



REILLY RYAN

Ship of  
Dreams

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# Ship of Dreams

*Reilly Ryan*

# Dedication

For Allie, for her endless encouragement

And for L.J.

Thursday, April 10, 1912

# Chapter One

He went by James, but his real name was Warren James Hyde. He was a liar, a cheat and a thief, and he believed he was about to make his dreams come true.

She was called the ship of dreams, but her name was Titanic. She was the largest, most luxurious ocean liner of her day, and she was doomed.

He had an inkling the cops were after him. Guilty conscience, maybe, but when he glanced back over his shoulder as he handed his ticket over, he caught a glimpse of their silver buttons shining in the sunlight. “Thank you, gents,” James said quickly and hustled up the gangplank onto the ship.

The ship that was going to solve his current problems by carrying him several thousand miles away.

He felt his heart racing in his throat and put his head down. He told himself they wouldn't follow him on board. The ticket in his hand said first class on it. No one would take

him for a criminal. Only respectable people could afford a trip on the Titanic.

Too bad he could hear their thunderous footsteps behind him.

He took off running now, sprinting through a decorative doorway and down a long hallway. It was like being trapped inside a tunnel. Nowhere to run. He dragged his hand along the doorknobs of the staterooms, hoping one would give way.

One did, and he ducked inside, shoving the door closed behind him. A moment passed before the man he'd intruded upon registered in his vision. James opened his mouth, hoping for a good story to come out.

“Hide me.” He found that the eyes he looked into were dark chocolate brown and sympathetic. Wide and startled, but sympathetic.

Quick-thinking, the other man threw open the door to the cupboard. James stepped inside, listening to the cops drawing nearer. As an afterthought, he grabbed a handful of the other man's shirt and pulled him into the cupboard too, tugging the doors closed behind them. Closing them up together in the darkness.

He held his hand against the stranger's chest, keeping him still and silent. His pulse pounded, hard in his chest and loud in his ears. He became aware of certain things—the heat from

the other man's body, and the strong muscles beneath his palm.

"No one 'ere." The statement was accompanied by the shuffle of feet, and the door to the stateroom swinging closed.

James held his breath for another moment, closing his eyes. When he opened them, the other man looked at him, so close up that his vision went soft, like it would on the face of someone he was about to kiss. His heart beat fast now not just from fear, but excitement.

He shoved the cupboard door open. "Thanks." He knew it was time to run, but felt reluctant to go. He was impressed by the other man's quick thinking, and his acceptance of the situation. His willingness to not betray James's secret.

"What the hell—" the other man began to ask, but James was already gone.

When the door opened again, Will Woods thought perhaps the strange man had returned. He hoped for it. His mind still reeled from the surprise, and he began to feel as though the strange encounter hadn't happened at all.

Instead, his mother crossed the threshold into his stateroom.

"I thought I heard a noise," she said.

"It was nothing." He stepped close to her, settling a steadying hand on her arm. In the months since his father's



death, his mother had grown frail before his eyes. Once a strong woman, now she faltered. That was why they were headed back home.

A step behind her was his fiancée, Annie. She reached out for his mother's arm just as he had done, and then smiled at him over his mother's shoulder. "It's nothing," he assured her. Together, the two of them helped his mother back into the room she was sharing with Annie.

There were two dark wooden beds, and he guided his mother to a comfortable seat on one. He sat beside her, resting his hand against the soft linen. "What do you think?" she asked him.

"It's lovely." He scanned the room, taking in the rich, dark wood of the dresser that separated the beds. "Annie?" he asked, and watched her head come up and her eyes blink as though she'd been raised from a trance.

"It's beautiful." She ran one hand along the woodwork. She ducked her head to look at Mrs. Woods, her green eyes wide and clear. "How are you feeling now?"

His mother nodded, as though to indicate she was better. "I thought I heard a noise." She smoothed her hands down against her skirt and began to rise to her feet. He put his hand to her elbow to steady her. "We should go on deck, to see the ship off."

"We don't have to," he said.

“I want to.” Her eyes turned fiery and snappish for a moment, and he glimpsed the strong woman who’d raised him. He didn’t see her very often anymore.

They fought a crowd all the way up onto the main deck. He couldn’t help scanning the crowd for the mysterious man who’d burst into his stateroom, wondering who he was. The classes were kept strictly separate on the Titanic, so he couldn’t have been some third-class riffraff. It was a mystery, one that had him intrigued.

He’d felt a strange physical pull toward the charismatic stranger, the likes of which he hadn’t felt in years. Will thought he’d left that sort of thing behind.

Standing casually at the rail, James looked down. The side of the ship was high enough to make his head spin for a moment. He thought about falling, plunging into the murky waters below. He closed his eyes and opened them again, this time directing his gaze to the people surrounding him on deck. They all seemed to have the glint in their eyes that only came from security and money in the bank. They chattered gaily and waved to those they were leaving behind, while he stood at the railing, silent and alone.

He looked up at the funnels that rose high from the deck. Plumes of smoke sliced into the sky.

There was another man looking up at the same time.

Perhaps because they were looking in the same place, at the very same thing, their eyes met for a moment. He felt an electric shudder go through him, because it was the man he'd just encountered. The one with the beautiful dark eyes, who'd hidden him in his stateroom with almost no questions asked. He received a funny little smile, which he returned with a grin of his own.

James watched him after he turned away. He was with an older woman, who had deep lines set into the skin around her mouth and wore a sparkling diamond pin on her lapel. He figured she was the man's mother and dismissed her.

The woman clinging to the stranger's arm was another story. She had long, dark hair and roses of life in her cheeks as she pressed close to him. He felt an uncharacteristic stab of jealousy, flashing back to the moment when he'd been just as close physically. He turned away from them all, his gaze seeking more likely victims. He needed money, and he needed it before the ship docked in New York.

“What do you think?” Will asked Annie.

“It's amazing.” She seemed breathless. Times like this, seeing the wonder on her face, reminded him that she was nearly ten years younger than he was. Her youth made him feel young again. When she saw things for the first time, he

could remember what it felt like to be young and free from care.

He turned to his mother, reminded of his duty. He smiled gently at her, and she smiled back silently. His father had been British, and they'd taken him back there to face the last stages of his illness. His mother was American, as was he, and it was time to go home. Still, he could understand her reluctance. Although familiar, everything there would be different now.

He looked at the crowds around them. Excitement hung in the air—even the ship herself was new and untested, although she was said to be the biggest, strongest and most expensive ship in the world today.

His gaze moved upward, to the four smokestacks pointed heavenward. Only three were operational. The fourth remained quiet and still, pristine. It embodied the true spirit of the Titanic—existing because the White Star Line believed the excess of having four funnels was preferable, even though three would do. He had to agree it gave majesty and symmetry to the look of the ship, not to mention an instantly recognizable uniqueness.

As he lowered his eyes from the fourth funnel, he noticed a man sharing his line of sight. They had looked up at the object at the same time, and now their eyes happened to meet across the deck. It was the man who'd intruded on his stateroom before.

His hair was dark blond, streaked as though by a sun that did not shine strongly enough in England. He must have spent some time on warmer foreign shores. Will recalled from their earlier meeting that the eyes that met his were the color of the sea far below their feet and the sky above their heads. He found himself smiling, recalling their earlier encounter.

The other man's smile in return was glorious and bright. His full lips parted and dimples appeared in both of the man's cheeks, deep grooves enhancing his smile, making Will feel as though he was receiving something truly special and precious. He would see this man again. He was sure of it. He would make sure of it.

"I'd like to go back to my room." His mother's voice was so quiet it was nearly lost in the crowd.

He felt the blood rush into his face, and he wondered whether either of the women had witnessed the strangely transcendent encounter. He wanted to stay, but when he saw her skin pale and papery, he knew he had to see to her. "Yes, of course," he agreed.

They traveled through a maze of narrow halls back to their staterooms. Will opened the door for his mother and watched with concern as she sank gratefully into one of the elegant chairs. When had she grown so old? he wondered. It seemed to have happened overnight.

Uncomfortable with the thought, he turned his attention to Annie. “Are you excited?”

She nodded fervently, but he couldn’t ignore the shadow darkening her eyes.

“What is it?”

Annie closed her eyes for a long moment, and when she opened them again, her long lashes were damp, but no tears fell. “It’s always hard to leave. Even when there’s everything to look forward to.”

“Oh, Annie.” He pulled her into an embrace. He liked the way she felt in his arms, her body compact and soft, with the top of her head underneath his nose where he could inhale the scent of her hair.

“Will.” His mother’s voice was a sharp intrusion, and he reluctantly removed his arms from their place around his fiancée. She didn’t need to say any more, but she continued, “I expect you to behave properly.” They were words he had heard hundreds, if not thousands, of times before. He was too old for them, yet he bowed his head as guilt rose up within him. It was only this recent setback with his father that had thrust him back into the child’s role, the son underneath the thumb of the mother. He knew his mother needed him now more than ever, but his spirit bristled at it all the same.

“We are engaged,” Annie pointed out.

He cringed inside, knowing it was the wrong thing for her to say, but he knew it was his duty to back her up. “Yes.” He loved Annie, and he wanted a wife and a home and a family. But a fleeting remembrance of the man on deck flashed through his consciousness, forcing him to acknowledge that a small, wild part of him wanted not only love and safety, but also something more, something he’d never experienced.

“I’m going to rest here until supper,” his mother said, changing the subject. He nodded, in agreement and sympathy. He knew she would want him to stay with her. He also knew he couldn’t do it.

“I’ll see you before supper.” He moved to kiss her lightly on the forehead. Then he turned to Annie. A silent negotiation took place, one where Annie agreed to remain with his mother. He smiled his thanks to her, and kissed her on the forehead as well.

Then he was free to explore the cavernous ship.

## Chapter Two

After being shown to his first-class bedroom, James remained in the room, restless. He was conscious of the motion of the ship and the roar of the engines even though they were far and deep below his feet.

They were in the open water. Right now, it was the sedate waters of the English Channel, steaming toward Cherbourg, France, where a brief stop would bring more passengers on board. More rich passengers, who had completed the season in Europe and would be heading for home. Soon, they would reach the deep, lonely waters of the Atlantic. He wasn't sure if the feeling in his stomach was anticipation, dread or plain old seasickness.

He opened a drawer here and touched a surface there. The papered walls and deep, plush carpets seemed to gleam with newness. He was the first person to ever occupy this room. He didn't know or care how long ships lasted, but he knew hundreds of people would follow him, step where he had stepped and lay their heads at night where he had lain his. He was the first. He wanted to leave his mark, somehow.



A small brochure in among the stationery was marked in the upper corner with *R.M.S. Titanic*—a neatly typeset list of first-class passengers. How convenient, he thought. He let the booklet slip through his fingertips, straightened his waistcoat and ran his fingers back through his hair. He was going to find the men's smoking room and start himself a few games of chance.

Because once he settled on a victim, they would have a lot more to lose than a few pennies at poker.

Each first-class lounge was grander than the one before it. All of the first-class facilities were rich to the point of being ludicrous. The upper class traveled in its own hermetically sealed world of safety and elegance. It almost made him feel good about preying on them from within. Even this safe shipboard fantasy world was not the paradise it pretended to be. Wherever there were people, with their lies and insecurities and human failings, danger lurked.

The men's smoking lounge was his sort of place, although he did peer in at the reading and writing room with an innocent longing in his heart. If he were a different sort of man, that's where he would spend his time.

Blue smoke and the lingering odor of cigars and pipes already filled the air of the lounge. A day ago, it would have been as clear and fresh and pure as the air in any other part of the ship. Now it was, in its own way, more noxious than the

boiler rooms, filled with coal dust and fire. He glanced around, sizing up the crowd. He slid into a deep chair, off to one side but not out of the way. He claimed a table with enough room for a game to expand, which is what he intended for it to do.

From his pocket, he withdrew a deck of cards. They were worn and well-thumbed, the sturdy cardboard of their edges beginning to split in places. These cards were old friends. He began to shuffle them, somewhat noisily, wanting to attract attention.

It worked. He could feel eyes on him, judging this newcomer. There was no fear. This was a first-class lounge; the others could be confident he was, in fact, one of them. He was carefully attuned to the attention, even as he appeared to ignore it. He dealt the cards into a solitaire layout and began to move them with slow deliberation. He did not want to appear to be a card sharp, even though he was, and a good one.

He felt the warm presence and the change in the air as someone took a seat across the table. It took everything he had not to glance up to see who it was, but instead to hold to his concentration and finish his play before raising his eyes.

He had hoped, completely without reason, that it would be the man he'd encountered earlier. Instead it was a tall, slim man barely old enough to qualify for the word. He had dark hair and eyes as clear and blue as the crystal cloudless sky in the middle of winter. "Hi," he said. He was American.

“Hey there yourself.” James lengthened out his drawl, which was not only American, but Southern. In the States, it frequently marked him as lower class, but here, where he must have already passed the requisite tests to be in first class, he had the feeling it would only add to his charm.

It seemed to. “I’m Teddy.” The young man impulsively stuck out a hand for him to shake, and he did, then placed the next card. “So, solitaire,” Teddy said. James nodded, glancing at him because he didn’t want the boy to go away just yet. “Do you want to play some real cards?”

He raised his head, as though appraising an opponent. But he didn’t give an answer right away. Instead, he asked, “Do you have a cigarette?” That was not an act. He smoked, though his policy was never to purchase cigarettes for himself.

Teddy shook his head and reached for James’s cards. He felt an overpowering jolt of alarm and began to sweep the cards from the table himself, ahead of Teddy’s grabby fingers. Teddy looked at him in confusion. “I thought we were going to play.”

“Sorry.” He tucked the cards into his waistcoat pocket. “Missing a ten. Fine for solitaire, but not suited for games with real stakes.” He casually reached for the drawer set into the table between them, where he knew he would find a brand new deck of cards. He tossed them onto the table. “Better to work with a new deck.” The logo of the ship was everywhere,

even embossed into the backs of these innocent new cards, which Teddy unwrapped and opened. “Five-card stud,” he said, and Teddy began to deal.

James played half-heartedly, not bothering to strategize or bluff. The amount on the table wasn’t enough to consider. He watched the rest of the room beyond Teddy’s shoulder. Men playing cards, smoking and talking. He couldn’t settle on a victim just yet.

The door slammed open and the atmosphere in the room changed instantly. Everyone sucked in his breath and the room went silent, as though all the air had disappeared, taking the sound along with it. Because a woman strode through the door, confident and angry and headed straight for Teddy. “What are you doing?” she demanded.

The color deepened in Teddy’s face. “This is the men’s lounge. You can’t come in here.”

“I just did,” she said. “You’re supposed to be escorting me.” She was blond, with features chiseled to near-perfection. And she was tall, almost coltish. He knew beneath her long skirt would be pale, slender legs that went on forever. Her abrasive manner charmed him as well. She grabbed Teddy’s arm and began to pull him from the chair.

“I’m in the middle of a game,” Teddy protested.

“Come on.” She pushed his small pile of money toward James and dragged Teddy away. He chuckled to himself as he

watched them go, a pair of spoiled kids, rich enough they could walk away from money without a second thought. He began to smooth the cards into a neat, square deck, contemplating the solitaire routine again. He didn't think he could stand it, especially not while listening to the cheers and shouts of the chess tournament over in the corner.

After a while, he tired of the game. His body felt weary with it. He wished he could sit out this round. Go along for the ride, enjoy the fancy ship and do what he wanted to do. It was only a few days until they reached the United States. In New York, he would be able to find someone to prey on, and it would make for an easier escape than in the middle of the cold, gray ocean.

Unfortunately it wasn't possible. He was dead broke. The moment he disembarked, he'd be down and out, and he refused to be. This ship was filled with opportunity. But for this short moment, he could give opportunity a rest and wait for its delicate knock.

He gave in and went into the reading room. He smiled as he looked at the very different crowd—this one filled with ladies, knitting and talking and sipping tea. He turned his attention to the library shelves, pulling down a brand new book and settling into an out-of-the-way chair.

He turned the page of the book he had selected. Another turn, and another, and he was transported to somewhere else

entirely, so he didn't notice that someone approached. The sound of words crossed the line between worlds, and he blinked. "Hmm?" he murmured, before glancing up from the book and meeting those dark brown eyes once again.

"Is that any good?" The words were repeated, from the thin lips of the man he'd met earlier. "I've been meaning to pick it up."

His body jumped slightly, with the surprise of having the man he'd been daydreaming about suddenly appear. He tried not to let it show. "It's very good," he said. "So, you got a name?"

"Will Woods."

"James." Neither of them made any move to shake hands, holding a wary space between them. Neither of them knew quite what to do about this spark caught between them. He smiled a bit slyly and said in a low, confidential voice, "You look like the sort of guy who might have a cigarette."

Will's lips pressed together, trying to hide the amusement in his smile. There was something twinkling in his eyes that betrayed he was happy to have run across James as well. "I might."

"Let me bum one and you can have the book when I finish it," he offered. Fair trade. He wondered if Will had purposely sought him out. A little fire burned in his chest at the idea.

“Two, and I’ll take the book now.”

Negotiation. Not what he’d expected. The idea of two cigarettes was so delicious he could taste it—it had been a very long time—and letting the other man feel he’d come out on top of the deal might be to his advantage later on. He held out the book. Will took it, tucked it beneath his arm, and began to walk away.

“Hey.” He sprang from his chair, his protest loud enough to draw eyes to him. Hadn’t they been in the middle of something?

“Can’t smoke them here.” True amusement enriched Will’s voice this time. It made the golden electric lights dance in his eyes. He put his head down and followed, watching the line of Will’s body from behind.

Back in the smoking lounge, Will handed him a cigarette. His fingers fumbled on it, and Will placed his hand over his, holding it still and lighting it for him. He felt that surge of electricity between them again. Their eyes locked, and he could see that Will felt it too.

He felt heat coiling deep inside his body, lower than the fire burning in his lungs when he took his first, deep drag, then removed the cigarette from his mouth and licked the taste from his lips, acutely aware that Will was watching him. He could feel that gaze on his skin. “Been awhile,” he said, and Will nodded, as though he knew he’d been caught staring.

Will puffed on his own. The silent tension between them was as exciting as watching Will's long fingers handle the cigarette and the deep sensual pleasure he took from smoking, from the interplay of the stick and his lips and his tongue as he sucked the smoke from it and released it.

James stubbed out the cigarette in the center of a brand new, pristine Titanic logo ashtray and slipped the second cigarette away to save for later. He could smoke it before bed, or upon waking, and savor the taste and close his eyes and remember the feel of Will's dark gaze on him.

Will rubbed his hands across his knees as though he was thinking about leaving. James's eyes absorbed the touch, following its path across Will's thighs. "You wanna tell me what you were up to in my stateroom earlier?" Will asked.

He shrugged. "Not really." He didn't want Will to go, not yet. He ran his hand back through his hair, a motion that attracted Will's interested gaze. "Hell of a ship."

"Sure is. You by yourself?"

"Yeah." He glanced at Will again, holding his eyes for a moment on that thought, of being alone. "You've got some people with you, though. Was tryin' to decide. Mother, I think, and—" he took a second to assess Will's hands, finding no ring present, though that meant very little, "—girlfriend."

"You're a regular Sherlock Holmes. But she's my fiancée." Will's voice grew quiet. Almost embarrassed.



“Fiancée. Sure.” Perhaps he accidentally showed something like disappointment in his voice or in his face, but he saw an echo of the same in Will’s eyes. As though he wasn’t too keen on the notion of getting married, despite the fiancée waiting while he was here exchanging deep looks with a stranger. “You think it’s too early for a drink?”

“No,” Will said, but seemed to think the better of it. “I was exploring the ship. Would you like to come along?” There was hesitation in his voice, but something hopeful in his eyes. Will wanted him to accept the invitation. To come along with him.

He pretended to give it a moment’s thought. There was no question that if Will wanted him, he’d be there. “Sure.”

Plenty of other people had the same idea. They swarmed on deck. He ran his hands back through his hair again, keeping them busy as he tried to divert his thoughts. He felt a yearning to touch and be touched, one that he suspected might be returned. It quickened his breath and set him slightly off balance, his arm brushing against the warmth of Will’s arm.

What was he supposed to say to someone he’d only just met and didn’t know, yet wanted all the same? Whenever something accidentally touched his tender emotions, it tended to make him angry. He wasn’t used to such feelings, and he didn’t like them. He could feel Will’s eyes on him. Maybe this was different.

Not far from the lounge was an unobtrusive door marked *Darkroom*. He put his hand on the handle and pushed it open, pulling Will inside.

“Interested in photography?” Will’s hands skimmed the counter, and he had to look away, filled with thoughts of what those fingers would feel like ghosting across his skin.

“Are you?” The walls surrounding them were black. Bizarre machinery lined the counters, along with shallow trays.

“I’ve taken the odd snap with my Kodak. It’s very modern—”

“Will.” Desperate, he turned to face him. He hoped he would see the same darkness burning in Will’s eyes that he felt consuming himself from within. It was there. Inviting him.

“Yes.” Will clearly knew they weren’t really talking about hobbies. James brushed at the light switch. Red lights glowed overhead for a moment, crazy and off-kilter and ghoulish. He found the switch for them and plunged the small space into darkness.

He and Will were two bodies in the eternal blackness. It was like a dream; it was like falling into the sea and drowning. Will’s hands smoothly rose to cup his face, his thumbs brushing over the spots where his dimples would be if he were smiling, as though it was something he’d longed to do since they saw each other on the deck. He let himself be held. The

deep breaths filling his chest closed the space between their bodies. He felt the heat radiating from Will's skin. He wondered if Will's eyes were closed, needlessly, in the darkness. The heat possessed him.

Will kissed him, although it was he who had willed it, arranged it. Will's mouth pressed against his with a silenced groan almost hinting at exertion, if not of body but of desire.

Once Will kissed him, expressed that desire, he allowed himself to move into his more usual position of aggressor. His tongue moved to brush at Will's lips and gain entrance, plunging deeply into the heat of Will's mouth, playing along the flat edges of his teeth, toying tantalizingly with his tongue. Their bodies pressed together, undulating with the waves of the kiss, but the kiss was the culmination of the act. Yes, Will's heat and scent would have permeated his clothing, and yes, the angles and hardness of his body were immovable against his in a way that he knew he would be able to feel hours later, like a sucker punch, the unexpectedness and the power of the blow.

Will dragged his mouth away, gasping and breathing hard. His hands slid down James's jaw, against the hot pulse in his throat, and came to rest heavily against his shoulders. Though they were in complete darkness, his eyes were open and for a moment James thought he could see Will's face. It was the expression he expected Will to wear. The horror, the

realization and perhaps the smallest bit of curiosity regarding what he'd done. That was why James had shut off the lights. It wasn't a look he was fond of. For a weak second he considered turning the lights on, to look at Will's face, to see if he'd been wrong.

"I'm engaged."

"You said." He sighed. While James hated not getting his way, he admired the man's honesty. He knew he should pull away, but he didn't want to. He didn't deal well with facing his own true desires. He dragged his tongue across his lips and found he could taste Will there. He leaned in, tasting Will again. Tempting him away from the realities that existed beyond these black walls.

They breathed hard for a long moment. Each man trying to decide what to do next.

James placed his scalding lips against Will's cheek. He had to let Will know, give him some sign, that this had been mutual. Then he opened the door and walked into the bright sunshine without looking back.

## Chapter Three

Will stumbled back to his stateroom in a daze. His feet and hands felt large and clumsy and his head burned with fever, though when he reached up to touch his skin it was oddly cool. He couldn't help skimming his thumb across his swollen lips, reveling in the remembrance of kissing James. In his stateroom, he stared into the mirror. His face was white, pale as a fainting patient, and his lips and eyes glowed, radiating heat. He barely recognized himself.

