried to pull free but James’s fist was like steel. “Let me go.”

“No. I need to explain—”

He rounded on James. “Do. Explain how you came by this ‘information.’ Was it part of your job? Did you talk to the Sun or the Mirror because I don’t know anyone who—”

“Miranda. It was Miranda.”

That stopped him as nothing could. “What?”

“The other day you said I didn’t know anything about you, but you were wrong. I know everything about you.” James gave him a stark, half smile. “You were Miranda’s favorite subject and she loved talking about you.”

James’s grip relaxed and he let go of Thomas’s arm. “She had a half dozen photos of you on her bedroom wall and a big one in her living room. It was of the two of you in riding gear in front of a house she said was Ashbourne.”
Thomas nodded, remembering. It had been his last attempt at playing the country lord. Miranda had made him pose for the photo, saying they needed to look supercilious and priggish. The photographer had gotten a few shots in before Thomas started laughing at the sheer outmoded, ridiculousness of it. Miranda had hit him on the arm, telling him to be still, then ruined it by laughing, too. “There’s a story behind that.” His voice was rusty, as if he’d been yelling.

“I know. I made some comment, because by then I had met some of her friends. She told me how you hated that lord-of-the-manor bullshit, but she had thought it would be funny so you went along with it. That was when I started to like you.”

James glanced down, then frowned as if realizing only then that he was holding the glass. He put it down on a side table. “She told me of the time you crashed your father’s custom-made Audi on the A52 and how all he could do while you were being stitched up in the trauma center was shout at you over the phone. You were nineteen. You still have the scars on your shoulder, hip and thigh, but the accident changed your life. To help pay for the damage to the car, you got a job at Water Aid during your term holiday. That’s where you got the idea of trying to do something meaningful with your life.”

Unthinking, Thomas touched his hip, remembering those days. He’d been so very sure that just his presence could change people’s lives. He’d been so naive.

“Then there was the time when you were eight,” James’s voice grew soft. “You were at the Duke of Fyfield’s house with your parents for some party. Miranda and another girl had climbed a tall oak and were afraid to come down. A bunch of older boys began making fun of them and calling them names. You heard what was going on and shoved the boys aside and climbed up the tree. You helped Miranda and the other girl down.”

He went to the desk and sat on the edge. “Elizabeth Ashe.” Peter’s little sister. He’d forgotten about that.

“The way Miranda spoke of it—” James shook his head. “Even after all those years, she saw you as some kind of white knight.”

“I’m anything but a knight, James.”

“I know,” James said with a small grin. “She told me of the time you and Lord Ashe got pissed while you were at Eton and you both threw up in one of the fountains in front of a group of parents taking a tour. Your father made you clean up the fountain for the next month, though Lord Ashe’s father just sent him home for a few weeks.

“My favorite story, however, is the one where you were in a play at Cambridge, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and you were Oberon. Your wings got stuck on a prop tree and you had to speak the, ‘Meet me by break of day’ speech from upstage left. Miranda said you had the audience laughing and clapping so loud that Puck couldn’t finish his lines.” James’s smile died to a wistful frown. “I love that speech—I wish I’d been there to see you.”

James cleared his throat and looked up, his gaze now direct but still bleak. “So you see, Thomas, I do know you. I knew your father was a son-of-a-bitch and, contrary to what I’ve said in the past, I know your plan is not all talk, it’s not about making a name for yourself. You donate to causes under a pseudonym. You were the driving force and the money behind that decision to re-open that homeless shelter, the one that Lord Dunster took the credit for. You’re a good man; Miranda was right to love you.”

He rubbed his forehead. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this before?” James’s descriptions weren’t
just casual stories—they were purloined memories, polished and honed from repeated use. “You could have at any time.”

“I know. I was afraid it would sound like I was stalking you.”

Though he understood the fear, he just said, “James.”

“All right.” Slowly, James pushed a lamp out of the way and sat down next to Thomas. “I was going to and then that last night on Nassau—” He pressed his shoulder against Thomas’s. “I wish I’d been more careful with Hume and not fucked things up. I wished I hadn’t been so ashamed—even after all these years, I’m still angry at myself. Those days in Florida while I waited on my supplier to find the equipment—I kept telling myself to leave it alone, to leave you alone but I couldn’t.” James took his hand. “Can you forgive me for what I did to Miranda?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

It was anything as simple as, ‘Just like that” but he nodded, then asked quietly, “Are you disappointed?”

James frowned. “In what?”

“The reality. Of me, I mean.” There were two pale lines on James’s fingers where his rings had been. He traced the one and then the other. “Stories are one thing but what about—”

James leaned over and kissed him, stopping his words. “Thomas, I fell in love with you before I ever met you; nothing’s changed about that.”

He squeezed his eyes tight, telling himself that now wasn’t the time for tears, then pulled James up to stand between his legs. They kissed long and hard. He drew back. He wanted to say the same, wanted to tell James that this thing he’d been feeling was love, but he couldn’t say it, not while he was under his father’s roof, so he just gave James a small smile and ran his hands up his chest. “Why are you carrying your gun?”

James raised an eyebrow, a glint in his eye as if he’d heard what Thomas couldn’t say. “I think the better question is, why didn’t you notice it before now?”

He thought about that, then shrugged. “Nerves, I suppose. I was about to beard the lion in his den and wasn’t looking forward to it.” He wrapped his leg around James’s thighs. “Now…” He kissed the corner of James’s mouth. “Answer my question.”

“Hennessey and I reviewed the situation and he’s of the belief that we should take no chances. He was unaware the document was written by Charles’s right-hand man.”

“That’s a little premature, isn’t it? We don’t know who—” He caught his breath and leaned back. “You heard from Eleanor?”

James smiled again, this time broadly. “She called while you were in the shower. The document has passed the first two initial stages of authentication but just to be sure, the Smithsonian is calling in a team from the British Museum and the National Archives.”

He dropped his head. He hadn’t let himself hope and the relief was like a cold wave. “Why didn’t you tell me?”
“Nerves, I suppose,” James said. “Once this gets out, our lives will become very complicated.”

“Hence the gun,” he said under his breath, looking up at James, a slow smile growing. “Wait—you’re to be my bodyguard as well as my liaison?”

“Hennessey thought it best and I agreed; don’t laugh, Thomas.”

“I’m not. I’m just waiting for you to break into song.”

“I don’t sing,” James replied, scowling. “Besides, that’s your part, right? I’m just supposed to look stoic and unmoved and—Stop laughing.”

He really wasn’t but it was kind of funny and definitely sexy and he stood up. “Come on,” he said, giving James another kiss. “Forget about my father—I want you to meet Mother.”

***

James was silent all the way home. He didn’t speak when Thomas pulled into the garage, nor as they went through the house and turned off the lights.

When they got upstairs, Thomas went to the chest of drawers and took off his cufflinks, glancing at James in the mirror. “You’re quiet.”

“Mm-mm.”

“What did you think of Mother?”

“It explained much.”

“How so?”

“I’ve been wondering where you got your looks because it sure as hell wasn’t from your father.”

He laughed and put his cufflinks away, then bent down to remove his shoes and socks. “Now, that’s what I call a compliment.”

“But, to answer your question, I liked her very much.”

“You’re worried about her comment about grandchildren, aren’t you?”

James shrugged and pulled his gun from the holster and put it in the top drawer of bedside table. “I wasn’t sure if she was serious.”

“She was, very.”

James didn’t say anything.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Thomas said after a moment. “She’s just concerned about the family line; she’ll stop talking about it eventually.” He’d untied his bow tie in the car and he drew it off and laid it on the chest.

“Is that something you want?”

He looked up. “What? Children?”

“Yes.”
“Isn’t a little too early for this conversation?”

“My clothes are in your closet, my gun is your drawer, and your mother just told me she wanted grandchildren. No, I don’t think it’s too early.”

He began to unfasten his shirt buttons, not sure how to answer. “I’ve never really thought about it, to be honest. My work has always come first.” It wasn’t quite a lie. He had thought about it when he was much younger but had given up on the idea as pointless. He didn’t want to raise a child alone and there’d been no one in his life that had come even close to being a suitable partner. “What about you?”

“I’ve thought about it.”

Truly startled, he looked up. “You have?”

James walked up until he was standing right behind Thomas. “Of course, I have. Miranda wanted children.”

Again, he was startled. “I didn’t know that,” he said quietly. “Though I supposed I should have. She loved being a teacher.”

James stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Thomas’s waist. “She did. Did she tell you she’d been made headteacher?”

“No, she didn’t.” He wondered if he was jealous or just sad—Miranda had always called him first when something important had happened in her life.