He fell back on the soft bed, letting out a deep sigh and closing his eyes. When he did, he found himself back there, in the tight, dark heat of the photographic room. It shocked him, because he thought of himself as a practical man.

He had kissed another man before. So long ago, fifteen years or more, at school. He hadn't touched another man since. He hadn't wanted to. Until now.

Even though he had a fiancée... He groaned at the thought of his duty toward Annie.

A light knock came at the door, the soft knock of a slender hand he recognized. He managed to rouse himself, hoping the odd fire had gone from his eyes.

Annie stood there in her dinner dress, with her hair done perfectly and the diamond he'd given her glittering on her finger. She was so beautiful. He could appreciate it, but he felt none of the same pull toward her that he'd felt toward James.

"Come on to dinner." Annie tugged at the lapel of his jacket, fixing it as though he was her property, as though they were already bound together. "You've hardly eaten anything in days."

He nodded, and took her hand in his to remove it from his person. "I need a moment." He guided her to the hallway, where his mother had appeared. Her eyes met his with accusation and reproach. "One moment."

He pushed the door closed behind him and sighed in her absence. He had to pull himself together. His duty was to her.

He undressed, feeling the cool air caress his skin, even as he hurried into his trousers and dinner shirt and jacket. He ran his hands under the cold water tap and rubbed them against his face, leaving sparkling droplets in his short hair to catch the light. He could still feel that dark fire burning. His mother waited for him on the other side of the door with Annie. He forced himself to smile, to take her thin arm in his and place one hand lightly over hers. He was all she had now.

“Are you all right?” his mother asked him.

He couldn't face her and lie. “The traveling—and everything—must have gotten to me.” He felt a stab of guilt, knowing his mother would interpret “everything” to be his own private grief over his father's passing, an emotion so overwhelming he refused to recognize or otherwise address it, because he knew when he did it would consume him.

“Of course.” His mother ran her hand up and down his arm soothingly, filled with motherly comfort that just drove the stab of guilt deeper into his heart. “I feel the same way.”

They weren't the first to arrive to their assigned table in the dining room. The large room encompassed the entire width of the ship, and could seat five hundred people at a time. The square tables had wide, heavy chairs lined up two to a side. Annie sank daintily against the blue cushioned seat to Will's right, and his mother sat to his left.

The tablemates who had already arrived sat opposite them. A young man and a young woman, barely out of their teens. The resemblance between them ceased at their tall, lean builds. The man had dark hair and blue eyes. The woman's hair was blond and her eyes were hazel green. She wore a striking white gown and a necklace at her throat heavy with jewels. She extended a hand to Will's mother, an elegant gesture of acquaintance undermined by the flat, childish way she said, “I'm Ruth. That's Teddy.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” His mother smiled. “Are you on your honeymoon?”

Ruth’s distaste at the notion showed strongly on her face. “He’s my brother.” Will saw his mother’s thin smile and felt he knew what she was thinking—that it was a shame he was her only child, that he didn’t have siblings to bicker with or lean on.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Annie placed one pale hand against the table, showing off her engagement ring. It caught the light, sparkling, and he kept his eyes on it, trying to smile. “My name is Annie, and this is Will, and this is Will’s mother, Mrs. Woods.”

The next member of their party joined them. It was an extremely gaunt young man, with a wide smile enhanced by mutton-chop sideburns resting against his chiseled cheekbones. “Harvey,” he said, extending a bony hand for Will to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

Will liked something about Harvey instantly. Maybe it was the way the delicate man squeezed the life out of his hand as they shook, or perhaps it was the laughter in his eyes.

Harvey planted both elbows on the table and leaned in comfortably. “What do you think of the ship? It’s really something.”

“Uh, yeah,” Ruth agreed, glancing around to show how appalled she was by Harvey’s manners—or lack thereof.



“It’s beautiful.” Annie’s voice took on a dreamy quality as she looked about the room. Her eyes settled on the grand staircase, the ship’s showpiece. “The details are amazing.”

“I gotta tell you, if you’d said to me a year ago I would be sitting here, on my way back from the continent, on the biggest ship in the world, one guaranteed not to sink, one with millionaires in every corner, I would have laughed you out of the room. You know what I was doing back then? Guess. Go ahead, guess.” Harvey leaned back, eyes sparkling with merriment, hands spread wide in invitation.

No one said anything. The uncomfortable silence made Will’s heart ache. “Studying,” he guessed.

“Ha, good one,” Harvey said. “I was selling newspapers! A newsie! And now I am filthy, stinking rich. I used to sell for William Randolph Hearst and now he writes about me. Isn’t life grand and ridiculous?”

Will nodded, barely able to contain his grin. Annie took his hand underneath the table, sending a stab of guilt through him as he thought of James, and his grin faded. Life was grand and ridiculous indeed.

“I heard this ship was cursed.” Ruth’s lips curled into a smile.

“Ruth.” Teddy’s tone sounded dismayed and warning.

“No, really. Did you see that ship when we were leaving Southampton? Not the Oceanic, the smaller one. It almost hit

us! It's the suction, because this ship is impossibly big," Ruth said. "This woman who was standing next to me at the rail, she said she'd gone to a fortune teller, and the woman told her not to sail. That she would die. By drowning."

"No one believes in fortune tellers." Teddy rolled his eyes at his sister.

"I do." Harvey ran a nervous finger beneath the edge of the stiff collar encircling his neck.

"But this ship is unsinkable," Annie said with quiet practicality. "Nothing's going to happen to us. It's perfectly safe."

*Nothing in life is perfectly safe.* A chill danced along Will's spine at the thought.

"I wonder who we're missing." His mother changed the subject elegantly. Two empty chairs remained at their table.

"One is our mother," Teddy said. "Her name's Esther. She's traveling with us, but she got an invitation to dine at the Ritz restaurant on board..." He trailed off, as though embarrassed.

"You probably won't see her. If you're lucky," Ruth muttered.

"That leaves one. I wonder who it might be." His mother smoothed an invisible wrinkle in the fine linen tablecloth with her hand.

“You didn’t start without me.” The voice came from behind him. It was smooth like honey, with the hint of a deep, delicious Southern twang. A hand came to rest on the back of his chair and he felt a chill rise between his shoulder blades. He knew exactly who that voice belonged to.

James.

He slipped into the empty seat beside Harvey and smiled that impossibly bright smile. Ruth sat up straighter and he noticed the smile on Annie’s face showed additional, genuine delight. “We met earlier,” James said to Teddy, then his gaze graced Ruth’s face. “But I didn’t get your name. I’m James.”

“Ruth Cole.” She extended a graceful, delicate hand, which James did not shake, but instead kissed lingeringly, sending a delicate shiver dancing across Ruth’s skin. Will couldn’t look away from the two of them.

James turned to Harvey. “If I don’t miss my guess, this here’s the chess champ of the Titanic.”

“Hey, how’d you know?” Harvey asked.

“Saw you do it. Good work.”

“It’s all luck.” Harvey shrugged.

“Appreciate it when you’ve got it. You never know when it’ll turn,” James said, and Harvey looked agreeable, even pleased. James turned to his right, bowing his head slightly. “Madame.”

“James, this is my mother.” If he’d expected a reaction, he was disappointed, because not one thing showed in James’s face. Perhaps he was an actor, he thought, wondering where this sudden bitterness he felt had come from. “This is Annie, my fiancée.”

“Congratulations,” James said, and there it was. The slightest hint of sarcasm. Its darkness warmed something inside him as their eyes locked for the barest second.

Their waiter approached, ready to set the meal into play. He felt a wave of relief.

James sat back during dinner and let the others talk. There were a lot of awkward silences—the group wasn’t exactly filled with complementary personality types. He knew no one would notice that he listened more than he spoke. They were all much too wrapped up in themselves to pay much attention to him or to who said what.

Any one of them would make a suitable mark, a pocket to dig his hand into.

He liked Harvey—he was affable, stick-thin and maybe a little stupid. He had money, a lot of it, which he’d only recently come in to, although he didn’t elaborate on how. That intrigued him, because he’d never known anyone to come into a fortune honestly, but Harvey seemed like a good guy.

Ruth and Teddy picked at each other. On first blush Ruth appeared to be the harpy, but it was Teddy who got the most digs in. Ruth tried to defend herself. Did a piss-poor job of it, but tried. She raised up walls. He liked that in a girl.

Then there was Will. Will with the soft, short hair and dark eyes and amazing mouth. He sighed a little. Will and his fiancée with her sweet, innocent little face.

Who to choose? Not to mention how to do it. He'd gone into this without a plan, because who needed a plan when you were on a ship filled with the richest people in the world, none of whom you'd see again in seven days' time? He'd done this often enough that he could wing it.

He watched as Annie slipped her hand into Will's and pressed her shoulder against his. She let her hair brush against his face as she turned to whisper in his ear. He watched Will's reaction. No man who loved his fiancée would be kissing a stranger in the darkroom the way Will had kissed him. There was a stiffness in his back and the way he held himself as he rose from the table and helped her from her chair, bidding the table as a group a good evening.

Will was careful not to look at him. That was the tell.

The rest of them sat for a long, dull moment, deciding how to part company and what to do next. None of them was in a terrible hurry to go. Funny how lonely you could be in the midst of people, he thought.

“I’m, uh, gonna go to the lounge.” Harvey pushed back his chair. Harvey looked at him first with a hint of longing in his eyes, then turned to Teddy. He yearned for company.

“Yeah, I’ll go with you.” Teddy sounded distracted.

“I wanted to see the promenade deck,” Ruth protested. She practically stamped her foot in irritation.

“I’ll take you, sugarplum,” he said smoothly, before Teddy had the chance to shoot back a cutting retort. Ruth’s eyes still flashed at Teddy, but she moved her shoulders in a preening way that made the soft electric lights dance off the glittering, expensive necklace she wore. It draped elegantly to highlight her delicate collarbone and for a second it was all he could think of, tracing his way with one finger until he reached those delicious, delectable gems.

“Thank you.” Ruth extended a regal hand to him, for him to help her up from the table. Teddy shrugged and rolled his eyes, and accompanied Harvey toward the men’s lounge.

Will’s mother was left sitting alone. He felt a twinge, because she seemed sweet and frail beyond her years. For a moment he considered inviting her along. There was something sad and vulnerable in the line of the older woman’s throat as she turned her head and looked away, as though her thoughts were somewhere else. “I think I’ll join my son,” she said in a thin voice. He wished for a moment that he could do the same.

The ship featured a glassed-in promenade deck, so an evening stroll underneath the stars afforded the same beautiful view without any of the frigid, arctic cold. It wasn't cold now, drifting in the water between France and their final stop in Queenstown, Ireland, but in another day as they steamed at full speed through the north Atlantic, that would undoubtedly change.

The sky hovered close above them, a deep blue, nearly black, and the stars twinkled like crystal. Like the diamonds in Ruth's necklace. She drew her wrap around her as though she felt a chill. One corner of the long piece of fabric unfurled, trailing in a seductive remembrance of bed sheets and states of undress. One look in Ruth's eyes assured him she was aware of her power and had no second thoughts when it came time to assert it.

But she wasn't all ruthlessness. When he did as he'd been contemplating and drew one fingertip along the silken skin of her upper chest, longing to caress her expensive necklace, her lips parted in a soft expression of surprise and her eyes turned vulnerable. For all the dressing and show, she really was young.

He stroked the cold gems, as he'd intended. "Your mother know you borrowed this from her safe?" he asked.

"It's mine," Ruth said quickly.

“Good thing.” He leaned in close, to murmur into her ear. “Big brother would tell on you if it wasn’t.”

“He’s an idiot.” Ruth engaged her attention in rewrapping her shawl around her arms. But then she glanced curiously at him. “What do you think of him?”

“He loves you,” he said. Her body jolted, and it wasn’t as a reaction to his reaching out and redraping the shawl in a more suitable way around her, letting his fingers skim her slender arms.

“I doubt that. He’s always been horrible to me.” Ruth grinned wickedly. “He’s rather...earnest.” She looked at him, to determine whether he’d understood the double meaning of that word, one Oscar Wilde liked to use to indicate other things entirely, things nice girls of Ruth’s upbringing shouldn’t know anything about. But Ruth wasn’t a nice girl, was she?

“I hadn’t noticed,” he lied. She had no idea that for some people, such things were flexible. For a fleeting moment, he almost wanted to be the one to educate her. Watch the blush flood her face with shock. But he let that thought fade away and smiled at her true innocence. She was a girl playing at being a grown-up woman. “You’re eighteen?”

“Twenty.” There it was again, the girlishness, not certain whether she should be offended at being thought a child or pleased she looked younger than her years. She tossed her



head a little and said, “Tell me what you’re doing here all by yourself.”

“The same thing everyone else is, sweetheart.” He intended a fanciful answer, but at that moment, they rounded the bow and there stood Will and Annie, the affianced, the lovers, and the sight of them together gave him a pause he didn’t appreciate. “Dying a little bit more every single day.”

“What do you think of them?” Annie held her body close to Will’s as they walked together on the enclosed deck.

“They’re an odd bunch.”

“My hands are cold.” Annie lightly embraced him, trying to tuck a hand into each of his pockets. He felt her touch through the thin cloth as though he’d been burned, and jumped, seizing her wrists as playfully as he could and removing her hands.

“You don’t want to do that.”

“It’s exactly what I want to do.” She smiled impishly, tilting her head back to look up at him. Her hair came loose of its pins and swung out behind her as she maneuvered him out of the way of traffic, backing him up against the wall. She put her hands into the front pockets of his trousers and looked into his eyes. “Your mother is driving me crazy.”

“She’s old fashioned,” he said. It wasn’t a quality he’d appreciated until this very moment.

“I wish she’d give me just ten minutes by myself. She keeps fussing at me. I’m tempted to push her overboard.”

“Annie. She’s been through a lot.”

“This trip should be the most romantic one of my life,” Annie said. “Instead I’m being told when to rest and when to brush my hair and what a lady should eat, for crying out loud! She’s not *my* mother.”

“I think it’s nice,” he admitted. His mother had already accepted Annie into the family as a daughter. She felt it was her duty to look after her.

“Hush.” Annie pressed her body more closely to his. They could both feel his reaction to her insistent closeness, and he didn’t like it. He drew her hands away, holding her wrists in his. She didn’t like being held like this, he knew, but for now she allowed it. Waiting to hear his explanation.

“We’ll be married once we get back.” His words turned his mouth dry with dread he hadn’t felt before. He realized, maybe for the first time, that he didn’t want to marry her. He’d promised, and it was the right thing to do. But he didn’t want to.

“You’ve got one of those wedding-night fantasies,” Annie said, and he raised his eyebrows at her. “Honestly, Will, don’t you ever tire of always doing things the proper way?”

“There’s something to be said for anticipation.” And God help him because James’s rich, full lips flashed through his

mind, causing another surge of unwelcome heat through his body.

“There’s something to be said for seizing the moment.” Annie rocked her hips against his. “We’ll never be on this ship again.”

“You don’t know that.” He felt the thready pulse of his blood winding through his head. He wanted to push her away, but he had to stand there, keeping her close because he was holding her hands to keep her from putting them back on him and touching him in ways he didn’t welcome. “We could turn around in New York and book our honeymoon and come right back here.”

“We’re going back to California. You’re going back to your bank.”

“Exactly.” He relaxed the grip on her wrists to see what she would do. “It needs to be done.”

Annie sighed noisily, making her statement on that.

“Sometimes I don’t think you want to marry me,” he said. Annie looked at him, her eyes filled with shock and pain, and he wished he could pull the words back. His stomach knotted horribly.

“Let go of me,” she cried. He released her instantly, and once freed, she ran. He could only watch her go.

“Trouble in paradise.” The snide comment from a passerby drew his attention. But it wasn’t the woman who’d

spoken the words he found himself looking at. It was James. Their eyes locked, and he felt heat rise in his face. Anger at Annie and embarrassment at having been seen by James in the state in which she'd left him. He turned his back on them and stalked off as quickly as he could.

Back in his stateroom, he turned the cold water tap as far as it would go. If there had been an old-fashioned-style water pitcher, he might have emptied it over his head and stood there dripping on the brand new carpet.

It did little for his agony. He thought about the expression he'd seen in James's eyes, but that only added flame to the fire, further engorging the hardness that grew against his trousers. He tried to will the erection away, but his head was filled with James. The only thing he could do was unfasten his trousers and lay them aside. He rested back in the bed and, with singular purpose, took himself in hand.

He just wanted off, he didn't care how. He needed this red-hot ache to go away. The long fingers of his delicate hands worked in rough strokes against his skin, hard pressure from his index finger and his thumb curling around his thick, swollen organ. He couldn't get James's mouth out of his head, though it would be softer than this, soft and velvet and warm. He rubbed his thumb over the tip of his cock and shuddered lightly, feeling the spring coil, tightening toward the orgasm that would release him from this pain and delightful misery.

Up and down, harder and faster. The light behind his closed eyelids turned from black to red and he felt the tension release, fluid pumping hot against his belly. Deep breaths could fill his lungs again, taking over from the short, desperate panting a moment ago. He grabbed a towel and wiped the mess away, keeping his eyes closed, not thinking of James or it would grab hold of him again, not thinking of anything but the hum of the machinery and the gentle rocking of the water against the hull of the ship, hundreds of feet below where he lay.

“Tell me about yourself.” James knew already it would be Ruth’s favorite subject. They’d settled into wooden-frame deck chairs. Strains of music wafted from somewhere, one of the lounges, the Titanic’s orchestra playing an after-dinner concert for all the lords and ladies.

She spoke about how her mother had always preferred her firstborn, her son, Teddy. Ruth claimed it had only gotten worse after the death of her beloved father. She tried to paint herself as a Cinderella, surrounded by a family who hated her.

He listened, but the story wasn’t as important as the way she told it. The flat, it-doesn’t-matter-anyway tone in her voice, as though she might begin to believe it if she repeated it to herself often enough. The way her eyes sparkled with tears, not just when she spoke of her father, but a time or two when

talking about Teddy. She loved him, but love had never brought her anything but loss and pain.

She was lonely, lost and broken. She was also tough, and he liked her. It was better when his work resembled pleasure. She would be the one. He was still deciding how exactly to do it when she said, “There isn’t any money in it.”

His thoughts came to a screeching halt, although the expression on his face remained interested, if not kind. It was all he could do not to pull away from her. “What a shame.”

“That’s what we were doing in Europe. Esther was trying to marry me off to be rid of me. Practically begging her society contacts, all the girls she knew from finishing school, basically anyone she could dig her claws in to. It would have been awful, if it hadn’t been so fun watching her embarrass herself.” Ruth smiled with some satisfaction.

“And then what happened?” He was hoping for a sex scandal. Ruth caught in bed with someone, labeled a soiled dove, although he had the feeling Ruth was still technically a virgin. As soiled and experienced a virgin as there ever was, but still untouched in that one particular way.

Ruth shrugged, but her eyes went skyward for a moment, battling an onslaught of tears. When she looked at him, there was no hint of them in her cold eyes. “She came to terms with everybody hating me, especially since there’s no dowry. Those guys want a wife with money, even if they have their

own. But she won't pay up. She's too greedy." Something like a smile broke across her face. "I'm sure she'll dump me at the train station on her way out of town."

"What'll you do?" He found he really wanted to know. He kind of felt sorry for the poor kid. And he could relate to the notion of being left at the station without a penny.

"Same thing I always do. Take care of myself." She took a deep breath and leaned back against the deck chair, crossing her arms loosely against her waist. "Maybe I'll take a page out of her book and find someone rich to marry me. Though if Esther couldn't manage to find someone desperate enough among her friends' pimply, moronic sons I doubt I can do much better."

"Why don't you think anyone would want you?"

"I'm a bitch." It was almost a whisper, almost to herself. Like they were the words she said to herself so she would feel better.

He wanted to murmur her name and pull her into his arms. But it was too soon for that. Not when he wasn't sure this was going to work out.

"Or maybe Teddy will save me," she said, just as he had almost gathered his thoughts enough to speak. It was surprising what you could learn if you left someone alone with their uncomfortable silences, what they might say to fill them and make them go away. She blinked as though coming out of

a dream and looked at him. “Maybe you’ll save me,” she teased.

It was exactly what he wanted her to say. He felt the warmth of pride spread through his chest. “I would, if I had two dimes to rub together.”

“Come on,” she said, but he didn’t relent. “Nobody on this tugboat is broke. Especially not anybody on this side of the fence.” Iron railings separated the classes, kept the less well-to-do from mingling, and kept those who were special and rich from having to sully their sight with such people. It was, after all, a British ship, and the British were preternaturally concerned with class.

“It’s true.” He flashed his best smile at her. He could practically see her melt. “A bottle too much of whiskey, a bad hand and a little help from a con man, and I’m going home bilked out of my hard-earned life’s savings.”

“Oh, too bad,” Ruth said, sharp enough to cut. “You never worked a hard-earned day in your life.”

He couldn’t help the black thought that rolled through his mind, memory of the sun beating down on his head as he stood barefoot in a pen full of shit and corn and feathers, wringing chicken necks. He blinked and it was gone. “Yeah. You got me.” His grin widened, and he looked up at the stars. “We’re a pair.” He glanced sidelong at her. She was smiling too. He almost moved on to the next stage, suggesting they’d



think of something, that maybe they could work together to better their situation. But something held him back. It was too soon. “Better get those jewels up to bed. Mama’s waiting.”

She tried not to show her bristling anger. Her buttons weren’t too hard to push. “You’re right.” She slipped her long legs to one side of the chaise, and got to her feet. She stood over him for a moment, looking down at his upturned face, and she reached out to brush back his hair as though she couldn’t help herself. “See you around,” she said, and he watched her walk away.

Orchestra music still faintly filled the air. No doubt there were card games to be played and drinks to be had in the men’s lounge. But he stayed where he was, content in that deck chair, looking up at the stars.

Friday, April 11, 1912

## Chapter Four

In the morning, Will tried to burrow back into the soft bed. He'd been dreaming about James, he thought, but the memories of that other world faded quickly with a gentle knock at the door.

“Will, come with us to breakfast.” Annie’s soft voice wafted through the barrier.

He strode to the door and opened it, even though he wore only his rumpled pajamas. Annie grinned at him and suddenly he regretted the choice. It wasn’t proper for her to see him this way.

“Go on without me.” He turned his back on her to reach for his robe.

“Your mother will be disappointed,” she said. Her eyebrows rose to match the calculated words. She knew what would work on him.

He felt independence bristle up within him. “I’m going to the gymnasium. That’s the point of sailing on such a grand ship—the facilities. I’ll see you for lunch.”

Color rose in Annie's cheeks. Her hand reached toward him, only an inch, before she caught herself. "The Palm Court," she said.

He nodded coldly. "See you there."

"You should check in on your mother." Annie's implication was clear—she wasn't going to do it. She stalked off down the hall with a twitch of her skirt.

He sighed. He knew it wasn't the right thing to do, but he just couldn't face her this morning. Not after the dreams he'd had and the thoughts he'd entertained. He belted his robe and slipped into the hall, knocking softly at his mother's door, then pushing it open.

"Will." Her face lit up at the sight of him. "I thought you'd be with Annie. She went off to breakfast."

"I'm not hungry." He sat on the edge of the bed.

"You can't skip meals. You must keep your strength up." A moment of vulnerability sparked across his mother's face. He saw the loving mother of his youth, and a hint of the woman who had lost her husband to death and worried about losing her son. Her worry about him was ridiculous—he was healthy, and would undoubtedly live for a great many more years, barring some unforeseen accident. He supposed she couldn't help it.

"We're meeting for lunch at the Palm Court," he told her.

“That sounds lovely.” She leaned back onto the pile of pillows. “I’ll just have some dry toast and get a touch more rest.”

“Are you all right?” he asked, feeling his heartbeat quickening with worry.

His mother nodded. “It’s the curse of traveling.”

On an impulse, he leaned in and kissed his mother’s forehead, a light, dry brush of the lips. He hadn’t done anything like it in many, many years. The dazed, surprised expression overtaking her face almost made it worth it. She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“Have a good day,” she told him, and he nodded, feeling a reluctance to leave her side. But she needed her rest, and he had things he wanted to do.

Back in his stateroom, he couldn’t help feeling energized by the promise of the morning’s freedom. He did not have to consult the guide to services on the ship—it seemed as though the ship’s amenities were the only things they’d discussed for weeks in preparing for this voyage. The gymnasium was fully outfitted with the latest training mechanisms. There was a saltwater pool below decks, a squash court and even a Turkish bath. He hoped that physical activity would help with some of the urges he was feeling.

In the gym, he looked over the equipment, taking it all in from where he stood. There was a stationary bicycle, and a

rowing machine. Rings hung from the ceiling and there was a vaulting horse in the middle of the room. He didn't know where to begin. He thought he'd read about an exercise professional on board who would presumably be able to help him with this decision, but he was alone in the room.

Some of his enthusiasm wore down. He could have lived up to some of his responsibilities instead. The solitude weighed on him, leaving him alone with thoughts he did not want to listen to. He decided to let his body take over, let the exertion distract him from conscious thought.

He took his seat in the small, artificial boat of the rowing machine and put his hands to the oars. His muscles screamed with the first awakening, and then settled in to a comfortably dull ache. His heart rate and respiration grew quick and his mind went blank with the effort he was exerting. It felt good. He opened his eyes and found he was being watched. It was James, of course. He felt his body flush at the thought of what he must have seen—him with his eyes closed, vulnerable, body taut with exertion.

“Careful, or you'll row yourself right back to England.”

So that was how it was going to be. Denial and spite. He shot James a look that said he didn't care, and pulled harder at the oars. James didn't move, just continued to watch. Suddenly he felt conscious of the beads of sweat on his face and the heat in his body, since it seemed as though James was

taking in each detail deeply and individually. He wanted to snap at him, tell him to go somewhere else, but he couldn't find the words. He redoubled his concentration, shutting out the world. Including James.

But James would not be shut out. "Let me guess. You went to some fancy college and did crew with the other rich boys. Am I close?"

So close it made him bitter.

"Betcha got a cute little Harvard sweater back in your trunk. Too bad you're not wearing it now."

A dark satisfaction curled the corners of his lips into something resembling a smile. "Princeton," he corrected, but even as he said it, he knew he was merely confirming all of James's assumptions about him.

James straddled the horse, legs spread wide and thighs gripping. That spot in the center drew Will's gaze. James didn't start the mechanism, just sat there, watching him with a jealous intensity. "Pretty little fiancée you got yourself there."

"Leave Annie out of this." He kept his voice even. He felt guilty enough. Something dark began to take hold of his heart. Had yesterday only been a carefully calculated attempt at blackmail? He didn't want to believe it. He dragged his gaze up from the juncture of James's thighs to his pink, firm lips. It hadn't seemed like blackmail at the time.

"Just giving you my congratulations."

“What do you want, James?”

James wet his lips lingeringly, considering his reply. When it came, it was like a punch to the softness of his stomach. “You.” He said the word deliberately, then slipped from the horse and walked out of the gym.

Will stopped pulling at the oars and the machinery ground to a halt. But it was too late, James was gone, and he wasn’t sure his watery knees would support him even if he did stand and run after him. He tightened his grip and thrust the machinery in motion again, pulling harder at the oars, as though he rowed his own tiny boat on the rough sea, trying to get as far away from there as possible.

James wasn’t the type to blush or to wear his emotions on his face, but he felt his skin burning as he walked away from the gymnasium. He tried to tell himself he’d said what he did to provoke Will and see what he would do. But the pounding of his heart betrayed the truth of it to his body, even if he wanted to try to lie to himself. He’d said it because it was true.

Funny, he thought, he could have been using the same strategy on both Will and Ruth, even though his goals for the two were entirely different. He wanted Will. Ruth he just needed for the money. Money was the most important thing. Why did it feel as though he needed to be reminded of that?



Feeling caught and off balance, he went for the one thing that never failed to comfort him in a time of need.

In the men's lounge, it was still too early for games of chance. But the library was always there, so there he stood, searching the shelves for some comfort.

"You should try this." An unexpected voice called to him. He turned his head and saw an older man sitting relaxed in a chair.

"Okay." He drew closer, with a little uncertainty. The man seemed lonely. Loneliness could be an asset in his line of work, but it could also lend itself to the long conversations impossible to escape from, which he dreaded, because right now he wanted to be alone. "What've you got?" he asked, but then he saw it. The blasted chess set.

The man who'd beckoned to him smiled, a grin that pulled deep lines around his eyes. "I'm John Keyes."

"James." He held out his hand so they could shake. The other man's grip was cold but firm. He looked like the kind of guy who might have some money.

"I noticed you yesterday. You're traveling alone. So am I."

James felt the dread roll through him. He headed it off by saying, "You're the chess champ." It earned him another big grin from Keyes.

“It really is the most fascinating game. Ancient.” Keyes’s eyes lit up, enthusiastic.

“Okay.” He eased away, hoping for some distraction or rescue. John Keyes was probably a nice guy, but he seemed a little batty. It didn’t seem normal to be so excited by chess.

“Keyes!” It was the ringing, bell-like voice of his dinner companion, Harvey. Harvey clapped Keyes on the back like they were old friends—which perhaps they were, having played chess the day before. Harvey saw him and his grin widened even further. “James!” he cried, looking like he was about to hug James with the joy of seeing him again.

James put up a hand defensively and edged back, away from them both. “See you around.” As he turned and hurried toward the door, he heard Harvey’s hearty laugh and knew somehow it was directed at him. He felt like a fool. He was used to being in control of himself, his emotions, and his surroundings at all times, for he had learned a long time ago people were easy to manipulate into doing what you wanted them to do, as long as you made them think the idea had been theirs in the first place.

He settled into one of the wooden chairs on deck and drew in a deep draught of the cool, crisp air. It wouldn’t hurt to close his eyes and contemplate what to do next. A giggle roused him before he could drift off into the soft darkness entirely. He opened one eye and found Ruth standing over

him, her head tipped in a mocking way. She'd pinned up her hair, with strands escaping from a silk band in the front, but the ladylike effect only made her look younger. "You're like an old man." She dropped onto the lounge chair beside him, sending her long, elegant limbs sprawling.

"I was resting my eyes." He knew it sounded as old and ornery as she'd accused him of being. He grinned and cast her a wicked, sidelong glance to accompany it. He'd like to believe that look prompted her to shiver delicately. "Here you go." He removed the blanket he'd draped over his body and took care to fold it and wrap it, embrace-like, around her shoulders. He lingered a moment, allowing her to feel the warmth of his breath against her skin, inhaling her delicate, clean scent. Drawing her in to his web. "What mischief are you up to today?"

"You tell me."

"Ah-ha." His voice low and inviting. "Makes me wish I had some mischief to get up to."

"You haven't thought of any yet?" she teased, and he shook his head, lowering it slightly so he could look up at her boyishly. She stretched, lying back against the chair. "You're right, of course. This boat is dreadfully dull. There's meal after meal, and lousy conversation afterward."

"Where is your beloved brother?" he inquired, as though lousy conversation had reminded him. Which perhaps it had.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “With Mother.” She let disgust drip from her tone. “I think they were going to play tennis or some dreary nonsense.” He nodded, and she continued, “We could go and stroll through the shops. I understand there’s an entire vault of gems here for the asking.”

He chuckled, and lowered his head humbly for a moment before he nailed her with a look so intense he could feel the electricity flow through her body. “I think you’ve got me figured wrong.”

“What do you mean?” She kept her voice low and honeyed to match his. He could feel it resonate in his belly. She was good at this. Obvious, because she was young, and not as good as him, but he had no doubt her routine had been perfected at the expense of brother dear and used on many defenseless men throughout Europe. Those were real diamonds in her jewelry, after all.

“I ain’t got a penny to my name and neither do you.” He beamed a bright, wide smile at her.

“What are you talking about?” The expression in her eyes read *caught*.

He refused to repeat himself. Instead, he reached out to brush back a golden strand of her hair, and her eyes went unfocused due to his nearness. If he’d had the materials, she would have eaten out of his hand. “I’m broke, and so are you. Doesn’t matter, though.” He took her hand in his. “There are

ways around it.” He pulled her to her feet along with him. “It never hurt anybody to window shop.”

His plan had come together. He suspected she’d like it when he explained it to her. If he explained it to her. That might be a needless complication.

“There you are!” Annie cried, quickening her pace to catch up with Will. The vigorous exercise he’d just put himself through exhausted him, and the thoughts of James dogged his every move. Annie fell into step beside him, winding her arm through his and leaning in close to him. It took all of his strength not to pull away. He didn’t want to be touched. His nerves felt too raw.

“What’s wrong?” Annie had a talent for picking up on the things he didn’t want to discuss.

“Nothing. I’m tired.”

“Of course you’re tired.” She reached up to rub his back, between his shoulder blades. “You ran off this morning without breakfast and now you’re wound up tighter than a watch spring.”

He waited for her to tell him what she proposed to do about it. Annie lived up to her predictability, and it made his heart sink. He didn’t want to be right all the time, or right about her. Hadn’t there been a day when she’d been full of

surprises? Where had that Annie gone, the one who kept him guessing?

“You’re going to come with me and we’re going to meet your mother for lunch.” She put her hand over his. Annie hesitated a moment. “I feel like you’re avoiding me.”

“Of course I’m not.”

Annie was silent a moment. She knew him too well. He hated it. “It’s okay, you know.”

“What?”

“To have cold feet. About the wedding.” She looked up at him with her big green eyes, then looked away quickly. “You’re not the only one.”

That gave him pause. He hadn’t given her feelings much thought since the day he’d placed the engagement ring on her slim finger. But it was also reassuring, as she’d intended it to be. He wasn’t alone. These feelings were perfectly normal, given the situation.

She’d surprised him by saying so. It was a hint of the old, unpredictable Annie, and he found that the most reassuring of all. It wasn’t all about responsibility and duty, not always.

“I think the Palm Café is down this way.” Annie pressed against his arm to steer him like a rudder.

“This place is like a maze.” His voice sounded hollow to his own ears.

“I figured you’d know your way around by now. Didn’t you run off exploring yesterday?”

He let the comment pass in silence. He couldn’t tell her what he’d been doing.

“Don’t think I didn’t consider making a break for it too.”

“Yeah? Where would you have gone?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Annie said. “Maybe into one of those ridiculous lifeboats hooked over the side. Or maybe catapulted over the iron railing into steerage. No one would notice another body down there, do you think?”

“I’ve heard it’s not so bad.” He thought of the gates, actual physical barriers to separate the classes. Such a thing would only exist on a British ship. “One of the articles or brochures said the facilities for the other classes are not only better than on any other ship, but even better than they would have at home, with running water and other comforts.”

Annie looked at him as though she was indulging him, or as though he was speaking but she wasn’t listening to the words. Which was entirely possible. “What?” he asked.

“We’ve arrived,” she said, a moment before he saw the white lace handkerchief wave from one of the tables, where his mother had already installed herself.

“She’s got a friend with her.” His eyebrows rose with surprise.

“That’s Esther Cole,” Annie whispered as she approached. “Our missing table mate from the dining room last night, mother to those two, you remember?”

“Of course.” They reached his mother and her new friend. Esther was tall and slim. Her hair was blond and pulled back almost severely, or perhaps the darkness lingering in her eyes gave her entire face a hard look to it. She was probably the same age as his mother, but she seemed so much stronger somehow.

After the introductions, they settled in for lunch.

“We met in the Marconi office,” his mother explained. “I wanted to let your aunt know we’re on our way. You would have enjoyed the hustle and bustle and seeing such a modern machine at work.”

“There’s nothing new about telegrams.” He smiled to mitigate the sharp edge to his words.

“Ship to shore, though!” Esther's eyes sparkled with excitement. “All of these new communications. It’s the wave of the future, mark my words.”

He nodded politely and focused on his food for a moment. At least his mother had found someone who would make a good companion. Though they seemed very different, they had both been widowed.

“It’s been terrible.” Esther dabbed a handkerchief to her perfectly dry eye. “Mr. Cole died when my boy was nothing



but a child, though it seems to me he passed only a few short years ago. It is still a blow to my heart. I know exactly what you are going through, my dear Martha.” She patted his mother’s hand lightly in the spirit of comfort and friendship.

His mother nodded, though her eyes were dry as well. Being widowed was new and hard for her. She reached out and patted Esther’s hand reassuringly.

“You have your son to be a comfort to you, as mine is.” Esther looked at him. It should have been a warm look, except as far as he could tell there was not one thing warm about Esther. “Of course, he’s a man, now. So is my Teddy. It’s more of a comfort, really. When things shift, and you’re no longer taking care of them, but they are taking care of you.”

“Teddy and Ruth, wasn’t it?” He stirred the pot a little bit. He didn’t want to think about how he was responsible for taking care of his mother now.

“Oh, of course. Dear Ruth.” Esther’s tone made it clear what she thought of the “dear” girl. For a moment he thought she might expound on the girl’s flaws; but she did not. He figured she would wait until one night at dinner, when the girl was present to suffer the humiliation. He despised the sort of woman Esther seemed to be.

“You’re blessed not to have siblings,” Esther said, and he saw again the regret on his mother’s face. Esther didn’t

understand her new friend at all. She turned to Annie. “What about you, Anna?”

Annie set down her fork and pushed a polite smile onto her lips. “It’s Annie.”

Esther nodded emptyly, and everyone at the table knew Esther would quite determinedly continue to refer to Annie in any way she wished. “Well, it’s a darling name,” Esther said. “Very royal.” Annie’s smile thinned. “So, do you?”

“Do I what?” Annie appeared a bit alarmed and put on the spot.

“Have brothers and sisters.”

“No,” Annie said. “I haven’t.”

Will saw stubbornness building within her. He put his hand over hers on the table, and she tensed beneath his warning touch. The setting on her engagement ring dug into his hand, but he didn’t remove it. “What are your plans for the afternoon?” he inquired. “More Marconi-grams?”

“I noticed we have four for bridge,” Will’s mother said.

“Oh, no,” he protested. He loved his mother, but not enough for bridge.

“I agree.” As all eyes turned to Annie, she clarified more gracefully, “Pardon me for saying so, but my head aches terribly. I think I need to lie down in a dark, quiet room.” In case that didn’t make her point, she added, “Alone.”

“I’ll accompany you there,” he offered. Annie looked at him, and he looked back just as insistently. “Make sure you get back all right.” It was his responsibility. “Then, Mother, I’ll come back and see if there’s anything you need.”

“Let’s order coffee for dessert, and we’ll wait for you here, Will,” Esther said.

“Of course.” He rose and took Annie’s elbow as though to steady her on this rock-solid ship and nurse her through her headache, which he suspected was faked. They walked away together gracefully, and he waited until they had rounded the corner to say with a hint of sarcasm he couldn’t bite back, “Are you sure you’ll be all right?”

“I can’t deal with her anymore.” Annie looked at him imploringly, and he was surprised by how much it hurt. “I know she’s your mother, Will, but—”

“Maybe it’s good she’s met Mrs. Cole,” he said, to try to keep the peace. “She seemed a lot better than she did this morning.”

“I don’t see why you had to go off and leave me by myself earlier.” Annie’s voice was soft.

He pretended he hadn’t heard it. But she wouldn’t let it drop. “I swear we haven’t spent more than two minutes together since this trip started.” She began to reach for him but stopped herself. He felt guilty, knowing she was thinking of the night before.

They reached the door to her stateroom. “What are you really going to do here all afternoon?” He leaned casually against the wall beside the door.

“Enjoy the peace and quiet.” Annie smiled, and there was an odd, bitter tinge to it. “There are some things I need to think about.”

Her words sent a cold chill fluttering down his spine, but he nodded solemnly. “Anything you want to talk about?”

Annie smiled again, and shook her head, as though she was carefree. But he knew she was thinking of those things she’d threatened earlier. He knew she valued her freedom. He knew her so well.

As though she could read his thoughts, she asked, “If you knew everything there was to know about me, would you be bored with me?”

“No.” He had to wonder in his heart if it was true. He looked her in the eyes. “What about me?”

“You don’t have any secrets, Will.” She appeared certain of it as she turned away from him, closing the door to the stateroom firmly behind her. He wished she were right, knowing how very wrong she was. Thinking again of James. The way he’d looked this morning, when he’d said Will was what he wanted.

It only took him a few minutes to return to the Palm Café, but Esther and his mother had finished up their coffee. “Let’s

take a turn on the main promenade,” Esther suggested, and he had little choice but to accompany them, one woman on each side. He settled in to do his duty.

Almost immediately, he caught sight of James. He had one arm wrapped around Ruth as the lithe blonde looked up at him with mirth and enjoyment on her face. Will felt his stomach clench and fought against a physical reaction that might draw attention to him. Jealousy. He was surprised to feel it.

“Who is that horrible man?” Esther asked, her voice artificially low, hinting at confidentiality. “This is the second time I’ve seen him with Ruth.”

“He’s assigned to our dining table,” Martha replied. “Sanders, something like that.”

“James.” He could not take his eyes off of him.

“James, that’s it. Will is always good with names and faces. Dates, too. He went to Princeton, you know,” Martha said.

“Oh,” Esther countered, with a smile that seemed false. “I couldn’t get Teddy to bother with schooling. He was too anxious to put himself into the real world of work.” She drew a deep sigh through her nose and practically tsked at her daughter. “I hope he knows what he’s gotten himself into. She’s not only penniless, but shameless.” She turned to

Martha. “You’re lucky Will’s got himself a good, solid girl like Anna. What is her background, exactly?”

James had noticed him. He felt the shock of his gaze. Ruth still had her head down, obviously studying a jewelry case. James held his gaze for what seemed like an eternity, during which he found himself completely unable to breathe. He had to get away from here, away from James’s eyes, away from the mindless chatter of his mother and her new friend. “I’ll leave you to it.” He withdrew from the women on either side of him, and he turned and walked away too quickly to have to bother making excuses. He could feel James’s eyes boring into his back for the longest time.

## Chapter Five

James had never thought of himself as uptight. He rolled with the punches and he liked it that way. That didn't change his tight shoulders, his aching jaw and the pain between his eyes. He blamed it all on Will Woods.

Will had seen him with Ruth, and there had been pure, dark, heated jealousy in his eyes. Will looked so intense, so tightly wound, so sexually frustrated...

James was not the sexually frustrated type.

On the F deck, between the boilers powering the ship through the smooth, crystalline ocean and the saltwater swimming pool, was an elaborate Turkish bath for the use of the first-class passengers. He had heard stories about these sorts of baths before. Sordid stories. He pulled in a deep breath as he rode the modern elevator down to the appropriate deck. He'd had his share of meaningless sex in this lifetime, and he wasn't sure it was worth it. As he'd grown older, he'd come to appreciate quality over quantity, but God, it would release a lot of tension right now.

He exchanged his ticket for a towel and the attendant showed him into the dressing room. As he slipped out of his clothes, folding them haphazardly and setting them into a locker, he turned his thoughts to Ruth. It would be one way to draw her in, but he wasn't entirely sure she'd done it without training wheels on. She might be up for some manual stimulation, but when it came down to it, he could do that more effectively himself. Wasn't worth it.

*I really am getting old*, he thought, resting his tired eyes for a moment. He wrapped the towel loosely around his hips, shook his hair back, and padded toward the first room of the treatment. A blast of hot air kissed his skin as he proceeded inside.

The heat burned dry and arid, like the desert. Like hell. The Titanic's designers had put their own spin on the age-old concept of a sauna. The room was done up in varying tile and dark wood, cut into a lacy Moroccan theme, with tables to lie on. He edged onto the table one hip at a time, feeling the sweat break through the surface of his skin. He tried to breathe in the hot air and found he preferred the sticky humidity of his old family home in the South to this dry furnace.

He unwound the towel from his hips and used it to mop his face. Already his hair stuck to his neck and his forehead, and he swabbed at it uncomfortably. An attendant appeared. "Lie back," he counseled, and James did as he was told. He



couldn't keep his eyes open in the heat, but he was too uncomfortable to sleep. He lay there in the steamy red darkness, waiting to grow accustomed to it. He had always preferred heat to cold. Its languor began to soak into his bones and muscles, but he could feel the pounding throb of his heart, like it was swelling in the heat.

The attendant began to massage his limbs, with a touch neither too harsh nor too soft. It all transpired in silence. He could only hear his own breathing, loud in his ears, and the throb of his heart, less insistent now. The smack of hands against his skin. The succulent moan he couldn't hold back, caught low in the back of his throat. He thought he heard the door open, and the slap of another person's feet against the tiled floor, but he couldn't manage to open his eyes. His body commanded all of his attention. His skin began to tingle, awakened and alive, even as he felt the rest of his body sink deep into relaxation.

The next stage of the bath involved an actual bath, of sorts. Warm water from a bowl splashed against his skin. Mildly scented soap followed, lathered and rubbed into his body by the attendant's capable hands, followed by another rinse with warm water from the bowl. Somehow it didn't feel quite as hot, either because he'd grown used to it or because his skin and his muscles were too pampered to register the heat anymore.

The attendant clapped his hands twice and James opened his eyes. The man in the pristine white uniform ushered him up to a sitting position. He blinked rapidly to clear his vision. His head felt both heavy and light. A capable hand on his elbow helped him to his feet and steered him toward a door, holding him steady in his bliss-weakened condition, ensuring his feet did not slip against the elaborately tiled floor. Behind him, he could hear another attendant at work, another man's hearty groan.

The next room was an oven, hotter by far than the room he'd just left. He felt sweat trickle down his neck. "What now?" he asked.

"The tradition of the baths is to maintain silence," the attendant murmured to him. "This is the hot room. Remain as long as you wish. Then move to the next room."

"What's in there, open flames and the devil?" he asked. The attendant merely smiled, and moved away, pulling the door closed behind him, leaving him alone.

The heat. Oh Lord, the heat.

He sat on his damp towel. It was too hot to breathe, but the stress of the heat had gone. The massage and the bath had eased it all away, leaving him to sit in silence in this room that would be like a sauna, except the heat was intensely dry rather than steamy and damp. He breathed heavily through his

mouth, and even the moisture there was not enough to generate coolness. He had never been so hot in his entire life.

Despite the heat, he found the experience amazing. He leaned over a water fountain done up in elegant Titanic style, eyes closed for a moment, expecting the water to come out sizzling. But it felt cool against his tongue and he nearly swooned from the sensation of it.

Behind him, the door opened and closed. The other patron. He didn't care that he was standing there bare-assed. Like many activities on the ship, the Turkish baths were segregated by sex, although he wasn't terribly shy about showing his body to anyone. He found it glorious and reveled in the things that it could do.

Even when he turned and found himself facing Will.

Will's face glowed warm and pink, and his eyes drooped, heavy-lidded and dark. He had a towel wrapped around his hips and a second draped over his shoulders. The two men looked at each other for a long moment. He took in the details of Will's body, the pale skin warmed by his own massage and bath. The hair lining his chest, thick on the upper part and thinning, tapering down to where his towel perched. How damp his parted lips looked.