“She’d only just learned about it; it’s why we were out that last night.” James laid his head on Thomas’s shoulder. “Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“If I asked nicely, would you fuck me?”

It was a first and Thomas smiled, a pale smile, but still… “James, you don’t have to even.”

They made short work of each other’s clothes, having the rhythm down by now. When they were naked and in bed, he reached for the condoms and the lubricant.

“My blood tests came back,” James said.

“And?”

“Negative, as I’ve been telling you.”

He hesitated. “We shouldn’t take any chances.”

James pressed up against his back, taking the lube from Thomas but not the condoms. “When was your last blood test?”

“Three months ago.”

“And when was the last time you had sex with anyone but me?”

He didn’t like admitting it because it was so depressing. “Almost four months ago.”
“And unprotected sex?”

He had to think about that one. “Over six years ago, give or take.”

“So if I don’t have any communicable diseases and you don’t have any communicable diseases, then how can we pass on any communicable diseases to each other?”

“James?”

“Yes?”

“Could you please stop saying, ‘communicable diseases?’”

James laughed and tugged on Thomas’s shoulder.

They rolled together until James was on his back and Thomas was on top.

“I love it that you want to be careful,” James said, his smile dying. “But enough’s enough; I don’t want there to be any more walls between us.”

His own smile faded. Whatever wall James had been hiding behind had fallen weeks ago; he’d almost forgotten it had even existed. “Then, here…” He took the tube from James. “No more walls.”

Without a word, James turned over and spread his legs.

Wanting to rush, Thomas took his time, kissing James’s back and hip. One finger, then two, feeling the sweat break out on his forehead as he watched his own hand, as James began to gasp and thrust, urging him on with little sounds that were all the more erotic for being so totally unexpected and he had to close his eyes, afraid he’d come from just that.

“Thomas?”

“Yes,” he whispered, slicking up his cock, trying for dispassion as he began to push into James, completely failing because it had to be a sin, how good this felt and—

He took a breath, then another, fighting the need to let go, his body bowed as if in prayer.

“Thomas.”

“Yes,” he said again, this time in a whisper, pushing steadily until he was fully seated. He reached for James’s hand and began the slow out, then in, feeling all of a sudden as if he were back on that beach in Nassau, the sun so hot on his back, the sand so white, and James standing in front of him, water dripping off his body as if it were pure gold…

***

“At least it wasn’t Barry Manilow?”

He rubbed his cheek against James’s shoulder. “Pardon?”

“Your quote; at least it wasn’t Barry Manilow this time.”

He stilled. Then laughed and bit James’s scapula. “I did not.”

“No,” James said, a smile in his voice. “You didn’t.”
He kissed the small red mark he’d just made, then laid his head back down. He wasn’t going to ask, he wasn’t going to—

“You’re dying to know what you said, aren’t you?”

“No.” He gave it a moment. “Yes.”

James snorted, then murmured, “‘There is no remedy—’”

“…for love than to love more,” Thomas finished. “Dryden. Did I really say that?”

“You did, although it came out more like, ‘remedy for more love,’ but I knew what you meant.”

“I was a little distracted.”

“I know you were,” James said soothingly.

“I’ll bite you again.”

“I’m hoping you will.”

He made to do just that, changing his mind at the last minute, licking to the center of James’s spine, loving the way James’s muscles tensed in response. “Are all lieutenants as literate as you?”

“Some, but we pretend we’re not.”

“Who is your favorite?”

“Poet or lieutenant?”

“James.”

James reached out and Thomas took his hand. “I don’t know. For a while there it was Walt Whitman and then Neruda. I think now it’s Auden.”

“We’re going to have to work on that.”

“Auden is a great poet.”

“He’s depressing.”

“Who do you recommend?”

“I don’t know but it won’t be Auden… Hold on, I’m getting up.” He pushed up, then got to his feet. “Don’t move.”

He went to the bathroom and cleaned up, then rinsed the cloth out and went back to the bed. James had turned to his back and with a steady gaze, he let Thomas wash him clean.

He’d never done this before but that was mostly because he’d preferred to clean himself up and leave. He returned to the bathroom, thinking on the difference between then and now.

When he got back to the bedroom, he found James hanging their clothes up in the closet.

“You don’t need to do that,” he said, enjoying the view.