He could feel Will's eyes on him too. Knew what he was seeing. Warm-toned skin, still blessed with the last hint of the summer's sun. Nearly hairless, and what there was of it was

dark blond. His erection half-hard with the sensuality of the experience of being heated, touched, massaged and washed. He knew his mouth was cool with the water he'd drunk, and he knew Will's would be hot. It was impossible for him not to close the short space between them and put his lips to Will's, sliding his tongue inside, cold meeting and melting into heat.

Will put his hands into James's hair. His long, delicate fingers tangled in the damp, sweaty mess at the nape of his neck, holding him, caressing him, kissing him back with a deep groan.

The baths maintained the custom of silence. They upheld this custom, finding other ways to communicate.

He broke off the kiss, but Will still held James's head in his hands, leaving only a bit of space between their lips, eyes searching so close they couldn't focus. He could feel his body at attention, and he could feel the hard press of Will's cock through the towel between them. James moved his hips in a small circle, to see what Will would do. He didn't pull away. James extended his arms, skimming Will's spine to where it flared to tight, hard buttocks, which he ran his palms across, stroking, cupping, pulling Will's hips to his, meeting the thrust with one of his own.

Will gasped, and he moved, in an almost up-and-down, back-and-forth motion, dragging the soft towel against James's hardness with the steel of his own. He wanted the towel gone,

to meet searing silken flesh with his own, but it felt rough and soft and good.

His fingers kneaded the solid musculature of Will's backside, then rose to where the towel rode low and loose. He tugged at it, easing it down, and stepping back so it could fall from where it was caught between their bodies.

They looked at each other.

He felt himself twitch and swell a little bit more, bigger and harder beneath Will's gaze. Will's own member was thick, with the head permanently exposed, pink and soft. Another difference between them. Will had no doubt been born in a hospital, clinical and clean, and his rich parents had gone for the latest recommended procedure. James had been born in his parents' bed and swaddled up tight. Being cut was a mark of social class. But that didn't matter, not right now.

Will's cock fit perfectly against James's hand. He rubbed his thumb over the pink, swollen tip. Listened to his ragged breathing and looked at the beads of moisture he'd drawn from him. He ached to be touched, harder maybe than he had ever been. He started to reach down with his other hand, but Will intercepted him, pushed his hand away, and encircled his shaft with those slender, perfect fingers.

Will knew exactly what to do, how to touch him the way he wanted to be touched, so his eyes closed and his body swayed. After a moment, he remembered what he was doing,

and began to slide his own hand against the heated steel of Will's body, glancing up to see Will's reaction, the way his lips trembled, then back down to the thrusting of his hips between his wide-planted feet on the detailed tile floor.

The heat and the agony built fast inside of him. His hand grew rough and uneven, until all he could do was hold on, hold on, while the pleasure pumped through him, arching his back and stealing his breath and his words and his sense. Will's hand closed over his while his eyes were still closed. It was damp, and sticky with his own fluid. Will guided his hand, using it as a conduit between them, cupping his fingers and making the strokes hard, so he felt them, so they counted. Will's hand stilled and he kept pumping, even as he felt Will's semen, opened his eyes and saw the pale fluid and the anguish of pleasure on Will's face.

They stood there for a long, silent moment, swaying gently like dancers locked in an embrace, heads down, hands pressed together. He wanted to get closer. He didn't want to move. It was searing hot and he felt weak.

Will pulled his hand away, then must have thought the better of it, because he raised it to stroke the side of James's face. He picked up his towel and walked over to the water fountain, dampening it with the cool water and washing himself down, rubbing his hands under the meager spray. The towel settled back against Will's hips, covering his ass, and he

disappeared through the door on the opposite side of the room, leaving him alone.

He echoed Will's motions, almost following him. He wet his hands, then the towel. He wiped himself off, then pressed the dampness to the side of his face, to his mouth, to the back of his neck. He couldn't be bothered to dress himself in the damn thing, so he carried it with him to the next room, uncertain of what to expect.

Blissful cool air washed over his skin. A pool of water lent moisture to the room. He felt gooseflesh rise on his legs and his arms and he shivered lightly. This room had an attendant in it. Will's face was still pink, retaining the fever of the previous room. He lay back on a carefully tiled table matching the rest of the elaborate décor. Will looked blissful, and James could imagine the icy feel of that table against his skin after the brutal heat.

He slid into the pool. The cold hurt. He ground his teeth and bore it, like ice on a burn. He ducked his head and pushed his hair back, teeth chattering. It was enough to make him want to go back to the first room, get warm and clean and start again. He could spend his life in this cycle, he thought, even as he walked to the tables. He had his choice, but he lay down on the one next to Will's. He thought he could feel the other man's body radiating heat. He gestured for a clean towel, and the attendant obliged, handing it to him. He draped it over his

hips, folding it once against his belly. He liked the feel of it there. He liked the coolness of the air after the heat. He wanted to talk to Will, but silence was the tradition, and he didn't know what to say.

He didn't mean to close his eyes, but he did, and when he opened them again, there were several other men in the room, older, fat as walruses. One of them he thought might be Guggenheim, but he didn't care. Will had gone.

Will intended to wait for James. He sat in the cool room, breathing evenly, centering himself. James lay beside him, only a few inches gap between the tables where they rested. James's eyes were closed and he was asleep. Will thought of sleep after the sexual act as a sign of satisfaction and trust. He looked at James's face, the strong lines of his brow and his nose, and the way a hint of a smile tugged at his full lips. Maybe he was exhausted from the heat.

More men entered the cooling room. They didn't seem to know of the tradition of silence in the baths or, if they did, they didn't care. The men talked and splashed in the pool. He could only think of how few minutes they'd followed by, and how closely he and James had come to being discovered in the hot room. What would these men, by the looks of them wealthy businessmen, have thought if they'd walked in to find him and James touching each other? A part of him imagined



scandal and shame. Another part of him, perhaps the part James had touched, imagined they wouldn't care in the least. They must have gone off to school, as he had. Men had secrets of their own.

But the added presence in the room drove him from it. He gave up on waiting for James to awaken. It crossed his mind that James might be feigning sleep, waiting for him to leave. He felt a twinge of sadness at the thought, but had no reason to expect anything better. He returned to the changing room and put on his clothes. They felt limp and soiled and rough against his skin, which felt new and changed by this experience. He felt lighter as he walked through the maze of halls back to his stateroom.

He opened the door and found Annie curled up on his bed, waiting for him. He glanced behind him and closed the door quickly. Annie's feet were bare and they seemed vulnerable to him in their paleness. Her hair swirled against her shoulders and she'd loosened her dress. "Surprised?" she asked.

"Very." He remained on the other side of the room, with his back pressed to the door.

"You haven't paid more than two minutes' attention to me since we got on board." This was Annie's way of changing that. "I've spent more time with your mother, and it's not her I'm engaged to."

“Annie.” He tried to think of some way to reason with her, when he wanted peace and quiet and solitude to clear his head. He approached, thinking he could take her hands and perhaps encourage her out of the room. But she drew near, wrapping her arms around his neck and turning her face up to be kissed. When he didn’t, something changed in her green eyes.

“Don’t you want me anymore?” she asked.

*No*, he thought, and her reaction was so immediate he feared he’d said it aloud. She sprung away from him, searching out her shoes against the richly carpeted floor. He realized she was reacting to the truth she’d read in his eyes. But the answer was still no. It felt like a revelation. Guilt flowed through him with every beat of his pulse.

“Annie, I’m sorry. It’s not... I just need time.”

She nodded, drawing her lips in against each other, clear-eyed. He’d never known Annie to cry. That was one of the many things that had drawn him to her. She seemed so strong, especially compared to his mother. “I know,” she said, and for a brief second his heart was touched with cold fear, wondering what exactly she knew. He realized she was responding to his statement. She knew he needed time. “You missed tea.” Her gaze searched his face. “That was why I waited for you here.” She stepped forward, as though regaining her boldness. She

brushed his cheek with the palm of her hand. “Don’t miss supper, Will.”

“I won’t.” He watched her pull the door to his stateroom open and move out into the hall. She glanced at him over her shoulder, and silently closed the door behind her, breaking through the space between the two of them.

He didn’t know what to do. Annie, his fiancée, was the right choice. He’d made a promise to her. It was the right and proper thing to do, to fulfill that commitment.

But there was James. James, who he wanted. Only a few days were left on this ship with James, before everything went back to normal—or what passed for it. When the ship docked in New York, could he turn his back on everything that had happened aboard it?

He didn’t know. He knew he should. He didn’t know if he could.

Will arrived last at the supper table. It made him uneasy, being the last one to approach the large, square table, with familiar faces on every side. Ruth looked gorgeous and petulant, and something hard sliced through him as he remembered seeing her with James earlier in the day. That was before he and James had their encounter in the steam room, but jealousy still flared. James sat beside Ruth now, leaning back comfortably in his chair like he owned the place.

Completely at ease, with whiskey in his eyes. Would James taste of alcohol if he kissed him?

The open place for him to sit was beside James. He had no choice but to sit there and try to pretend there was nothing between them. With his fingers still numb, he withdrew the chair and sank into it, feeling all eyes on him, making him oddly self-conscious.

“I don’t think anyone told me what you do,” Esther said to him. He had joined the conversation when he walked up. Esther had a predatory look in her eye, as though she had to be the king of the jungle by any means possible. No matter what he replied, it wouldn’t be good enough.

“I’m a banker.” He waited for her retort, which would undoubtedly involve her son Teddy’s superiority. He was too old to care about such things. He hadn’t become a banker because of any sort of social standing. He’d done it because it was the family tradition, because it was what he was born to and had no choice about, and because there was nothing else he could do. He was lucky—aside from those obligations, he was good at it.

“A banker, how wonderful.” Esther’s tone was icy. “Ruth, what a shame Will is already claimed by Anna here. A banker might be exactly what you need.” She seemed to imply something ugly about Ruth and money.

Ruth bit her lip, as though holding back an insolent remark, and looked at Esther with the narrowed eyes of a sullen teenager. She wasn't much younger than Annie, he thought, though Annie was much more poised, controlled and mature. "Whatever you say, *Mother.*" Her inflection on the name seemed biting and cruel.

He spread his napkin in his lap belatedly. "Did I miss the rest of the introductions? James, what do you do to earn your keep?" He felt nervous addressing the question to him in front of all these people. It was as though he was leading two very separate lives, and sitting here they intertwined.

"Didn't you know?" James's voice was low and slow and whiskey-soaked indeed. His eyes blazed with a challenge. "I'm a gigolo."

His mother choked. He thought her eyes would bug out of her head. He felt his hands tremble and clenched them underneath the table.

Ruth's laugh broke the mood. "Tell them what you really do, silly."

James dipped his head perfectly to make his golden hair hang down over his brow. His wicked smile acknowledged he had been naughty. "I sell things."

"What sorts of things?" Esther asked, but Ruth spoke over her, making her contribution utterly unimportant and unacknowledged. "What about you, Mr. Harvey?" she asked.

“Mister.” Harvey snorted in a jolly way. “It’s just Harvey. I used to sell newspapers, then worked in a factory. But then I got kinda lucky. Now I own some factories, and some other stuff too.”

“What a wonderful turn of fortune.” Annie inclined her head as though this was the most interesting conversation she’d ever had. Yet he knew it was genuine. Annie was sweet and made real connections with people.

“Not really,” Harvey said. “Okay, I’m not selling papers anymore, but ever since I got rich, I’ve been kinda unlucky. Like, my father died, and I’ve been so nervous for months I can hardly eat anything.”

Will's mother made a sympathetic sound. He almost laughed aloud, the way Ruth had done a few minutes earlier. All this polite society made him feel slightly mad and hysterical. Perhaps it was James’s closeness, his proximity, the way he could almost feel the heat radiating from his body, inches away, so close he almost imagined he could smell him, and it took him back to those raw, sweaty moments in the Turkish baths when they’d been alone and touching. He looked over at James.

To his surprise, his glance didn’t go unnoticed. James looked at him too. His eyes were like walls, dark and deep and impenetrable. But the electricity in the meeting of their gaze took his breath away.

Until he blinked and the moment was broken. James had returned to staring hard at Ruth, and the conversation had moved on. Teddy and Harvey were trading industrial strategies and stock market tips. “What about you, James? Where do you keep your money?”

“In my sock drawer.” James smiled wryly. “If’n that gets full, I move it to my mattress like a good Southern boy should.”

“I don’t quite buy your aw-shucks attitude.” Annie’s nonsense statement cut through his act.

“Good for you, missy,” James replied. He added, an echo under his breath, “Good for you.” Only Will could hear it, and James looked at him when he said it. He wasn’t quite sure what it meant, except James wasn’t quite everything he seemed. He already knew that.

Dinner seemed to go on and on, course after course, the food all delectable, to be certain, but he felt suffocated both by his stiff collar and his tie and by the company surrounding him. He couldn’t breathe, sitting so close to James. He wanted to be out on deck, breathing the ice-cold ocean air. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He wanted to have solid ground beneath him again.

Finally the meal ended. “Shall we retire to the lounge?” Will’s mother suggested.

“We could remain here,” Esther said.

“Will, please escort me on deck.” Annie wasn't making a request but giving an order. She rose from her chair, settling her shawl smoothly around her shoulders to keep her warm. It wouldn't be the easy promenade deck for her. She would want to go to the boat deck, with real stars up above them and real air for them to breathe, perhaps for the first time that day. He couldn't decline. He stood and took her hand in his. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. He wondered what he was in for once they were away from the table.

“What an excellent idea,” James said. “Ruth?”

“I'd be honored.” She got up from her seat. She stood nearly as tall as James.

Will thought he saw James wink at him, but they went in opposite directions; he and Annie heading toward the bow of the ship, and James and Ruth moving toward the stern.

“What a dinner.” Annie fell into step beside him. Small talk, between two people who were supposed to be beyond such pleasantries. They felt like strangers lately.

“I wasn't sure I was going to make it out alive.” He slipped one finger between his hard-beating artery and the tight collar of his shirt.

“Oh, Will.” Annie reached up to straighten the tie he'd knocked askew. From there, she slid her hands up over his collarbones to meet at the back of his neck and pressed herself against him. She nuzzled at his neck, close and warm and soft.



A part of him melted into her, but she still held her face back from his and looked up into his eyes. “Don’t you love me anymore, Will?”

“Annie.” He saw the hurt gather in her eyes. He hated the idea that he was causing her pain.

“I understand, you know.” She traced one finger along the curve of his ear. He wondered what it was she thought she understood. “Men and their desires,” she elaborated. “The things a wife has to put up with. I won’t be a burden to you, Will. But I will be an equal. If, after we’ve had our children, you find yourself wanting to satisfy yourself elsewhere, I won’t protest. But I won’t sit home alone at night, either.” Very lightly, she kissed him. Passively, he let her. “Is that acceptable to you?”

“I don’t know what to say.” He didn’t. He was shocked by her words, and that made him feel like a hypocrite. Because of James. He was an honorable man, and he took pride in that. What she was suggesting—in Annie’s terms, it was not something that was acceptable to him.

He couldn’t keep his thoughts from James. She was giving him an easy way out.

No, he thought. Even if Annie was fine with this sort of arrangement, even if he could live without it eating him up inside, he thought James wouldn’t stand for it. He didn’t know why James dallied off with Ruth now—to amuse himself or to

make Will jealous. But he knew James was not the sort of man to be second best. James was stronger than that. It made him feel rotten and hollow inside. He'd always considered himself a man of integrity, but what was he really?

"I can't," he said, and his mouth was dry.

"It's the twentieth century, Will. It's a bright new world, waiting for us to take it. Look where we are."

"But look how you got here." He instantly regretted the words, implying she only wanted him for money or status. He felt another rush of anguish flow through him. He wasn't acting like himself.

"Is that what you think of me?" Annie's eyes narrowed like a cat's as she looked up at him.

"Can you hear yourself? Did you listen to what you were proposing? It's not right."

"Fine." With one hand Annie gave a twist to a finger of her other hand, removing the diamond ring she wore. The diamond ring he had put there and intended to replace one day with a gold wedding band. She held it out to him, keeping her hand outstretched when he didn't reach for it. Insisting he take it from her and settle the matter right away.

"Throw it overboard for all I care," he muttered, and in the next second, with a sailing arc of her hand, she did. Will imagined he could hear the splash as it sank deep into the ink-black water.

Annie glared at him with blazing eyes. “You’re not going to go in after it?” Sarcastic.

He just stared at her, unmoving, in shock. She hit him across the face, one final, impotent release of the anger boiling inside her. She made a terrible gasp and turned away, running down the deck, gathering stares from the people she passed.

Two of them were Ruth and James. He wondered if James had seen the entire display. After a moment's thought, he decided he didn't care. Shoulders stiff with pride, he walked away, feeling like a wind-up toy, an automaton, empty and blank and unfeeling. It had been his mother's ring. It would hurt her so badly when she found out.

But for now it didn't matter. He was free, horribly terribly free, and he was going back to his room to take off his suffocating collar, ask the steward for a bottle and drink until he passed out. Maybe when he woke, the ship would be in New York Harbor and this nightmare would be over.

## Chapter Six

James escorted Ruth out onto the main deck. In the cold air, she put her hands against the railing and stretched her long neck, almost like a dancer, deeply inhaling the fresh air. He merely stood back and watched her. “I can’t stand them,” she said.

“I know.”

She turned her head and looked at him with those dark hazel-green eyes that at times seemed all-seeing and all-knowing. “What’s your big plan?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re the one who pointed out we’re both broke. What’s your plan?”

Now she’d put him on the spot. He went with what he was feeling. “Well, well, well. I wasn’t expecting you to be quite so sharp.”

She moved a fraction of an inch closer to him with her entire body, and it suddenly made her close enough to feel, almost to touch. “Don’t underestimate me.” It was almost a threat.

“Noted.” He let his smile linger on his lips a moment too long as he studied her, with her face only slightly upturned, because she was tall enough to almost look him in the eye. If not for Will, he’d be having a whole lot more fun with this, and wanted to damn Will for it.

There shouldn’t be any “if it wasn’t for Will”. Will shouldn’t mean a thing to him, because he felt pretty sure he didn’t mean a thing to Will, and even if he did, it would come to a crashing halt the moment they both strolled off this floating bathtub. He reached out with two fingers and brushed back a long, straight section of Ruth’s hair. “What do you think the plan is? Or should be?”

Her gaze turned soft at his touch. But her lips pressed together in a knowing smile. “You’re going to romance me, and count on Esther paying you off to make you go away because you’re unacceptable. Am I close, Romeo?”

“Very.” That had been his exact plan. A frisson of excitement should have sizzled down his spine at having been figured out, at discovering a woman with enough brains and guts to match his own. But he only felt mild annoyance at her intelligence, because it complicated things. Not impossible, but still. He didn’t enjoy complications.

“Let me give you a word of advice, loverboy.” Ruth leaned in close, close enough that when that lock of hair he’d brushed back loosed itself from behind the curve of her ear

again, it brushed tenderly against the skin of his face. Her words were hot and warning and not entirely unseductive against his ear. “She won't go for it. Go after Teddy.”

He let this new information sink in for a moment. This was an interesting development on its own—how far the boy would go to protect his beautiful sister—but more interesting was that Ruth knew where the payoff was more likely to come from. “You done this before, sweetheart?” He drew back to look at her face.

It was an angry mask. “That bitch stole my father’s money. She got rich off his labor, the labor that killed him. She drags me around like I’m some ragged doll she got stuck with. She didn’t have to be stuck with me. That money was supposed to be mine. I’m just getting it back. Any way I can.” Despite the fiery anger flashing in her eyes, her words were smooth, solid and ice calm. Like the sea beyond them, not a wave or a ripple, just calculated.

“We split it fifty-fifty,” he said, and she nodded, an *of course* kind of gesture. But this was not a foregone conclusion. In fact, he planned to leave the poor kid in the lurch and take off with all the cash himself. That was the twist, the backstabbing double cross, the one thing he was damn good at. She didn’t see it coming. That meant she was still an amateur at this game. Maybe she always would be, or maybe

she'd get lucky and someone would kill that evil witch of a mother and her dear brother Teddy would do the right thing.

When he spoke again, his words were true, and so was the admiration behind them. "We're gonna make a hell of a team."

"Just tell me what to do."

He shook his head. "Let it come naturally. It works better that way." He took her arm in his and tugged her away from the railing. "We seem to have gotten delayed on our sojourn around the deck."

"That we have, James," Ruth agreed playfully, falling into step beside him. Now that things were settled and out of the way, their conversation could grow natural again, and comfortable. That's what he was counting on. That's what would sell this to Esther, or to Teddy. Keep him above suspicion and out of jail. When he absconded, there would be nothing Ruth could do without incriminating herself. No doubt right now the favored son thought it was his idea to keep paying off these unacceptable suitors of his sister's.

They didn't get very far in their walk before they encountered Will and Annie, apparently in the middle of an argument. His heart lurched, full of uncomfortable emotions such as excitement and glee, even though the look on Will's face was terrible. Annie's arm came up, not to hit him, but to fling something overboard. Something that sparkled as surely

as the stars in the heavens close over their heads right now, on the darkness of the open ocean. The engagement ring.

He half-expected Will to leap after it. Instead, Will's shoulders sagged with defeat. That helpless gesture gnawed at his belly, as though he was the one who had put it there, who had defeated him. Annie gave Will the clichéd slap to the face and flounced off, picking up her skirts and running past him and Ruth, blind to everything but her own emotions. He noticed no tears dampened her eyes. If he hadn't seen the sparkle, he would have thought she'd palmed the ring. He wet his lips and let his own shoulders sag a little. This profession of his made him entirely too cynical toward people.

He wanted to call out, to go to Will, but Ruth's hand tight on his arm prevented him. They stood there until Will had gone and, without a word or a thought between them, fell back into step on their journey around the deck.

Later that night, James lay in his comfortable first-class bed, hands folded over his bare chest. He stared at the ceiling, utterly unable to sleep. Because he couldn't get his mind off of Will.

Three times he threw back the covers lying gently over his legs, with the intention of getting up and going to Will. Three times he dug his hand through his hair and sat back down, drawing the blankets over his body again, telling himself he wasn't going anywhere. He knew how this all



might end. He could easily picture himself leaving Ruth behind. What he couldn't see was how it would end with Will.

He knew how it should end. It was a shipboard fling. He'd walk away from Will the same way he'd walk away from Ruth when the boat docked. What other options did he have? He needed the money, and there was no way two men like them could be together. They had no future. Best get used to it.

Saturday, April 13, 1912

## Chapter Seven

Will lay awake when a soft knock came at his stateroom door. He'd barely slept. Too many thoughts racing through his head. His mother's lost ring, his duty toward Annie, his yearning for James.

The door opened, a crack at first, then wider to admit Annie to the room. He groaned and let his head fall back when he saw her. His cheek felt sore where she'd slapped him and his eyes burned with the lack of sleep. "You shouldn't be in here." He got out of bed. This wouldn't have been proper, even when they were engaged. And now they weren't.

Annie held her head low, tilted downward. "Will, I'm sorry." Her voice was low and raw and desperate, and her lips turned almost white with strain. "I shouldn't have done those things last night, and I'm sorry."

"There's no taking it back now." He knew how cold he sounded. The coldness hurt him, deep down in his chest. He could only imagine how it made her feel. But he'd been the one who had to stand there and watch her throw the ring overboard, the ring his dead father had given to his mother.

Now that ring was irretrievable, at the bottom of the ocean, lying lost against silt and bedrock. It was just a thing, and he didn't care about things, but it was also a symbol, and symbols meant something to him.

"Will, please." Deeper desperation. "I'll tell her I lost it. I'll tell her someone stole it from me. Just...please. Please. Don't do this. I'm sorry." She reached for him, finally meeting his eyes. He remained as still and silent, and she stopped short. "Will, please, just tell me what to do and I'll do it. I don't want it to end this way, I swear."

"It's too late." Other words might have made this all right. They would have come from Annie, and they might have started with "I love you". Except even if it had occurred to her to say them, it was a lie. Everything they'd felt seemed like a lie now. Maybe she had loved him, in her own childish way, but it wasn't real love, and it wasn't what he needed. Nor had he given her what she'd needed. They were too different, too many worlds apart. He saw that now.

"Will, what do I tell her?" Even now, when Annie raised her head, there were no tears. Unreadable emotions reflected in her eyes, definite regret, but no real sorrow.

"I'll take care of it."

"She'll throw me out of the stateroom. Off the boat. Please, Will." Those final words, not the first time he'd heard them, but now they translated with crystal clarity within his

mind. *Please, Will, we've been pretending all this time, can't we keep pretending a little longer to keep the peace?*

"Fine." The coldness had seeped all the way through him. She didn't seem to notice she'd actually hurt him. He didn't know how Annie would be able to face his mother and pretend nothing had changed.

"It's only a few more days." Annie inadvertently answered his unspoken question. The desperation dissolved from her now, and her color started to come back. "I've heard the captain is pushing Titanic to go fast, to break the record and arrive in New York early, perhaps by an entire day."

"Won't that be a blessing." His sarcastic humor was so dry it almost cracked.

"Thank you, Will. I won't forget." She moved in to kiss his cheek.

He moved away quickly, stopping her from touching him, and watched her put her head down again. The gesture had been enough. She left his stateroom without a sound, save for the soft click of the door behind her.

He squeezed his eyes tightly closed, so tight he saw colors swimming there. But it made the tears go away, for now. He wasn't going to cry over her. Or anyone else. Not anymore. Will got out of bed to wash and dress and to begin this new day.

At the breakfast table, James looked at his dining companions, searching for signs of what he'd witnessed the previous evening. Mrs. Woods appeared oblivious. Annie looked pale, simultaneously demure and determined. Sometimes he thought he saw something he liked about her. Maybe it was that she had Will, or maybe there existed some strange kinship between them, in that Will felt something for each of them. Will's face was gray and slightly puffy. Not like a man who had been crying but like a man who was sick with loss. It hurt him, somehow, and that was when he realized he was in over his head.

Annie seemed to be enjoying her hearty breakfast. He wondered how she could eat after what she'd done the night before. But maybe she savored it now, because as soon as the news hit, things would explode and she wouldn't be able to count on where her next meal was coming from. He saw something hungry in her he could relate to. She wasn't born to this life like the rest of them. Just like him. He wondered if that was what Will saw in them.

"Will, you're not eating," Mrs. Woods said to her son.

Will dropped his napkin on the table and pushed back his chair. "I'm done." He put his hands on the table. Oh, Will was something to see when he was angry, James thought.

"Will, please." Will's mother implored him. Will hesitated, only for a second, with remorse as he looked at his

mother. Then his gaze fell on Annie. He shook his head and walked away. For a moment the table fell silent as they watched him disappear through the maze of other diners and waiters, and finally through the door to the passageway rather than ascending the grand, domed staircase dominating one end of the room.

“Thank goodness my son doesn’t behave that way,” Esther remarked.

“Thank goodness,” he echoed, sarcastic. He knew it would prompt her to glare and Teddy’s face to flush a dark red. An important element of his little game of cat and mouse was to make them not like him. Just doing what came naturally.

They settled in to finish their meals, with Harvey telling stories that made the table break up in laughter. Ruth snuggled closer to James. Everything seemed to have grown comfortable and easy again, and no one else seemed to mind the empty chair. He felt an irresistible need to throw a wrench into the works of this happy group. He only wished Will would be there to see it. Will needed to be there to see it.

“Miss Annie, what happened to your ring?” he asked, as Annie reached out to lift her glass to drink.

She froze mid-movement. Her eyes turned wide and pleading, but it was too late. He watched her wheels spin, as she tried to come up with an acceptable excuse, trying to

decide how she ought to play this. If it were him, he would have known exactly what he was going to do when discovered—and had a back-up plan. But she was young, and he'd been doing this for a long, long time. It made him feel old and weary in his bones.

“You were wearing a ring, weren't you? An engagement ring?” He pressed the matter a little bit harder. Waiting for it to break.

“Annie?” Will's mother's voice wavered. Annie stared at her bare hand, her fingers splayed and shaking slightly.

“I don't know, I must have, I mean, it was a little loose but I didn't think—” Annie's words had a mildly hysterical edge. The sound of being caught. She lied well, like someone who had practiced often. He wondered what she would have done if Will had been there to see this, to call her on her lies. But Will might have looked hurt, and he wasn't sure he could have stood that.

Ruth made a satisfied sound in the back of her throat, almost like the purring of a cat, and Annie looked at her, even more stricken, realizing her scene the previous evening had been witnessed and there were two people facing her who knew the real truth.

“Annie.” Martha's voice rose with panic.

“I'm sure...I'm sure it must have come off in the room,” Annie said. “Perhaps last night, when I was asleep. I'll bet it's



under my pillow. It was only a little loose. I didn't think it would come off."

"You'd better go and look for it before they make up your room." Esther arched one eyebrow. "You never know who among the servant class is trustworthy."

"That ring might just be lost forever." Ruth made her voice rich and warm and taunting, in contrast with her words, which were cold as ice.

James decided Esther looked much too pleased and smug. He leaned over and planted a kiss full on Ruth's mouth. Something in him resisted, feeling unfaithful to his feelings for Will even though this kiss was for effect. Ruth seemed to melt beneath his touch, but she kissed like a little girl who hadn't done it very often or very well. She blinked her eyes and looked at him like she'd changed her mind about the money and the charade, and had decided to take him as her prize instead. Meanwhile, the air echoed with the silence that expected her hand to smack against his face for taking untoward liberties and in such an inappropriate location.

"Ruth, go back to the room. Now," Esther ordered, her face white rather than flushed with anger. James wiped his mouth lusciously with the back of his hand and watched the look in Teddy's eyes. He wasn't oblivious anymore.

Annie had taken advantage of the distraction to slip away from the table. Martha rose, presumably to follow her to the

stateroom. Ruth's family herded her away, and she cast a longing glance back at him over her shoulder.

This left him sitting at the table with Harvey. "Just you 'n me," Harvey said.

"Looks that way."

"You wanna go to the smoking lounge?"

"Sure, why not." He folded his napkin and dropped it daintily and politely on the table. "Had enough of women for one morning, that's for damn sure."

"God, that was great," Harvey said as they walked toward the smoking room. He wondered which part of the scene Harvey admired, but he let the statement go unquestioned when Harvey didn't elaborate.

The smoking room was fairly empty this early in the day. There wasn't much of an appetite for tobacco or cards with the sun still high in the sky. But John Keyes, chess champ, was back at his table.

"Which one of you would like to play next?" Keyes turned to them.

"You want to?" Harvey offered him first choice.

"Nah, you go ahead," he replied. "I think I need to get some air."

"Uh-huh." Harvey smiled knowingly. "Say hi to Ruth for me." As though that was what going to get some air meant. As though Esther would be finished yelling at Ruth so quickly.

Harvey moved into the vacant chair, and within moments the ancient game of strategy had resumed. James rolled his eyes as he exited the lounge.

He decided he could use the quiet time to relax. There hadn't been nearly enough relaxing on this boat, but now that he knew where his payday was coming from, he could take the time. Much as he had done before, he found a deck chair in an out-of-the-way place, and he sighed as his muscles relaxed when he leaned against its back. The gentle sound of the ship's engines not only relaxed him but also lulled him.

When someone took the chair next to him, his eyes drooped half-closed and he didn't find it worth the trouble to open them, let alone to glance over. He contemplated letting his eyes drift the rest of the fraction of the way closed and taking himself a nice, long, cozy nap.

But Will's voice came close at his ear. "I think we should have a conversation at some point. Don't you?"

Because no one else was near enough to hear them, he replied in a low voice, "You don't think it's fun to just fuck around?"

"No, I don't think it's fun." There were lines of strain around Will's mouth.

"Shame." He swept his gaze back to the horizon. "Cause you look like a guy who could use a hell of a lot more fun in his life." He wanted to massage Will's solid shoulders and feel

everything tense in Will dissolve beneath his touch. That was just the start of what he wanted.

“Let’s be honest here.”

He shrugged, like it didn’t matter a bit to him, when this was probably the most important moment of his entire experience on the ship. Maybe in his whole pathetic life.

“Talk,” he invited, and watched Will deflate. All the bluster and air went right out of him. Apparently he hadn’t had any topics prepared. “Fine, then I’ll talk. That’s what you wanted, anyway.” He glanced at Will for confirmation, which he received. “You wanna take the mystery out of the stranger and see if the appeal goes with it.”

“Something like that.”

He had to take a deep breath and steel himself before he got started. In that moment of turning his soft, molten parts to hard, cold lead, he tried to remember if he’d ever told the whole story before. Bits and pieces here and there when it suited his purpose, sure, but the whole thing? He couldn’t swear to it. He hesitated another moment before he began.

“My mama died when I was just little. Not too little to remember her, but little, all the same.” He couldn’t look at Will, couldn’t look at anything except the pale, buffed nails at the tips of his fingers. “My daddy, well, there was some question about that. The man I called my daddy had himself a temper. And then there was the other man. He showed up

when they took my pa off to jail. He wore a white suit and had a dimple in his cheek. Talked a good game. Put me to work. Learned everything I know from him. When he died, I stepped right into his shoes and they fit real good. Hardly had time to look back.”

Another shallow sigh. Rough tongue sweeping over his lips. Raised his eyes for a minute but the light glared too bright and he lowered them back down. “I’m a con man, Will. A liar, a gambler and a thief. I’m not a good man or an honest man, though if I work hard enough I can look like one for awhile. I expect I’m the plain opposite of you. I wish it wasn’t true, but there it is.”

Now he raised his eyes, seeking Will’s. Will looked back at him, calm and level, without surprise or acceptance. “Thanks for telling me.”

The words fell against his heart like an arrow. He pressed his lips together and looked down at his hands again.

“What about me?” Will asked. “Are you trying to con me, steal from me...blackmail me? Is that what this is?” His voice barely held calm. Will was trying to give his trust, but it didn’t come easy for him, even before what James had said. That was plain to see.

“No, Will. The only thing I want from you is *you*. And I shouldn’t want it. Makes things too hard. For both of us.”

Will let out a breath that sounded almost like *yeah*. He ran his hand over the short bristles of his hair in that uneasy way he had. “You’re working on someone else right now. For money.”

He shrugged, acknowledging it as truth.

“Would you stop? If I asked you?”

“Could you stop having brown eyes? Can’t stop being what I am. Any more than you can.”

“When the ship docks—”

“That’s the question of the day,” he said. “Your mama’s probably lookin’ for you. There was a bit of a to-do after you left the breakfast table.” He didn’t admit he’d been the cause of it. Will could figure that part out if he needed to. “Lots of time before that moment comes for things to sort themselves out.”

“There’s no future.” The words almost rasped on their way from Will’s throat.

Maybe that was true and maybe it wasn’t, James thought. What he said in response was, “We better make the most of today.” Will started to say something, but James saw an unwelcome figure looming in the distance. “Better look alive, son, your mama’s on her way.”

“Will you meet me later?” Will asked. Quickly, softly.

“Yeah. Of course.”

Will ducked his head to seal the deal. James didn't even bother to look up and fake pleasantries when Martha Woods's feet, tiny and neat in her fancy beaded shoes, came to a stop against the deck. He tried his best to render himself invisible.

“Will.” She took his arm. Without a word of agreement or protest, Will allowed himself to be swept along with her, leaving James behind, with his head filled with thoughts of when and how and where they might meet later, whether Will might keep his word and what they might do if he did.

## Chapter Eight

Will accepted his mother's news with a plain, neutral face and no words. Annie was pretending she'd lost the ring. He supposed she had to—how could she ever face his mother and tell her she'd thrown the family heirloom overboard? He hated lies, and he didn't like the revelation that his ex-fiancée was such a great liar she had his mother not only convinced, but worried about her future daughter-in-law.

"She's inconsolable, Will." Martha swept him along the deck back toward their staterooms. "You have to do something, say something to her. I'm afraid of what she might do."

"Don't worry about that." He wondered if the end of the engagement had really hit Annie hard. It left her an orphan, a girl without means, alone in the world. He still felt a responsibility toward her. "Perhaps you should wait." He stopped his mother at the door to the stateroom the two women were sharing.

"Yes, of course. I'll go to the lounge. Drink some tea, to calm my nerves." Martha did look shaken by the excitement.



His mother had never held up well under extremities of emotion.

“Do that.” He leaned over to give her a light kiss on the cheek. She seemed surprised by the gentle affection of it. Then he turned the handle of the stateroom door.

He was shocked—it had been thrown into complete and utter disarray. Tables had been overturned, and dresses thrown everywhere. The beds had been stripped and one of the mattresses had a corner that stuck up crookedly. In the middle of this mess sat Annie, still in her innocent white dress, with her hair tangled and falling down over her shoulders. Her eyes glowed red as though she had been sobbing, but the expression in them was calm.

“What did you tell her?” He stood inside the stateroom door, as far from the disheveled mess as possible.

“That it was loose and must have slipped off without my noticing.”

“You tore apart the room looking for it. Or did you stand back and let my mother do the work?”

“No, it was me. I made this mess.” The words didn’t refer only to the room. “If searching hard enough would bring it back, I would.”

“You could have said you’d given it back.” He still felt calm. It amazed him, this calm. He did not know where it had come from.

“She would have wanted to see it.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Sorry I didn’t plan the story better,” Annie said bitterly. “You weren’t there, Will. You didn’t see how it happened. That horrible man with his horrible smile, accusing me like he knew the truth. I couldn’t say or do anything. Was I supposed to pretend we’d canceled the engagement and gone to breakfast without saying anything about it to anyone?”

“That wouldn’t have been pretending,” Will pointed out. “That was what happened.”

“It wouldn’t have made any sense.”

“And this does?” He raised his voice for the first time, his eyes going to the four corners of the room. He could imagine Annie crying and screaming, making this mess out of hysteria and desperation.

“I’m sorry, Will, I’m sorry. I’d say it a thousand times if I could.”

“But it wouldn’t change anything.” Words meant so little.

“Who is she?” Annie asked, and for a moment his mind was blank. That’s right. Annie thought—knew—he was having an affair. She just didn’t know who it was with. Nor did she care—that was what had begun this whole charade. Or had it begun earlier? Looking at her now, a calculating, desperate little girl, he began to question what about her was real. If anything ever had been.

“Do you want me to help you clean up this mess?” he asked. He would. That’s what he did. He satisfied his obligations. Even the unpleasant ones. The thought almost turned his stomach, because his father would have thrown words like that at him when he was young, making him an obligation or a burden rather than a son to take pride in.

“No, I’ll do it.”

“I’ll call a stewardess.”

“No,” Annie insisted. Not because it was her obligation, but because she still held on to a glimmer of hope she could do this as penance and be welcomed back into his good graces. He wondered if she had a clue of how wrong that was, or if she didn’t care.

And how wrong was what he planned to do later on? Yet he would do it anyway. He remembered the feel of James’s hands, his skin... “I’ll leave you to it.” He stepped back into the hall. He took a moment to compose himself, and tracked down the nearest stewardess. He put a tip into her hand and asked her to help Annie straighten things up. The stewardess nodded with serious eyes, and walked toward the stateroom as he hurried in the other direction.

He went to the bar, because he needed a drink. He also hoped to encounter James. But James wasn’t there, and at the last minute, he changed his mind about the drink. Too early in the day.

His neck felt so tight it hurt, and he sensed himself clenching his jaw. This ship claimed to be the most luxurious ever constructed. There must be something on board he could do to put all the pressure of his mother and Annie and James out of his mind for a little while.

He flagged down one of the waiters. “Yes, sir?”

“You’re familiar with this ship’s amenities, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. What are you looking for?”

“I’m hoping you can tell me. Where on the ship would you go if you wanted to relax?”

“Turkish baths?”

He shook his head slightly. “Tried that yesterday.”

“There’s always the swimming bath, sir. It’s right near the Turkish baths, and quite an amazing thing it is, too. A swimming pool, right here aboard ship. Have you ever heard of anything so odd? A big pool of water, right inside a ship. On other ships, ones not as safe as this, that might be rather a bad thing indeed.”

“The swimming bath.” He considered it.

“Course, there’s always the card games in the smoking room, or the orchestra’s tuning up to play in the lounge...”

“No, I think the swimming bath sounds good.” He thanked the waiter, who grinned as though with real pleasure his suggestion had been not only considered but accepted.

He proceeded below decks to the swimming bath.

An attendant guided him to the dressing rooms, which lined one wall of the pool area. The cubicles were wrought out of fine, dark wood, and spacious enough to move about in. He hung up his clothes, changed into his swimming gear and emerged again, standing outside the door to his dressing room for a moment, feeling oddly exposed.

The pool was small, which was why it was called a “bath” rather than a “pool”. The tiles lining it were very white, crisp and clean. A wooden ladder led down into the water at one end.

The water reflected the lights just beneath the surface, throwing odd shadows up onto the walls, reflections that danced here and there. Combined with the way sound seemed to echo hollowly against the tiles, it made this space rather surreal and removed from reality. He felt almost dizzy, and it created an eerie feeling between his shoulder blades that made them flex in something almost like a shiver.

He’d wanted to be alone, and here he found solitude. The water, as warm as the blood circulating in his body, immediately made him want to close his eyes and drift. After a moment, Will gave in and allowed his body to float, buoyed by the water. The dampness licked at his ears, and his hearing faded in and out with it. The initial period of floating had soaked the tension from him, and now swimming exhausted

his muscles, leaving him with that pleasant, sleepy feeling swimming always seemed to bring.

Other people began to file into the area. Reluctantly, he made the next lap his last, as the pool was too small for it with other people about. He came up at the deep end and sluiced the water from his eyes, looking about. He only realized when he felt disappointed that he'd been secretly looking for James and hoping he was here.

He climbed out of the pool at the deep end. The hollow slap of his wet feet against the tile echoed strangely, and he went into the dressing chamber and sat heavily. He felt not only tired, but somewhat off balance. The combination of lights floating on the water got to him, almost like an eerie sense of *déjà vu*. Suddenly cold, he began to change back into his regular clothes.

The handle of the dressing chamber rattled slightly and began to turn just as he had disrobed almost completely. "It's occupied," he called, thinking it was a mistake, but the door continued to open.

"I know." James stood on the other side of the door. Will's heart beat faster at seeing him there. He could only stare as James slipped inside the tiny room. He was wet, with his hair slicked back from his high, noble forehead and dripping. He must have been out there at the same time as Will, but Will

hadn't seen him. James smiled lasciviously and teased, "We have to stop meeting like this."

"Yes. We do."

He watched the hurt flicker through James's eyes. "You telling me you want me to go?"

Yes, he thought, but he didn't mean it. "I don't really know what I want anymore."

"You say you don't know what's gonna happen when the ship makes it to New York. I say fine. But live in the moment, Will." James's eyes burned bright. "You never know when life is going to snatch that moment back."

"It's not something I've ever been very good at."

"Maybe it's time you learn." James's eyes were intense. James reached for him, stretching out his hand and caressing the side of his face. James cocked his head and raised his eyebrows, as though to ask if this was okay. Will rubbed his cheek against James's hand, a reply to the silent question.

James moved in, close enough that Will could feel the little droplets of water coming off his skin. James kissed him softly, with an uncharacteristic gentleness. It made Will think of the kisses he'd shared with Annie, also gentle and yet so different from this. This felt real.

James moved his lips to the side of Will's mouth, kissing his cheek. "This okay?" James asked, the words murmured into his skin.

“Yeah,” he breathed, putting his hand into James’s hair. James kissed him again, not quite as soft and tender this time. James’s lips moved with a carefully controlled hunger against his, nibbling a bit here, stroking with his tongue there. James’s control over his hunger intrigued him. James often seemed wild and free, like a tiger roaming the plains. What was he afraid of, that he was holding so much back right now? Was James afraid of giving too much to him, skittish as he was, or did he fear he might scare him off?

Or maybe James wanted him to take the lead. To take responsibility. To force him to admit he wanted this; he’d chosen it. His tongue slipped into James’s mouth, and James made a dark sound in the back of his throat, a soft moan of pleasure.

They breathed together. Will almost thought he could feel their hearts beating together. His body still felt languid from the swimming and the water, and he pressed heavily against James, whose arms went around him, holding him close, as they stood there, two men still damp from swimming, kissing and kissing with their eyes closed.

Finally James drew away, trailing his hand down Will’s bare chest. James’s eyes were heavy-lidded, perhaps from the water or perhaps from the passion they both felt. “I want to take this further.” James began to unfasten his own swimming costume. “I want to feel your mouth on me.” He drew his arms



inside, and pulled the shirt off. His hand brushed the waistband of the shorts, thumb rubbing against the tanned skin below his navel. “You ever done that before?”

Will’s mouth was dry, and all he could think of was the back and forth motion of James’s thumb against his skin. Was he even aware he was doing it, or was it a self-conscious, reflexive gesture? “Once.” A long time ago. Experimentation at school. He’d wanted to know what it would feel like. His curiosity had been satisfied. It had been nothing like this.

“You had it done to you?”

“Yeah.”

James’s eyes met his. “Then you know what to do.”

“Yeah.” His gaze followed James’s shorts as he slipped them down his hips. They caught on his erection, already straining upward, and it sprang back against James’s belly as he stepped forward, out of the garment.

Will reached out to touch him, but James made an “uh-uh” sound, disapproving, cautioning him. Will drew in a deep breath and ran a nervous tongue over his lips. He bent forward, awkwardly finding his way down to his knees, putting his mouth at the level of James’s hips.

A hiss of air expelled from James’s lungs when Will tentatively put his mouth against him. The skin was hot, hard and soft at the same time. He licked and felt James’s body sway toward him. It was a good start.

But this was not what Will wanted. What either of them wanted. He licked his way up James's shaft and took the head into his mouth, letting his tongue slide over the tip before he began to suck, lightly at first. A raw sound leaked out of James, muffled in a way that suggested he was trying to hold it back but just couldn't. He swirled his tongue over the most sensitive of James's flesh, and the other man's hands came to rest on his shoulders, loose and helpless. James's breath was hard and fast.

James was uncut, something Will found slightly fascinating. His foreskin had peeled back from his erection, but now Will discovered it with his tongue, swept back into loose rolls beneath the head. He touched the skin with his tongue, stretching it slightly, working it over, and James's body shuddered. James's left hand tightened on Will's shoulder, fingers digging in hard. He didn't want this to end too soon. He went back to running his lips up and down along James's shaft, taking him in deeply and almost letting him slip out again, back and forth, almost simulating intercourse. James's hand wandered up along his spine, then moved against his hair in a downward stroke against his skull. Keeping him close; making it personal.

He tongued the slit at the very tip of James's cock and felt that shudder go through him again. He could taste him, the salty drop of fluid there a preview of what was to follow. Up

over the tip and back again, long, hard licks followed by short, lavish ones. He ran his tongue around the edge of the head again, teasing, and with a short flick he found a sweet spot. James made a cry he could feel deep in the pit of his stomach and his entire body jerked, stomach curling and knees swooning. He removed his tongue, holding his lips firm, and counted to five before repeating the motion. James was close, so close. Will wanted to tease him more, tantalize him, make this go on and on, and yet he couldn't. James couldn't last, and he felt compelled to move his attention back to the sensitive tip, stroking in predictable ways, raising one hand to caress the lower part of James's shaft, to hold him, to position him just so.