“I do if I don’t want to be falling on my ass during the night.”
There was a pun there, but he kept it to himself. “Are you saying I’m a slob?”

“I’m saying it’s a full time job picking up after you.”

He grinned and got into bed. The book on pirates that he’d been reading was too close to the edge of the nightstand and he pushed it back. “Then it’s a good thing I have a maid, isn’t it?”

“About that…”

He sighed. “What is it now?”

James closed the closet door and got into bed. “I vetted your maid service. You’re going to change them.”

“I am, am I?”

“The owner has ties to the Russian mob.”

His smile died. “Oh.”

James nodded while he straightened the bedclothes and rearranged the pillows. “I’ve already found a replacement that’s got a clean record.”

“I guess it’s a good thing you’re around.”

“It is. Move over…”

Thomas turned on his side to face the windows.

James settled in close, pulling the covers up around them. He sighed, raising the hairs on the back of Thomas’s neck. “You feel good.”

“So do you.” Not sure if he wanted to know the answer, he asked, “What about my gardener and landscaper?”

“They all check out; it was just the maid service.”

“I’m sorry for the ladies; I liked them.”

“I was thinking you could thank them by giving them a generous tip. I can ask Idelle to take care of it for you.”

“She’ll love that.” James was still transitioning from the office at Whitehall and every time he stopped by, Idelle grew starry-eyed and clumsy. Just a few days ago, James had dropped off the latest data from Eleanor. They were going over it in his office when Idelle came in on the pretext of lunch. She asked if they wanted anything, then accidentally knocked the seagull paperweight off his desk. James had picked it up, saying something about it being a good thing the floor was carpeted. Idelle blushed and hurried away, forgetting her mobile. He’d followed her, but she was already gone.

Later on, after James had returned to Whitehall and Idelle had returned from lunch, she’d apologized for her unprofessional behavior. Seeing her leftover mortification, Thomas had said it was okay and that he understood. After all, he’d added, it had taken him a while to get used to working with someone so attractive. She frowned, then got it and gave him a brilliant smile followed by a lightning quick hug.

“Thomas?”
“Hmm?”

“We still need to talk about the house.”

“What about it?”

“You never formally asked me to move in. Don’t you think I should find my own flat?”

He almost winced. This was the one area he’d avoided even thinking about, fairly sure he knew what the answer would be if he brought it up. “What do you think?”

“I think I should.”

He nodded. “Then you shall. I’ll have my agent look for you.”

“I think I’ve found a place. It’s five miles away; I couldn’t afford anything closer.”

*Don’t offer, don’t offer...* “When you get time, you can have me over.”

“Thomas?”

“Yes?”

“You know it’s just for show, right? In case any of the media come sniffing around you?”

The relief was too great and it took him a minute to answer. He squeezed James’s hand, making sure his grip was tender, not grasping. “I thought as much.”

“I’ll get rid of it in a year or so, once you’ve made your announcement and the dust has settled.”

“That’s fine.”

“I know you think this house is too big but I still think you should keep it as it is. I’ve got some ideas on how you can save energy.”

“You do?” James’s voice had grown quiet, a little slurred, which meant he was on the edge of sleep. James nodded, his light beard scratching Thomas’s back. “It won’t be hard. Besides—” James laced his fingers with Thomas’s.

“Besides?”

“The children conversation isn’t over. The stairs might be an issue, but this house is more than big enough for one or two kids and you’d make a good father.”

“Do you think I would?”

“Of course, I do. You’re not your father.”

He closed his eyes, then opened them again. He should be worried that James had the next few years planned out, but he wasn’t, not at all... “Mother will be happy to hear that. About the children, I mean.”

“She’ll have to be patient. It won’t happen for a while.”

He clasped James’s hand to his chest. Not two weeks ago, he’d watched a program on in vitro fertilization—there were risks and the results weren’t guaranteed but it was something to think about.
Besides, there was always adoption. One of his great uncles had been adopted into the family after the war—his mother always said he was the best of them, which was funny, considering. “I’ll look into it. I already have the name picked out if it’s a girl. Two guesses as to what it is and the first doesn’t count.”

There was no answer and he glanced over his shoulder. James was fast asleep, a strand of red hair across his cheek. He started to brush it back, then held off, not wanting to wake James up—he’d had a long day. They both had.

He squeezed James’s hand again, then reached up and turned off the light.

fin.

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