The orgasm, when it came, seemed almost catastrophic. James's entire body seemed to tense and seize, knees trembling, fingers outstretched almost to the breaking point. The sound James made was almost terrible, and yet it made him throb hard as James came into his mouth. James stumbled backward, sitting hard on the dressing chair. Will turned and put the towel to his mouth, ejecting James's fluid there and wiping his lips with the back of his hand. He could still taste him on his tongue, which he pushed against his lips, almost to savor it.

"God, Will. Just...God," James sighed. His eyes were intensely dark, the pupils dilated, and his body still shook

lightly, quaking as though with aftershocks. “Come here.” James reached for him, half passion-dazed, letting his head fall forward against Will’s collarbone and pressing his cheek there. When he inhaled he could smell James’s hair, damp but drying. He put his arms around James and held him there, the heat of their bodies sticking their skin together. As good as it had felt, giving James pleasure, he liked this quiet closeness. It was the first thing that felt real, rather than a feverish dream.

Several long moments went by, the two of them remaining close and still, until James had recovered himself. “I think it’s your turn now,” James said against his skin.

“There are no turns.”

James raised his head, laughter on his lips. “You tellin’ me you don’t want me to suck your cock, Will?” James’s hand wrapped around his swollen member. “Cause your body seems to think otherwise.”

“I didn’t...just to get...” Words failed him miserably. “That’s not why I—”

“Then why did you?” James was a sight to behold when he turned serious. Head tilted slightly, eyes ferocious, full lips neutral, without a trace of charm.

“Cause I—” He couldn’t find the words. If he even knew them.

“You like me,” James suggested. Letting him off the hook.

The weak words were the closest he would come. “Yeah,” he said, and James took Will into his mouth, and suddenly his world went red and dark with pleasure. He could feel his breath, quick, through his mouth.

Where he might have been hesitant, James was certain. James devoured him, taking him deep, leaving him weak and moaning softly. He raised a hand to place on James’s head, to anchor him, to ground him, but as James bobbed, moving up and down, letting him slide into the recesses of his mouth, his hand never connected. It hung there in the air, fingers contracting emptily, and all he could think was *hang on, hang on*.

James ran his tongue against the hard, pumping vein along the length of him, moving toward the head, which he stroked using the rough pressure of his tongue. Will could feel it building in him, wave upon wave, all collecting in this one hard, deliciously aching part of his body. He did touch James’s hair, gently, with the tips of his fingers stroking, and it was James who growled, the rush of air from his throat vibrating against his skin.

He was huffing, panting, trying to hold back, to enjoy this for as long as he could. James knew what he was doing. It had never felt this way before, this sharp and intense. James raised a hand to touch him, first planting a palm against his inner thigh, as though he knew Will needed the distraction of his

kneading fingers. But James's hand traveled upward to cup his balls, sending another surge of blood downward, making him twitch against James's idle tongue, which lapped lightly, teasing him, as James's fingers moved downward and back, exploring the space behind his balls, finding the skin there soft and pliant. He began those rough, hard strokes of his tongue again, matching them to the movement of his fingers, and Will couldn't bear it anymore. His breath stopped and his muscles contracted as he felt everything within him move downward and outward, as though he was being turned inside out into the hot, sweet velvet of James's mouth.

The air was cool against his skin as James let him slip out of his mouth. James pressed tiny kisses against his skin, feathering them along the place where his leg met his body. When Will raised his head again, he was spent and weak, exhausted. He couldn't find any words, none at all.

He kissed James, tongues meeting shallowly, enough to meld the two of them together in his mouth. What he liked was the feel of James's long, hot body against his. He craved more of it. He wanted to lie down with James pressed against him. But they couldn't. He let his hand trail down the side of James's face, and moved off to put his clothes on. James dressed in the same small space, putting on his bathing suit to return to his own dressing room. When they faced each other again, they had their everyday personas on. Ready to face the

rest of the world, outside this tiny space that was theirs and theirs alone.

“See you at dinner,” James said softly, a goodbye by any other name. He pushed open the door to the room and was gone.

Will waited a minute, unwilling to admit to himself he did it for appearances’ sake or because his face still felt flushed and hot. He picked up the towel, and that’s when the door opened inward, the white-uniformed pool attendant facing him with a startled look in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The man took a decorous step backward. “I believed this cabin to be unoccupied.”

He put on the haughty aura of the rich first-class passenger he was and let the soiled towel drop to the floor rather than handing it to the attendant. “It is.” He brushed past him, feeling a rush of despair like a fall from a great height.

## Chapter Nine

James didn't think he could stand another dinner sitting around that square table, facing Will and his fiancée and his mother, cuddling up next to Ruth for some cash. His conscience, long dormant and neglected and not listened to, began to wear at him. He knew he couldn't let it. To resolve the dinner issue, he chose to go to the Restaurant A La Carte instead. He saw Annie sitting at a table alone, her eyes focused somewhat forlornly off into space. He took a quick glance around to confirm she truly was alone. "Mind if I sit?"

Her eyes focused on him with obvious surprise. "Feel free." She looked away from him again.

"Didn't know if maybe you came here to be alone." He pressed the issue. "Though I guess there's different kinds of alone."

Annie nodded in agreement. "I broke it off."

*With Will?* he wanted to say. No wonder he looked heartbroken. But even he couldn't be that cruel, because Will hadn't looked the least bit heartbroken with his cock in



James's mouth, and they both knew it, although that was probably not something Annie was aware of.

"But you knew that. You saw," she said, and he almost felt drawn to the bitterness in her smile. "I confessed to breaking it off. I couldn't sit there tonight with them. Why are you here?"

"Same. Couldn't face 'em." Although his reason was entirely the opposite. He and Will had gone farther, rather than break it off.

"It was never going to work. I'm not part of their world. I'm too far beneath them. Will says it doesn't matter, but he brings me places like this ship and it doesn't matter how hard I try. It still matters." She looked at him plainly. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I have the feeling you know something about what that's like."

"You think I spent my whole life being called trash, just like you?" he asked, a little more pointed in his assessment than she had been. But he could tell it was true of her, the same way she could see it on him. He thought he did a good job of concealing it, and maybe he did. Funny how the rich ones were always fooled. It was the ones who were dirt-poor and desperate like he had been, who could see right through him. Wasn't so terrible, was it? He wouldn't entirely mind being back there now. Money in your pocket was freedom,

he'd learned that well enough, but another kind of freedom came from not telling lies, not giving a damn.

The thought made him feel cold. He couldn't stand being broke.

"That's a little—"

"Just say yes, Annie," he ordered, and it made her smile.

"Okay. Yes." She actually took a bite of her food. He must be cheering her up. Funny how that worked, now that they weren't rivals anymore. There must be something in each of them Will was drawn to, something they had in common.

"Tell me about Will."

"Will is...driven. He'd deny it, and doesn't think he is, but he is. Even though it's not the least bit true, there's some small part of him buried deep inside that feels the way we do. He thinks he is what we are."

"Trash." He kept his voice low, almost inaudible. It angered him to think of Will that way. Funny how it didn't hurt him anymore but he wanted to defend Will from it.

"Yeah. His dad was horrible, apparently. Pushed Will. Pushed him hard. It never quite mattered what Will did, it was never good enough."

"Whereas you and me, we never even gave good enough a shot, did we?" He wondered when he would step over that line, go a little bit too far and feel the slap of Annie's hand ringing hard against his face.

“I tried,” Annie said, in her holier-than-thou voice, and he saw he’d been wrong. Being with Will, that was Annie’s shot at being good enough. Right now she was here because she’d failed.

He wondered if the same was true of him.

“What’re you gonna do when we get to New York? You got a place to go?”

“I can take care of myself.” Her words turned sharp.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I’ve got a little money. I can go wherever I want.” She pushed her chair back from the table. “Take care, James.” She turned and walked away.

He watched her go, and looked down at his own dinner. It was unappetizing. No, there wasn’t much difference between them at all. He got up and walked in the opposite direction. The orchestra would be playing. Perhaps he could coax Ruth into dancing with him. Shore up his own future.

He paused out on deck to take it all in again. Every time he saw it, it was as though it was the first time. The deep black sea, as smooth as glass, all around them. The sky, almost as dark save for the tiniest hint of midnight blue, with crystalline stars winking down at him. It was both beautiful and forbidding, and it almost took his breath away. He could feel that its power was something to be feared as well as to be

admired. He would admit to fearing very few things in this life. He supposed fearing nature caused no shame.

The orchestra had already begun to play in the lounge. The crowds were thin. He got a passing waiter to bring him a snifter of brandy, which he held delicately in his hand, even though he longed to down it all in one go. It looked more elegant to hold it, and it made it look like he'd come to relax and enjoy the music, rather than wait to ensnare his prey.

Ruth finally appeared. She wore a dress which was a pale cream color touched with gold. Her hair had been curled, with the awkward look naturally straight hair has when the curls begin to inevitably fall out. He had the feeling she'd been disappointed he hadn't shown up for dinner. Or had she dressed to impress someone else? All eyes seemed to be on her.

He swung his arm around her small, cool waist and planted his alcohol-soaked lips against hers, a hard smack but nothing more. His hand slipped down the silk of her dress along the curve of her hip. He heard a gasp when he gave her long, lean flank a squeeze, and it wasn't Ruth's.

She looked at him, icy and amused, and he loved it. They would dance this entire evening away, he decided, feeling the demonic gaze of her mother resting upon him. But Esther didn't count in the long run. He spun Ruth around, their bodies close, and as he did, he stole a glance at big brother Teddy. He

did not look pleased. It made him want to kiss Ruth again, in victory.

“You’re gorgeous,” he whispered into her ear, as they slowly waltzed away from her family.

“You kept me waiting.”

“All the better to make a scene now, my dear.” Her body didn’t seem to be protesting. She danced gracefully. “What are you going to spend your money on?” he breathed into her ear.

“You are so crass.”

“That’s what you love about me.” Her lack of response concerned him slightly, however. He had no concerns that she would forget why they were doing this and fall into the fiction. On the contrary, he worried she had the idea in her pretty little head to somehow double cross him and take the entire payoff.

That wouldn’t do at all. It was fine for him to do it to her—she’d be all right, she had big brother Teddy after all—but there was no way in hell she was taking the money he had worked hard for. Even if she didn’t make it feel like work.

One more whirl and he found himself the object of Will’s scrutiny. Will stood still, not dancing. He wondered what Will was doing there. He felt almost guilty being observed.

Will’s dark eyes burned into his, even when he closed his eyes and nuzzled against the long, slender column of Ruth’s throat. “Do you want to take a walk?” he asked.

“Not public enough.” She definitely didn’t trust him. But she had no reason to.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“As much as you are,” she said, entirely accurate. He wasn’t particularly enjoying himself. Neither was she.

“Who do you wish you were out here on this floor pressed up against?” he challenged, and he felt the angry clench of her body.

“I could ask the same of you.” She drew away from him. He didn’t reach to pull her back, just took her hand and kissed it, an overstated gesture for the sake of his audience. *Don’t blow it, kid*, he thought, as she stalked quickly out of the room.

When he turned to look again for Will, he was gone.

James ended up taking that walk on the deck by himself. He strolled the promenade, slowly, observing the people more than anything. He’d made his life studying people, yet they never lost their capacity to surprise him.

For example, the rough hand seizing his shoulder wordlessly. When he turned—he had little choice—he found himself face to face with Teddy. The boy’s face was flushed. He anticipated the scent of alcohol even before the kid opened his mouth to say, “I want you to leave my sister the hell alone.”

“Your sister,” he repeated, in the slightly mocking way he’d perfected.

“Ruth.”

“She’s got her own mind. Quite a nice one too.” He let innuendo underlie the words. He wanted to see how far he could push Teddy—test how far Teddy would go with this. The point of the entire exercise was to have Teddy warn him away.

“Stay away from her.”

“That might hurt her feelings,” he pointed out, still laughingly insincere.

Teddy reached for him, the hands at the ends of his slender arms pushing James against the cold iron railing. James allowed him to, knowing all he’d have to do was give a shove and the lightweight would find himself on his bony ass on the hardwood deck. “I told you. Stay away from my sister.”

“Why?” He smiled confidently.

“Cause I said so.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I don’t like you. And I don’t like you with her.”

“You always pick her boyfriends for her? What else do you do for her?”

“Shut up.” Teddy had crossed the line into moroseness. His hands fumbled loosely against his shirt now. James could slip away with ease, but he didn’t, because he was curious to see whether the drunken kid would cry.

“C’mon, kid.” He reached out to push down Teddy’s hands. He put an avuncular arm around his shoulders. “Why don’t we have a drink and talk it over?”

Ruth’s brother acquiesced without a word, going along docilely where he was led, into the smoking room. James flagged down a waiter, who happily brought a couple of whiskeys for them. His glass had ice in it and he sipped it. Teddy’s did not, and he gulped it, fueling the fire burning on his face, and dulling the focus of his eyes. He would feel like hell in the morning. “Tell me about Ruth.”

“Ruth’s just a kid.” Teddy still made the effort to articulate his words. It didn’t work especially well, but the effort was noticeable. “She thinks she’s grown up but she does dumb things. Teases guys like you. Needs someone to look out for her.”

He could feel the money coming closer. His entire body seemed to sing with the promise of it. “Uh-huh,” he murmured, encouragingly.

“She’s a couple years younger. She’s always been frail. I felt like I had to protect her. She felt like she had to grow up to become a complete bitch to me.” He tipped his glass up again, trying for the last few drops. “Course I’m a complete ass to her too. That’s what we do. How we relate. It’s like kids, when they love each other. You know? ’Cause we are. Kinda. Still kids. She is. Doesn’t look like it.”



Good God, he wasn't a crying drunk. He was a talkative drunk. "Tell me how you look after her." He wanted him to bring up the money.

"I tell guys like you to stay the hell away," Teddy said.

"What happens when they don't listen?" He couldn't help the corner of his mouth that turned up in amusement. He wondered if Teddy would even remember this conversation in the morning. Might be hard to, given his eyes would be bloodshot, his head pounding, and his stomach threatening him in various ways.

"I make 'em listen."

"Are you threatening me?" He couldn't hide his amusement.

"Yeah." Teddy almost giggled. "No," he reversed himself. "There's other ways of making guys listen. Guys like you are all the same. You only care about two things and if you can't have one you'll take the other in its place."

He assumed those two things were: one, women and two, money. They were definitely on the right track. When he took off with Ruth's half of the payday along with his own, would Teddy take proper care of her? He began to feel pangs of guilt at leaving her with this schmuck. They were both kids, he thought. Maybe given the time they'd learn.

"You're wrong. There's a third thing I care about, and that's myself. As in, putting myself first." He patted Teddy's

shoulder as he prepared to leave him. “Drink some water before you go to bed.”

“What?”

“Wisdom of the ages. Just do it.” He felt a momentary pang as he walked away. Always leave them wanting more—that was how he drew people into his plans. He knew he wouldn’t have gotten the money tonight. Planting the idea was enough. But it was so close he could smell it.

James woke in terror, tangled in the sheets, feeling them pull at him like hands in his dream. His mouth opened and his pulse pounded, but he managed to stop the scream before he let it escape. At least he thought so. If there had been one before his eyes popped open in the darkness, all of his senses suddenly alert, he wasn’t aware of it. But it wouldn’t be the first time he’d screamed himself awake.

He turned on the light, and its soft electric glow banished the shadows into the odd corners of the room. The light comforted him, as long as he didn’t concentrate on those cast shadows for too long. They mesmerized him, reminding him of his dream. He couldn’t remember what it was about, or anything more than mere sensations.

He remembered darkness all around him. Darkness and silence. Like being underwater. Like being in the grave. The things that had tugged at him—in retrospect, his sheets, but in

the dream they had been hands of victims reaching out for him, pulling at him, sucking him under to join them. They'd wrapped around his ankles like seaweed as he floated in the black void.

He couldn't get warm. He shivered under the layers of blankets. He sank further, drawing the covers up to his nose, but the cold wasn't physical so much as it was something that seeped into his bones, made permanent by panic. He'd had dreams like this before. If he was perfectly honest with himself, he'd never overcome the fear of the dark he'd acquired during the trauma of his childhood. But the silence, the underwater feeling, the hands grasping—those were new elements. This was not his usual nightmare.

It was circumstances, he told himself. The swimming bath this afternoon. Guilty conscience about the plan to double cross Ruth, the victim who he felt tempted to allow to cling to him. Just being on this damn boat in the middle of the ocean.

He wondered how far they were from land. There'd been talk about trying to break a record, finish the voyage up early. Some people found it scandalous, as though this kind of a race was meant merely to rip them off, to steal from them the time onboard ship they'd paid for. James thought it was stupid but he couldn't wait to get off this tugboat.

His head went back down on the pillow, and he curled into a ball to try to warm himself. He could hear the hearty

thrum of the machinery, the ship's engines, not a noise but a vibration carrying through the structure of the ship, magnified by the pillow pressed beneath his ear. He closed his eyes, leaving the light burning, and went back to sleep, determined not to fall prey to nightmares again.

Sunday, April 14, 1912

## Chapter Ten

He opened the door and saw his mother standing there. “Will, I’m sorry,” she said. He hadn’t expected that.

He nodded, and sat on the soft, sleep-tousled bed.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” It was the universal answer to such a question.

“You know, I believe that.” His mother studied his expression. She smoothed her hands against her skirt. “I don’t know why, but I expected you to be heartbroken. Annie seemed to mean so much to you.”

“She did.” Those days felt fuzzy to him now. There must have been a time she’d been more than just a promise he’d made. She must have made his heart pound in excitement to see her, or butterflies flutter in his stomach with nerves. It seemed so long ago now and so irrelevant. He had to push the thought of James away.

“But it had been over, truly, for some time,” his mother prompted him.

“We just hadn’t realized it,” he agreed.

“Such a silly girl, really.” His mother gave the barest hint of a smile. “Lying about the ring as though she’d been cornered. Do you know she completely tore up our room looking for it, to keep up her charade? Why couldn’t you have been honest with me, Will?”

He couldn’t find the words to explain it. He turned it over in his mind, searching for the real reason and a way to express it. “I thought you would be disappointed.”

“Of course I’m—”

“Disappointed in me,” he added. He should have told her the truth from the beginning.

“Oh.” His mother looked down at the patterned carpet, brand new as was everything on this ship. “Will, you know I could never truly be disappointed in you.”

He pressed his lips together and tried to believe it. It wasn’t something he knew, not at all. Yet she seemed perfectly sincere and heartfelt saying it. She meant it. Why wasn’t it something he knew?

Sensing she’d made him uncomfortable, she stood to leave, smoothing her skirt once more. For the first time he realized it might not be the symbol of desired perfection he thought it to be. Perhaps it was nervousness. Perhaps his mother felt less certain of her role and place in the world than he’d ever thought.

When he stood, he clasped her in his arms, an awkward hug between mother and son, and yet it made something in his heart feel warm in a way it hadn't been in a long, long time. He might have to thank Annie for this, in the long run. He released his mother and took a step back, looking down into the pale, crepe-like skin of her face. She smiled at him and he smiled back.

"I'll see you in church, Will." She made her exit.

He didn't have much more to do in the way of finishing up dressing, which he hurried through and trailed after her.

Sunday church services for the first-class passengers were held in the dining saloon. The glow of the sun lit the large space, filtering through the exquisite glass dome over the grand staircase that was the showpiece of the room and the ship.

They seemed to gather naturally into the same group as their dining table. The one person from their dining table who was missing was James. Will hadn't truly expected to see him here. James didn't seem like the church-going type, and he certainly never did anything he didn't want to, just to keep up appearances the way Will did. Will admired that, and felt envious.

The minister's words were calm. They sang hymns, all of them together, with one voice. Annie stood a few steps behind him, and he thought he could feel her watching him through



the service. He wondered what she was thinking. If she knew that his mother knew the truth between them.

The service concluded. The reverential silence of the crowd gave way to the soft buzz of conversation as people around them began to gather their things and leave the grand room. With a small, almost inaudible sound, Annie's body went limp and she collapsed to the floor. He reached out for her, but his fingers were too slow and clumsy to catch her.

Her face had turned an odd, pale gray. He put his hand on her shoulder. He shook her gently, to try to rouse her, but her eyes didn't open. Shallow breaths rose and fell underneath the lace and silk of her dress. Her skin felt cool and clammy to his touch. "She's fainted," he said, a statement of the much-too-obvious.

"It happens sometimes. Standing for so long in such a close room." His mother's face was filled with genuine concern. "She'll be all right in a minute."

"She's been through so much," he said softly. Breaking their engagement. She must feel so alone on the ship. Her pale face was still as death.

"Maybe I should get a doctor," Teddy said.

"Yes. Please do." The ship had an infirmary. They could help her. In the meantime, he sat with her, holding her hand loosely, rubbing his thumb across her palm to try to restore the warmth and life there. The quiet moment filled him with calm.

Teddy burst through the door wildly, with the ship's medics following him.

"She's going to be fine," the medical officer promised and Will stood back, allowing them to attend to Annie. It only took one of them to lift her slight form onto the stretcher they'd brought.

"We'll take right good care of her," one of the medics assured them.

Teddy was still standing beside him. "Don't you want to go with her?" Teddy asked. He didn't know what he should do. The engagement broken, they weren't anything to each other anymore. It was difficult to understand, one day being everything and the next being nothing at all. What would be the right thing?

Teddy left him and he walked out on deck, feeling the cool air and bright sunshine overhead clear his mind. When James came to stand beside him, hooking one foot up on the railing, the heat from being indoors still radiating from his skin, he turned on him with the anger and helplessness he felt about himself. "You should leave me alone."

If he was trying to hurt James, he failed. James's eyes turned a shade colder. "I know." Then the coldness was gone and he asked, "What brought this on?"

How could he explain? Why should he? "I have to go find Annie."

He waited a moment. James could argue. He could say something. But James just continued to give him that bold look, the one that said he could see right through him and all his protests. He turned away in anger. He didn't know what exactly it was he wanted to hear, but that wasn't it. He stalked off down the deck, filled with adrenaline he had to find some way to burn off.

He made the mistake of glancing back. He saw that James remained on deck, foot up on the railing and eyes focused on the horizon. Water as far as the eye could see, as calm and clear as a sheet of ice. The sun shone bright and yellow and almost warm.

He couldn't deal with the helplessness he felt. Especially when it concerned the welfare of others. Damned if he could find the ship's infirmary. Will strode through the maze of hallways for what felt like forever, growing increasingly frustrated. Each step seemed to lead him further off course. Finally he'd had enough and flagged down a steward and asked for directions. Turned out, he'd almost been there, except he'd turned the wrong way and was headed in the opposite direction again.

The cool, quiet room was filled with neat white bunks as silent as a hospital. Under the sheets of the last bed Will saw a thin form. That would be Annie. He began to walk toward her,

but the doctor stopped him. “May I help you?” he asked in a low voice.

He nodded toward the last bed. “I wanted to see her.”

“She needs rest. She’s not in much condition for visitors.”

Will almost said *please*. He almost said he was her fiancé. He almost said so many things. It surprised him how strongly he felt the need to see her. “I won’t stay long,” he promised, and brushed past the doctor, down to the last bed.

Her skin was nearly the color of the sheets, and even her hair seemed to have had the color leached out of it. “Hey.” He sank to his knees so he’d be at her eye level. He put a gentle hand against her shoulder, and she opened her eyes. They darted quick and bright in her pale face.

“Hi.” Her voice was thin but a smile graced her dry lips.

“You doing okay?” He smoothed a hand over her hair. She looked young as a schoolgirl. Vulnerable.

“Yeah,” she replied.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I’m not quite sure. I got dizzy and then...” She shrugged, shoulders moving very slightly underneath the blanket. He must have looked concerned, because she added, “I’ll be fine.”

“Good,” he said, and words failed him again. “You need anything?”

She shook her head a little bit. “They’ll let me go later today.” Annie looked at him again, almost hesitantly. “I’m surprised you came down here.”

He felt wounded. “I still care.” Feelings didn’t just shut off one day like a valve.

“I wish...” Annie trailed off.

“What?” He leaned in a little closer.

“I wish we could have another chance.” Her eyes were bright, almost dancing. Like all she had to do was win him over.

“Me too.” It would make everything so much easier. It was what he’d planned for—a voyage, a wedding, a life together. Now he didn’t know what awaited him when they reached the shore. He couldn’t picture what his life would be like there. It had seemed like the right thing to do, promising to marry her, and now it seemed like the right thing to do, calling it off. It left him feeling confused.

“Then why don’t we pretend none of this ever happened, Will?” Annie asked, sitting up. She laid her hand against his arm. The hand where she’d worn his ring. The ring she’d thrown overboard in a brash display of rejection.

He longed to agree. He could feel it rising up within him, an actual physical yearning. All he had to do was say yes. And leave James behind. Choose the easy path. Go on pretending

to be the perfect, honorable son. The words almost emerged from his lips.

But he couldn't. "There are no second chances in life," he said to her, very gently, and then he had to watch her absorb it. Had to look into the hurt in her eyes.

"I need to get some rest." She slipped back down under the blanket, pulling it closer around her.

"Okay." She closed her eyes, and he watched her drift off. He leaned down to kiss her forehead, a soft, dry kiss. As close to an official goodbye as they might ever get.

He went from the infirmary to the gymnasium. His head burned with unproductive thoughts, and his body ached with the need to move. He needed to get out his frustrations, all the things he kept so neatly locked up.

He walked into the gymnasium, not looking around, completely focused on his target, the punching bag mounted from the ceiling. He took a whack at it with his bare hands. It stung, but he kept hitting it until some of his anger dissolved. Slowly he became aware of the fact that he wasn't alone in the room.

James. Of course. The last person he wanted to see right now. He hit the bag again, wishing he could blame James for the turmoil inside him. If not for meeting James, he wouldn't be disappointing his mother and his fiancée.

James sat on the electric horse. He let it settle, and without the noise of the equipment, the gym fell silent. “You’re going to break something.”

“Shut up, James,” he snapped, without hesitation. “I don’t want to hear it from you, not right now.” James climbed down from his mount and walked over to him. He stood close enough for him to feel it, though he ignored James and threw another punch at the bag. He panted, tight through his clenched teeth.

“Stop,” James ordered, putting his hands on the bag and holding it still.

“Get out of the way,” he snarled.

“Or what?” James challenged, reaching for his hands.

Or he would punch him. The answer went unspoken, but they both knew it even before he turned his right cross on James. The blow hit him square and dazed him a little, but he was loose. When he straightened up, his eyes were wide and wild. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” It was easier to lie than to explain. But he never lied. He prided himself on his honesty. Had he lost that now too?

“That how you want it to be?” James asked.

“Yeah.” He knew he should walk away. Go back to his cabin until good sense returned. But he’d lived his whole life with good sense. If he was throwing that all away—and he

was, walking away from Annie and the life he'd known—he might as well enjoy it.

“All right,” James said, and hit him. Not very hard—he must have pulled the punch a little. Will stood there, glaring, seething with anger.

He wasn't sure who kissed who. The attraction between them flared too strong to overcome, especially in the face of heated bodies and the physicality of the fight. James's hands turned to weak fists, clutching at the fabric of Will's shirt. His hands came up to hold James's head. His kiss was hard and desperate.

He stepped back suddenly and put his head in his hands. James stood and watched him. A cold feeling rose between his shoulder blades, making him want to run. His head ached. “I don't know what I'm doing,” he confessed, letting his hands fall away. He raised his dry eyes to the ceiling, as though looking for guidance from above. “Tell me what I'm doing.”

James reached out to him. Took Will's hands in his own. He caressed the hard knuckles and bones and strong tendons. “Stop fighting,” he said. “Stop fighting the world, Will. Stop fighting me.” James began to rub at his palms, thumbs digging lightly against his lifeline, his heart and his head.

“Why are you even...why do you...” The words were too vulnerable. He couldn't get them out.



“I like you. I admire you. You’re everything I can’t be.” James said the words so easily, but looking into his eyes, Will knew it was the truth.

“I’m so ordinary,” he protested, and James shook his head. His eyes were deep and blue, slightly unfocused. He saw love there. He might not understand it, but he felt it too. He could be himself with James, a self he hadn’t acknowledged existed. One that didn’t need to live up to every rule of society. One that could just be.

“See you around.” James slid his hands against Will’s as he turned to go. Not a dismissal. A promise, filled with anticipation. They weren’t done here. Not by a long shot.

## Chapter Eleven

Later, they all gathered again around the dinner table. Will wouldn't meet his eyes, and James felt a flash of anger. He'd come as close as he'd dared to telling Will how he felt. As close to the truth as he'd ever been. Now Will sat across from him, silent and meek, next to his pale, lying fiancée.

He thought he saw something in Annie's eyes when she looked at him, which seemed to be often. Pity? He didn't like being pitied. It could be sympathy or understanding. He wasn't sure, and it made him uncomfortable. Uncomfortable and angry.

"You doin' okay there, *Mister Woods*?" he asked, half-sarcastic. Trying to provoke him.

"I'm fine," Will said quickly.

"What happened?" Annie's eyes flew to Will's face. He wondered if she still loved him. He wondered if he would feel guilty if he thought she did. But he didn't see passionate love in her eyes. She cared about Will, but that wasn't enough. Will needed everything you had to give, and maybe a little bit more.

“Nothing.” Now it was Annie he wouldn’t look at. He shot James a look and his eyes were dark. Accusative but heated. James couldn’t help curling his lips into a smile.

He thought he saw fire flash in Will’s eyes too.

“How are you feeling after your adventure this morning?” Teddy asked Annie. “Nothing serious, I hope?”

“Nothing at all,” Annie replied.

“Are you sure?” Martha Woods asked Annie gently.

“If she wasn’t sure, she wouldn’t have come to dinner,” Will said. Defender of the weak, James thought, feeling a smile twisting on his lips.

“Now that we’ve established how everyone is feeling...” Esther said.

“No one asked me,” Ruth pointed out, tossing a lock of hair back over her shoulder and glancing at him as she did so.

“How are you tonight, my pet?” he asked, on cue. He wished he could forget this ruse. Will made him want to forget. But he knew that when they reached New York, Will wouldn’t be there anymore, and he was going to need funds.

“How do I seem?” Ruth flirted back at him.

“Pretty as a picture.” He smoothed back another lock of her hair for her. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Will’s hands tightening around his fine linen napkin. He wished it was jealousy, but he thought it was more like

disgust. He couldn't blame Will for that. He was disgusted with himself.

"You know what I heard?" Harvey interrupted, to change the subject. "The captain is trying to beat all these speed records and get us into New York early. We've covered a ton of nautical miles."

"He's showing off." Esther clearly approved of the captain. "It is a magnificent ship."

"I'm not sure it's safe." Annie seemed to dread calling the attention to herself. "I heard someone in the lounge say there had been ice warnings. It wouldn't be a terrible thing to slow down."

"I don't see how there can be ice." The light in Esther's eyes indicated she enjoyed the conflict. "No one's ever seen such a smooth, clear sea as we've had. And it was warm this afternoon. Positively springtime. Did you get to enjoy it?" She directed the question in Will's direction, but Will frowned down at his dinner plate and let it go unanswered as though he hadn't heard it. James knew Will was thinking of him. Of the two of them, together. "Well, he's preoccupied," Esther said.

"Will." Martha called upon him, and he raised his head as though he was back in school, with no idea of what the question had been. "You're poor company this evening." A mother's gentle reprimand.

Will managed something approximating a smile. “Sorry,” he mumbled. It seemed enough to satisfy her.

“What shall we do after supper?” Esther asked, turning to her own son. “There’s a concert in the lounge. The orchestra on board is terribly talented. I can’t imagine a more perfect way to spend a Sunday evening.”

“I’m not much interested in another concert,” Teddy replied.

“Are you sure? It will be dreadfully dull without you,” Esther said. Teddy gave her a look, the sort of look that often passed between a mother and her spoiled child.

“Will, are you coming to the concert?” Martha inquired.

Will looked up from his soup, unfocused again, and shook his head. He would have given anything to know what thoughts were running through Will’s mind. Then Will glanced at him, their eyes meeting for one electrifying moment, before Will’s gaze drifted down to his mouth. He saw a hint of guilt before Will lowered his head again.

“Are you feeling all right?” Martha asked.

“He prob’ly just needs some time to hisself,” he offered, laying on the accent a little bit too thick, the way he always tended to do when he was in polite, snobbish company. He did it to make himself stand out, as a rejection of them and their values. “Sounds like it’s been quite a day.”

They ignored him. Martha turned to Esther and they began to chat about something inane, hemlines and hat styles. He smiled his smug, smooth smile like he didn't care, when all he could do was try not to look too hard or too much at Will.

The awkward dinner broke up a short time later. Martha, Esther and Harvey went to the lounge to listen to the orchestra. After a moment's hesitation and a backward glance at Will that went unacknowledged, Annie announced she would go back to her room, and then she scurried away.

"Think I'll head over to the smoking room for a minute," he said, while the group was still together, though he aimed the words at Will. He didn't expect Will to acknowledge them, although he longed for him to. He thought maybe Will would meet him there. By design this time, rather than by accident like all their other encounters.

But Will remained behind at the table. James refused to linger for his sake. He thought of going to join Ruth to coax her away from her family and advance his plan. But he put it off. The ship wouldn't make it to New York for a few more days. Anything could happen in that amount of time.

Will walked into the smoking room a few minutes later, his head turning this way and that as though searching for something. Or someone. His heartbeat thudded with increased excitement that he told himself was ridiculous. But he couldn't

help feeling like smiling when Will's search ended, his gaze settling on James.

“Have a drink,” he offered. “Take a seat.”

Will shook his head, his eyes dark and serious. Will withdrew the glass from James's hand, and he allowed him to, without protest. At the last moment, Will raised it to his lips and tossed back the remaining whiskey, without a grimace or a shudder at its potency. “Come on.” The words served the same purpose as if he'd held out his hand to him, pulling him up from the chair, and inviting him to follow. James rose and followed on his own, intrigued.

Out on the deck, in the cool open air, Will found a spot shadowed in darkness, and pulled him close. Their mouths melded, hot and whiskey-soaked, catching him by surprise. But the surprise wore off quickly as he licked at Will's tongue, wondering if he could get drunk from the taste of it.

Will put his hands against James's chest, steadying them both as the kiss ended. The light pressure kept him from diving in for more. “I've been thinking about this all afternoon,” Will admitted. He seemed like a completely different man than the one who wouldn't meet his eyes across the dinner table.

“Thinking about what?” He tilted his head.

“You,” Will breathed, and he could feel his body react. Tensing, tightening, flooding with heat and anticipation. “You know where my stateroom is.”

It wasn't a question but a command. “Yeah.”

Will kissed him again, quickly, tongue flicking with sweet pain against the raw spot on his lower lip. It was an invitation, and in the next moment, Will was gone, leaving him standing alone and cold and empty-handed on the deck.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the evening air. This was what he'd wanted, and Will had been the one to make the overture. Why did he suddenly feel uncertain? Perhaps it was because for the first time in his life, he didn't have a plan. He wasn't pulling all the strings. It scared him, but it excited him too, in ways he'd never thought possible. A small part of him wanted to go back to his stateroom, curl up and hide until they reached New York. But the rest of him, bold and curious, headed for Will's cabin.

Will opened the door and James walked inside. Will pushed the door closed behind him and turned the latch. Once he'd done that, the room seemed to close in around them, until it seemed a space too small for the two of them to fill together. There was just the heat of their bodies and the electricity between them.

He had expected to fall into Will's arms, into another kiss like the one on deck. But now Will stood still, almost frozen,



with that same lost expression in his eyes he'd worn earlier. James wasn't sure if he should advance on Will, or if he should unlatch the door and escape back down the hallway.

But Will reached out to touch him. He dragged his thumb across James's lower lip. James caught his breath, feeling his abdomen tightening even before Will reached the sore part. It felt dry and salty where Will touched him, and he dabbed the cut with his tongue, tasting the metal of the injury and the faintest taste of Will's skin.

"I still can't believe this."

He discarded several easy responses that immediately sprang to mind. "It's real." He hooked his thumbs on the pockets of his trousers. The movement drew Will's eye and he could feel the heavy, languid heat of his blood settling under Will's gaze. Just because neither of them knew what they were doing, it didn't mean neither of them knew what they were going to do. Again he let his hair hang down into his eyes.

"I still don't know what you see in me."

His shoulders moved up and down. "You're a guy who has everything. Family, career, friends. Ties." He wet his lips again. "I've got nothing. No one waiting for me. Freedom, though. I could follow you to the end of the earth if you wanted me to." The admission almost made him blush, but it was true. "I'd follow you because you're good, and I feel like a better man when I'm with you."

“I’m not—” Will began to protest, but something in his eyes stopped him. When he spoke again, his voice was lighter, and a smile tugged at his lips. “Would you?”

He lifted his head. His hair still hung in his eyes. “You’ll have to ask me to and find out.”

Will took this information in. But he didn’t ask. Instead, he reached out, fingers sweeping across James’s forehead, so gentle and light he had to close his eyes to be able to stand it. Will’s fingers lingered, holding the hair in place against his skull. James let out a deep breath, and when Will moved his hand, felt the lock of hair fall against his cheek. He rubbed his lips together, and the tiny sliver of pain from the sore spot sent a tremor of delightful anticipation through his belly, and beyond.

Will stepped up close to him. Close enough for him to feel Will’s warm breath against his skin. But Will didn’t touch him. He ached with lack of contact. They were both hesitant even after everything that had come before. Even after they’d met here for one reason and one reason only. This was so important it began to feel fragile.

He closed the space between them with his mouth. His lips were already open when they met Will’s, his tongue ready to gain entrance to Will’s mouth, to dance and tickle and tease against Will’s tongue. A shock of excitement flowed through him at the feel of the kiss, instantly deep and passionate. He

raised his hands to hold Will's head, to try to pull him closer, trying to put himself into Will's head and his heart through purely physical means.

He memorized every centimeter of Will's mouth, and the way Will kissed him back. The feel of Will's bristly hair beneath his fingertips and the contours of the nape of his neck. The way Will's long fingers settled against his biceps, tight but not digging, holding him there with a quiet strength and power.

The kiss ended and Will moved his head slightly to the side. James kissed his cheek, and down the line of his jaw, scratchy now with the day's growth of beard. His tongue scraped lower, over the delicate skin of Will's neck, finding the hard beat of his pulse there, pressing his lips against the surging warmth and sucking at it, hard enough to make Will groan.

Will pulled away from his mouth and he opened his eyes, finding them slightly unfocused. Will looked at him with similar intensity. "Slow." Will was breathing quickly, laboriously. Will squeezed his arms. James wanted to do the opposite. Now that he had Will, and they were here, he wanted to devour him, fast, before he was taken away.

But they were safe here. They would not be interrupted, or discovered. They had all the time in the world; they had the entire night. When the pale yellow sun rose the next morning,

everything would look different. Will held him still for several long moments, calming the pace, resetting his expectations. Will kissed him, slow, light, nibbling kisses that only sipped at his lips. The effect was profound frustration. He struggled with it, trying to take control, trying to open his lips beneath Will's and turn the kiss deeper. Will stopped again and looked at him, almost warningly.

He took the chance to kiss him hard, stepping forward until their hips met and their legs tangled together. For a long, delicious moment, their clothed hips ground against one another. His animal sound disappeared into Will's mouth. They tumbled onto the bed, hard enough to make the wood groan. They tussled, rolling against each other, kissing between gasping breaths. They ended up lying on their sides, facing each other, Will's hand stroking through his hair as they kissed, deeply and endlessly.

Will fell away, rolling onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. The hand Will had been touching him with dangled. Will's chest rose and fell with quick, excited breaths and he could see what he had felt against his body. Will was hard beneath his trousers, hard for him and no one else.

He wanted to touch him. He almost welcomed the inevitable squeeze of Will's hand against his. He could tell Will wanted this to take all night. James welcomed the idea, but he'd never been a patient man. He tried to learn from

Will's example and lay where he was, gaze skimming Will's form, watching the way his chest rose and fell, focusing on the vulnerability of his throat and the small patch of stomach he could see between Will's trousers and where his shirt had become untucked.

He waited until he couldn't stand it, for Will to touch him. He knew Will would, if he waited long enough. It was a game they were playing here. Who wanted more. Who could outlast the other. It brought a tension to his muscles, the strain it took not to pounce and take what he wanted. It was hard for him to wait for Will to come to him.

It wasn't about fear. It was about seduction, and savoring the anticipation, and control. A battle of wills, no different than their physical fight in the gymnasium earlier in the day, no different than any of the other times they'd found themselves together. But they both knew this was it. Love. From this night on, they would not be the same.

Will did, finally, come to him. He leaned over James, and his eyes were as dark as midnight and smoldering. Having those impossibly dark eyes focused on him made him yearn. Will rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand, lightly, an impossibly gentle caress. Will did it to see his eyes close with the tenderness of it, James was sure. He could feel his pulse threading through his slightly kiss-swollen lips, ready for Will

to touch them again, but Will didn't. He reached down to the buttons on James's shirt instead.

One button gone, and Will placed a kiss against James's skin. Another button unfastened, and more skin exposed. Will moved his way down, opening the buttons, giving James's body his attention, careful not to let his skin graze James's until he reached the last button, low against James's belly because his pants tended to ride low against his hips. There Will pressed another kiss, on the flat patch of skin below his navel. He made a grinding, yearning sound as he felt the bottom drop out of his stomach and the blood rush downward. It was all he could do not to writhe and buck against the soft mattress. Will flicked his tongue against his skin and he felt that hot, deep throb of desire.

Will's fingers traveled upward, opening the shirt, pushing it back against his shoulders. He rose up with Will, allowing him to push the shirt down his arms. The cuffs caught against his wrists, and for the first time Will's confident hands fumbled, trying to undo the links there that would free him to drop the garment to the floor.

They faced each other again, uncertain and starving. He waited a second for Will to reach for his trousers, but he didn't. He reached for Will. He put his hand against that exposed bit of belly and pushed Will's shirt up, not caring for the buttons or anything at all, tugging it off and throwing it

against the wall. He plundered Will's mouth with his own, kissing him hard and deep, sucking lightly on his tongue and thrusting with his own, setting a rhythm between them for what was coming.

Will's chest was coated with fine hair, which James rubbed with his fingers. It moved in whorls across his pectorals, surrounding his nipples, and he followed the curve of it with some fascination. His own chest was smooth and hairless. He liked the texture of it beneath his fingers, and against his bare skin when they kissed.

But kissing was not enough. Not when their cocks were hard and stiff, caught between their bodies when they embraced. The passion could not be ignored, not for much longer, no matter how much they wanted to prolong this, to take their time exploring, to make the night last forever.

He backed off the bed, finding himself unsteady on his feet. He hooked his thumbs inside the waist of his trousers and skimmed them off, stepping out of the puddle of cloth they left at his feet. His erection felt hotter when met with the cool air of the room and it took everything he had not to touch it, to leave the tender, swollen organ standing as it was, with Will's gaze upon it. It didn't help to think of the way Will had touched him before, and taken him deep into his mouth, in those previously stolen encounters.

Will lay back on the bed, waiting for James to come to him. He did, leaning over him, unfastening his belt and his trousers. He could feel Will's hardness through the thin fabric. Will lifted his hips for James to pull his trousers down, his eyes fixed on James so hot and so hard he could feel the weight of that gaze. He couldn't help running his hands lightly down Will's thighs as he slowly lowered his clothing to the floor. Will's thighs were pale and the hair on them was as intriguing as the hair on his chest. Will quivered at his touch.

Finally, they were naked. Will pulled him down for another kiss, not taunting him this time or teasing him. A real, deep, passionate kiss, seducing him further although he was long past the point of needing to be seduced. A kiss that was the beginning of lovemaking, and maybe the beginning of love itself. Sealing the two of them together.

They lay on the bed, face to face. He knew Will had to feel as eager as he did, physically ready to the point of pain. "Have you ever done this before?" Will asked him, eyes heavy and dark. His lips were sweet and pink, as they stayed parted even after he spoke.

"Yeah." His voice came out low and almost hollow. "You?"

Will closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again when he said, "Yeah."



They lay there for several more moments. Absorbing the knowledge about each other. He was always naturally curious, and he wanted details. Who and how and when? He wondered if Will wanted the same details from him. Looking at Will, he wasn't sure. That was one of the things he liked about this relationship. The past didn't matter. None of it mattered. Not as long as they were here, now, together.

His tongue was tempted to tell. Though it wasn't much of a story, and even less to be proud of. There hadn't been any love involved, not one single, solitary smack of caring. Not like this, here. He craved the knowledge of Will, and how it had been for him. If it had been the same, another meaningless scar. He hadn't thought Will had many of those. He couldn't bring himself to ask.

"You know what you're doing." It was almost a question, as Will raised himself up on one elbow, eyes still locked on his.

He gave a grave nod. That was how it was to be. Best that Will made the choice, he thought, and his mouth felt as dry as his palms were slick. His entire body was hot, burning, as though he'd lain too close to a fire and had been lucky not to be burned. Will leaned in to kiss him, quick but deep, binding them together, and he moved away, sliding off the edge of the bed so he faced it with his feet flat on the floor. Will raised his head and waited for him.

James rolled up, onto his feet, his body loose as a cat's, except for the one hard, aching part of him. He took a little walk in a circle around the room and a deep breath before he approached Will. Will looked like a god standing there, muscles carved from pure white marble as perfect as a statue on the continent. But Will wasn't a statue. His thighs trembled when James put his hands on his back, palms flat against the base of his spine, in the perfect little dents there where his spine gave way to his hips. He moved his fingers back and forth, rubbing, because he could feel how tense Will was. It wasn't going to be good if he was tense.

Will's ass was high and tight, muscles knotted. He ran his palms down Will's cheeks, then reached up, closing his hands, squeezing and kneading, feeling the skin and the firmness underneath. He was breathing hard through his mouth, and Will gave a little cry. He let his thumbs graze closer to the cleft of Will's ass, the soft dividing line. Will's muscles tensed reflexively and Will gave a sigh as he forced himself to relax.

He slid his finger down the inside of that cleft, until he found Will's opening. He ran his finger lightly across it, flicking back and forth, before circling it. He could hear the rasp of Will's breathing, fast and excited and maybe a little bit scared. He slipped his finger inside, just the tip, and worked his way around the hole, stretching with gentle pressure before pushing his finger all the way inside.

Will moaned, loud and unexpected. He crooked his finger inside him, to see if he could get Will to make that sound again, but it didn't come. More anticipation. He slid his finger back and forth, in and out, simulating what he was going to do next.

Keeping his finger inside Will, moving slowly, breaking down his resistance, he raised his other hand to his mouth. He let his tongue wash over the palm of his hand, and lowered it to his cock. A few drops had leaked from his tip and he spread them over his head, mixing with the saliva. Preparing himself. He removed his finger from inside Will's body. He held himself in his hand, giving one more flick across the sensitive head, enough to make him close his eyes and almost moan himself.

He pressed into Will. He was tight, unyielding and hot. Will moaned, a long, keening sound, as James pushed into him, slowly, until he was in deep. His balls rested against Will's ass. He could feel his own thighs trembling now as he breathed in deep, and even that breath was enough to move him the tiniest bit inside Will, a subtle motion that for a moment neither of them could stand.

He rested his hands against Will's hips. He slid down along the hipbones in front, down to Will's cock, which was hot against his hand and almost hard as steel. Will's body shuddered when he touched him, and he knew Will was

caught between the two sensations. He ran his hand lightly along Will's shaft, and drew his hands back to Will's hips, bracing himself for what would come next.

At first it was just him moving, not even thrusting so much as rocking their bodies together, listening to the helpless, desperate sounds Will made at the peak of each motion. He began to move in earnest, thrusting against him, sliding back and forth inside that tight space. Will's hips began to move in counterpoint, shoving hard against him, taking him in deeper until he had to close his eyes and hold his breath, concentrating because he was getting close and he didn't want to come yet, didn't want this to be over. It was too soon for this to be over.

But he couldn't fight his body. His thrusts grew quick and jagged, as did the movement of Will's hips against him. He could feel the orgasm building, hot and deep and red behind his eyelids, all of the nerve endings in his body seemed to be concentrated in the swollen pleasure of his cock, swallowed up in Will's tight body. His cry was almost a scream when that bubble of pleasure burst inside him. He could feel Will's tight walls clenching him as he came, holding stock-still even as Will continued to move against him, the thrusts losing power as Will was spent too. He held Will, leaning against him for a long moment, until he was able to open his eyes and move his

weak body, to pull himself from Will's ass, one last shudder flowing through him at the sensation of withdrawal.

Will had a handkerchief and cleaned him off, then wiped up his own come from the sheets. He pulled James into the bed with him, spooning up against him and drawing the thick covers over their bodies. He could feel Will's lips brush against the back of his neck. He was weary with satisfaction, and though he didn't mean to close his eyes, he dozed.

## Chapter Twelve

He woke with a start and a jolt that seemed to reverberate through the entire ship's hull. He could feel Will's body tense, wrapped around his own. It wasn't just him, then, wasn't the kind of startle that pulled you out of dreams of falling or dying. "What—" He raised his head.

"I think we hit something." Will started to sit up, letting the covers fall away.

He chuckled. "What in the hell is there out here to hit? Another boat?"

But beneath them, the jolt against the hull had died away, taking with it another sound, one they had grown used to in their days spent on the luxurious ship. Several decks below, the engines ground to a halt, shutting down. Now he sat up, too, the covers spread loosely across his lap. Will put on his clothes. Something was definitely wrong.

Before he could move, there was a sharp knock at the door. The knob rattled fiercely, causing another jolt to go through his body. Will looked at him, wide-eyed, before the

voice called to him, clear as day through the barrier. “Will?” It was Annie’s voice. “Will, open the door. Now.”

Those words pulled Will back into another world; his everyday world. The one filled with responsibilities to other people. James could see it in his eyes.

He couldn’t find a place to hide. He didn’t even have time to pull the covers over his head as Will strode directly for the door, anger in the set of his mouth and his shoulders. Will reached it as he opened his mouth to protest, pulling the door open.

Annie stood in the hallway in her dressing gown, her brown hair tousled and loose against her shoulders. “Will.” The words died on her lips as she looked from her shirtless, barefoot ex-fiancé to him, naked, barely covered by the blankets on Will’s bed. He lowered his head, because he couldn’t meet the look in her eyes. He didn’t know how Will could.

She gaped for a minute, eyes wide, as everything sank in. “Excuse me.” She began to walk away.

“Wait!” Will called, and he heard his heavy footsteps, running after her down the hall. He could hear their voices, the tone of them, even if he couldn’t make out the words. He threw back the covers and picked up his clothes from the floor, pulling them on hastily. But with Will and Annie in the hallway, he had no place to go. He stood in the middle of

Will's stateroom which had until recently felt cozy, fastening every last button on his shirt with extreme care, and pushing his hair back with his hands.

When Will returned, he faced him with wild eyes. "What'd she say?"

"You don't want to know," Will replied, shoving his feet into his shoes. "I told her to get dressed and see to my mother. We'd better get up on deck."

"Will," he said, and the sound of the word made Will raise his head again. He kissed him, quickly and unexpectedly, because he couldn't help it, and for a moment the dazed, almost happy expression returned to Will's face. It pleased him for the few seconds it took for it to fade.

"Come on." Will pushed him out into the hallway and closed the stateroom door firmly behind them.

There was ice on deck. Shards of it lay like scattered snowfall against the hardwood boards. He looked around to try to see where it had come from, but there was nothing in the darkness except the bright stars twinkling like cold, hard diamonds in the black sky overhead. Some little kids on the deck threw the ice at each other like it was snow, or a toy, and he wondered where their parents were.

Will took his hand and squeezed it, hard, just for a moment, before he let it drop. He marveled at the feel of it and at the beauty of this cold, brittle night.



“What’s going on?” Harvey’s boisterous voice rose above the commotion, as he approached James, wearing a warm coat belted around his thin body.

He turned his head to look to Will, but Will had disappeared. He felt Will’s absence like an arrow of panic. “Not sure.” He turned, scanning the crowd, but Will was gone.

“Let’s find somebody to ask,” Harvey suggested, and the two of them strolled along the deck until they reached a uniformed worker. He couldn’t tell if the man was an officer or a steward. He could have been a waiter or a shoeshine boy for all James knew. “What’s going on?” Harvey asked.

“Just a minor emergency, sir,” the man replied, betraying nothing. Or betraying everything. He could read the fear the man concealed in every line of his body and every controlled movement he made.

“We hit something.”

“Perfectly safe, sir, perfectly safe.” They both knew that didn’t address his statement.

James felt his stomach knot as the officer hurried on down the deck. “Unsinkable ship,” he grumbled, and looked at Harvey. Harvey looked wide-eyed and worried. “What?”

“We’re going to die.” Harvey’s voice held a thin edge of dismayed panic. He raised his hands to cover his face. “We’re all going to die.”

“Hey.” He reached for Harvey’s hands, which felt large and heavy in his own. He pulled the bony wrists away, and when Harvey pulled out of his grasp, he didn’t raise them again. “Calm down. You heard the man. It’s going to be fine.” Neither of them believed it.

More people gathered on deck, asking each other what was going on. It was thinly veiled chaos. Some people wore coats, and others wore thin, elaborate robes over what were unmistakably pajamas and nightgowns. He searched the crowd for Will, but didn’t see him. Where had he disappeared to so fast? he wondered, but he knew the size of the ship and how many hidden places there were on board in which to disappear. Will had undoubtedly gone to his mother. And to Annie. He didn’t want to think about it.

Another officer ordered people back to their cabins. He felt a slight breath of relief, until he heard what the man said: “You’ll find your life vests...just a precaution.”

He swore under his breath, then glanced at Harvey, who looked worried. “Where’s your cabin?” he asked. Harvey was alone on the ship, and James felt some sort of responsibility for him. Ridiculous, he thought, since he had never taken responsibility for anyone in his entire life, to be looking out for this guy because they sat at the same table for a couple of meals.

Will was rubbing off on him. But he felt a kinship with Harvey too. Just because he had Will, didn't mean he wasn't equally as alone.

He and Harvey headed below decks. Chaos reigned there too, contained into a smaller space. People stood around, dazed, chatting, in various stages of dress just like on deck. Harvey squeezed through, blazing the trail, and he followed. Harvey opened the door to his stateroom and they went inside.

It was more like a suite than a plain stateroom like the one he had, or even Will's room. Harvey had a larger bed, fancier furniture, and a larger sitting area. All to himself. "Nice," he said.

"Thanks," Harvey replied. "Amazing what money can buy, isn't it?"

"Sure looks that way," he replied, remembering Harvey's tale at dinner about having come into some money. He thought again about how he had none. "Any idea what these life vests look like or where they might be hiding?"

Harvey nodded, and reached into the large armoire. He withdrew large, bulky white garments that looked like an apron crossed with a winter coat. James took one and found it surprisingly lightweight. Blocks formed sections beneath white cloth. He turned it over in his hands, not putting it on.

"I think it's cork. Cork floats, right?" Harvey asked, a bit nervously. He'd put the vest over his head.

“Of course it does,” he replied. “People float too.” Dead people. He felt his stomach twist.

It wouldn’t come to that. They stood on board the most unsinkable damn ship in the world. He could get that image of dead people bobbing in the ice-cold water right out of his head. He kept holding onto the life vest, tucking it under his arm, as though denying he would need it made things all right. He wanted to find Will, even though he knew Will would be off doing his duty toward his fake fiancée. He sighed.

Harvey picked up on the despair in his sigh if nothing else. “It’s gonna be fine,” he said. “Unsinkable! Stays afloat. This is all an exercise. People getting worked up for nothing.”

“Right.”

Harvey wavered a bit, but suggested, “Let’s go back up on deck and see what else is going on there.”

He nodded, and followed him, still carrying the awkward, puffy life vest under his arm rather than strapping it over his chest the way he was supposed to. He gave a trailing look at Harvey’s regal stateroom, thinking of the treasures he probably had packed away.

Things up on deck had become more chaotic and intense. More people had gathered, all pulled into small groups with tight looks on their faces. The noise of everyone talking at once was almost unbearable.

He put his hand into his pocket and located a coin, which he let drop unobtrusively, and watched to see where it would go. It didn't lie flat on the deck, the way an ordinary coin would when dropped. It fell flat, but it began to slide. Shit. Unsinkable or not, they were sinking.

He wanted to find Will.

He wanted to get the hell away from this crowd, because he didn't like having so many people around.

He stayed where he was, observing.

Will hesitated outside the stateroom belonging to his mother and Annie. He didn't feel embarrassed, or any of the other things he knew he should be feeling. He felt relieved of a longtime burden. This was who he'd always been. He just hadn't given himself permission to recognize it until now. He regretted slipping away from James in the crowd. Regardless of how he felt, or what had passed between them, his responsibility was here.

A light knock and the door opened quickly, as though he had been expected. Annie's face was drawn and worried. His mother sat on the bed, passive, waiting. From the look in her eyes, he could see Annie hadn't said a word to her. Annie looked afraid. When his gaze swept the rest of the room, he saw his mother, looking frail and weak. They both needed him.

He took another deep breath, stretching his spine into an upright posture. He would have to be strong for them. It was his duty.

“What’s going on?” Annie asked.

He shook his head, quickly, once. “I’m not sure. We hit something, and the engines stopped. It could still be nothing.”

The words turned to meaningless mush in his mouth as a cabin stewardess came up behind him in the doorway. The young girl tried to smile, but her face was too tight to manage it. “Please get your lifebelts on,” she said. “The captain has ordered all ladies and children up to the lifeboats. Just a matter of procedure, ma’am. Precaution.” When no one moved, she asked, “Do you need some help?”

It suddenly seemed like years ago he and James had made love in his warm, safe stateroom. “I’ll handle it,” he told the girl, who had more passengers to attend to. She nodded and hurried off down the hall.

The lifebelts were in the upper cabinet of the wardrobe, and he pulled them down. There were only two. He handed one to Annie, and her nimble fingers began to fasten the awkward garment around her body. He approached his mother, who still sat blank and hollow-eyed. He held it out to her, not wanting to breach the bubble of her sacred space. When she made no move toward it, he began to put it on her.

“I won’t.” His mother’s dark eyes flashed with stubbornness. “This ship is unsinkable. I’ll stay here, where it’s safe and it’s warm. There’s no reason to spend cold, dark hours on some ridiculous little rowboat.”

“All right.” He dealt with her calmly, the way he did his ornery banking customers. He would soothe her with words while simultaneously continuing to do what needed to be done, ignoring her stated wishes, rendering them irrelevant. “But we’ve been asked up on deck by the captain.” He reached out to gently take her elbow, to guide her to her feet. His mother submitted, like a child who was used to being dressed and having things done for her.

“We’ll make quite a fashion statement.” Annie leaned in close to Martha, almost giving her a hug. Their two dark heads pressed together, they looked as though they belonged together. Like she was Annie’s mother, and not his. He felt strangely grateful. Annie shot a look at him as she led Martha out of the stateroom, one full of questions and a promise to extract their answers at the first opportunity she received.

He accompanied them up on deck, where people gathered in the cold. The little groups were dotted by the white lifejackets worn over furs or nightclothes. The odd scene added to the tension and fear coiling within him.

He searched the crowd, looking for James, but the darkness made it difficult to see. No moon joined the brilliant

stars overhead. It only took a glance. He would spot James instantly. He was intimately acquainted with his body, with the way he moved. James wasn't there.

Annie kept glancing over her shoulder, trailing Martha and making sure he stayed with them, as though she expected him to abandon them. He wished desperately that he could. He'd go and find James; his mind turned over the possible places he might find him. He thought of all the places they'd gone together, all the little places they'd found to meet and hide away from prying eyes. But he had no choice; this was where he had to be.

Officers in the uniform of the White Star Line attempted to coax women into the lifeboats. They didn't have very much luck. Most of the women seemed to hold the same opinion as his mother. They believed they would end up returning in a few hours when this all turned out to be an exercise, so there was no reason to leave the safety of the ship.

Except he could feel the unevenness of the deck beneath his feet as they made their way across it. The ship listed faintly. Perhaps it wasn't impervious, after all. Perhaps the talk had all been hubris. "You've got to get into the lifeboats," he said, more to Annie than to his mother, because he knew she would be rational. Annie met his eyes. Somehow, she knew.

"I won't go," his mother protested. "I won't."



“Here’s Esther,” he said, as they came upon a small, familiar group on the deck. Esther Cole’s hair was stunning and silver in the starlight.

“Isn’t this ridiculous?” Esther said to her newfound friends. “It’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever experienced in my entire life. Don’t they know—”

His mother made a frightened sound. “Hush,” he murmured, still trying to soothe her. The slant of the deck quickened his heartbeat with fear. He had to see to it that she and Annie were safe.

Esther said, “We’ll stand here a moment until these silly boys decide to give the all-clear.”

“I think we should get into a boat.” Annie looked at him, as though reading his thoughts. He wanted to take her hand and squeeze it, thank her for being on his side, despite everything. For trying to make this easier. No matter what had happened and how they had hurt each other, in some ways they remained a team.

He knew Annie probably still loved him and would do as he asked. Under less dire circumstances, it might be using her, but he was convinced the ship was sinking and he needed someone to stay with his mother. Someone he trusted. Someone who could. It wasn’t lost on him that the lifeboats were being loaded with women and children only. It was custom for the men to wait, to sacrifice their lives if necessary.

It hurt like hell to know he couldn't be with her when she needed him the most.

"Mother," he said, and she glared at him. "I want you to listen to me. You need to get into one of the boats. I want you to stay with Annie, until...until this is finished."

"We're safe enough here," his mother said.

"The ship is sinking," he insisted.

Ruth, who had stood at her mother's side silently, burst into hysterical laughter. As though she didn't believe it. But she knew too. They all did.

"Teddy comes too," Esther proclaimed.

He looked to Esther's tall, thin son. He was young, but he was a man, not a boy. He would not be allowed onto the lifeboats. He could see by the stubborn gleam in Esther's eye she would not leave her child.

"Then I want you to stay with me, Will," his mother said, and he could feel his heart break, because he couldn't. His duty to do what was proper, as a man, in a time of crisis, was stronger even than his responsibility toward her.

He took charge. He herded the small group toward where the lifeboats were being loaded. An officer helped women into the boat, quickly, one by one, as though loading them on an assembly line system.

"My son is coming with me," Esther declared.

“Women and children only,” the officer replied, and Esther stopped, drawing herself up, halting the progress of the loading.

“He’s merely a child,” Esther said, and at those words Teddy stood back. Distancing himself from her, from this mother who looked upon him as an infant and a possession. Esther looked at him, her horrified face full of betrayal.

“I can’t,” Teddy said. “Please get in the boat.”

Ruth tugged at Esther’s arm. “Mama.”

“No, I won’t. I won’t,” Esther declared dramatically. But it wasn’t for show, not anymore. She went to Teddy, pressing her face into her son’s shoulder, weeping.

Ruth seemed lost and bewildered. “Come on.” Annie gently took her arm. The officer helped guide her into the boat. Alone. Abandoned by her own mother. He felt cold all over. “Will—” His mother reached for him with long, thin fingers.

He held her hand in his, just for a second. Long enough to imprint his warmth on it, an impression to last. “You have to go now.” He saw his mother finally come to an agreement, and she turned to be helped into the boat.

He met Annie’s eyes. “Take care.” He was trusting her with his responsibility.

She smiled at him, a real smile. Because she knew they would never see each other again.

“I’ll catch a later boat.” He lied to his mother. He’d come to the same realization. This was happening. The unsinkable ship was sinking, and looking around he didn’t see how there would be enough space for all of these people on the lifeboats. Women and children would go first, and so the men on board probably wouldn’t see another sunrise. “Once the women are cared for. It’s my duty.”

As the boat disappeared from view over the side, Ruth began to scream. It reflected how they all felt. He looked at Teddy and saw his shoulders sag, saw the way he turned away, defeated, listening to his sister scream hysterically while their mother remained with him. He wanted to reach out to him. To stay with him. But he had to find James.

James couldn’t see Will in the apprehensive crowd on deck. He stepped through the nearest doorway and found himself in the lounge. Keyes was at the chess table, as though he’d never left. For some reason that heightened his feeling of foreboding. It was unnatural not to panic. Unnatural and eerie.

Most people in the lounge remained calm or, at least, retained the outward appearance of calm. Looking around, he found he was among some of the best names in society—Astor, Guggenheim—the immensely rich. In another life, this would have been a dream come true for him, so many wealthy

marks gathered together in one small space. All he'd have to do was work the room.

It was much too late for that now. Money wouldn't help him where he was going. Still, he was tempted. He could spend his final hours doing what he was best at. Lying and stealing.

As he descended the stairs, they felt strange beneath his feet. The risers were not where he expected them to be, and he grabbed at the rail for support. It was like being drunk. It took a moment for him to realize the problem was not with his equilibrium, but with the ship's. She was listing.

Sinking.

He continued on his path back to his stateroom. He wanted Will, or a distraction. He felt some small shimmer of hope in his heart Will would be down here, waiting for him, looking for him. But Will had his family to attend to. He knew that Will would never abandon them. He would do the right thing. That was one of the things James loved about him.

He stepped into his room, still hoping a little bit. But the room was just as empty. He stood in the center of it and turned around, looking at all the meaningless luxury. He'd spent his entire life in pursuit of one thing: money. The one thing that couldn't save him now.

Suddenly, from behind him, he heard the half-closed door latch, and the sound of a key turning in the lock. "Hey!" he

yelled, his heart exploding into a frantic rhythm as he dashed to the door, slapping it hard with his hands. He tried the knob, rattling it fruitlessly.

“Hey, let me out!” he hollered, and leaned his forehead against the wooden door, letting his eyes slip closed. Was this how it was going to end? Mistakenly trapped? It would grow dark, and cold, and airless, and still. He squeezed his eyes more tightly closed.

The door reverberated with motion on the other side. He raised his head and stepped back as the door opened a crack. “Sir?” The British accent gave the speaker away as an employee of the White Star Line.

“God damn it.” He yanked the door open. The steward was several inches shorter than he was, looking up with wide, unblinking eyes. His hair stood up in an odd sort of cowlick. He must have been off duty when they struck, perhaps fast asleep. “Check next time.”

“Very sorry, sir.” The steward held his ring of keys with both of his trembling hands. “Fear of looters, you understand.”

“Looters.” He lingered over the word as though considering it. He did consider it. Wondering why the idea hadn’t occurred to him, all these staterooms open and empty for the taking. ’Course it didn’t matter whose pockets the money was in when they all ended up at the bottom of the sea. “Level with me. What’s really going on?”

The steward wet his lips nervously. His flaring nostrils and his pale skin and twitchy eyes reminded him of a rabbit. “We’ve struck an iceberg, sir.”

“And?” he asked, his voice low and smooth.

“And...it seems quite likely...the ship will founder, sir,” the steward stated with some reluctance. “You should get up on deck.”

“Why? There’s not enough lifeboats,” he said.

“Godspeed, sir.” The steward pulled the door firmly closed and locked him out of his own stateroom. He moved on down the hall, locking the next door in the line without bothering to knock or to call or to check to see who was inside. Some people never learn, he thought, and went back up on deck.

Chaos reigned. He couldn’t stand to see it. Overhead, a white star exploded in the sky. Distress rockets. Pretense was gone; no more talk of being an unsinkable wonder ship. They were sunk.

He cut through the crowd gathered around the launch of the lifeboats. Looking for Will. But he wasn’t there.

He walked to the end of the ship, where there were no lifeboats, and consequently, few people. The wooden deck chairs were neatly folded up, waiting for a sunrise that was never going to come. He unfolded one and took a seat on it.

He looked up at the sky, dark above him and filled with stars, and he wondered what came next.

“James.”

It was Will’s voice. It took everything he had not to rise and go to him, wrap him in his arms. Will was only a few feet away, his eyes as dark as the night sky and the water beyond. “I knew I’d find you here.”

He nodded, and folded his legs, indicating Will should join him, take a seat at the end of the chaise. But Will remained standing. “Come on.” Will held out one thin hand invitingly.

He shook his head, and the light breeze blew the hair into his eyes. “Pointless.” He looked up at Will. “This here’s the end of the line.”

“On the starboard side they’re letting men into the boats,” Will said. A simple statement of fact.

“But you aren’t going, and neither am I,” he said. “You, because you’ve got this sense of duty and honor and doing what’s right. You’re a man, a real man, and you’re not going to put yourself first. That’s how it is.”

“What about you?” Will asked.

His lips pressed together in a vague imitation of a smile. His voice was low and deep when he spoke. “I’m not a good person, Will. I deserved to say my goodbyes a long time ago. It finally caught up with me, is all.”



“I don’t believe that,” Will said, with a glitter like tears in his eyes.

It meant so much to him. But Will was wrong. “You should.” He looked away because he couldn’t stand to see the disbelief in Will’s eyes. The disbelief that should turn to disappointment. “You should save yourself while you still can. There’s a lot of good you could do in this world.”

“Only if you come with me.” Will meant it. He was putting the responsibility for his life into James’s hands. He didn’t know what a mistake that was.

“I want to,” he said. “More than anything, I want to get up from here and fight my way through that crowd. Walk on people, push, shove, fight. To get my selfish way. I never thought of anyone but myself, and I never will.” He realized as he spoke the words that they were a lie. Will had made them a lie.

“That’s why you won’t.” Will understood him more than anyone else ever had.

He put his head down. His entire life had been a struggle to survive. His knuckles ached with the memory of the fights he’d been in over the years. It took every ounce of strength he had to remain still. He was stronger than he thought, because he managed it.

Will sat, and he felt lost. He didn’t raise his head, didn’t look. Couldn’t. He felt the addition of Will’s weight to the

chair, and the warmth of his body so close. He could feel Will's presence, his essence, and he ached to touch him, but he remained stone still.

Will sat with him in silence. The other sounds seemed to come from far away. Shouts. Whistles. The scream of another rocket as it shot up into the sky, signaling their distress. The silence was comfortable, but it was empty. There were things they needed to say, and such a short time to say it.

"I put my mother and Annie into one of the boats," Will said, and James realized he needed to talk, so he let him. "Ruth too. I thought you'd want to know she was safe."

He nodded soundlessly. Waiting for Will to say more. But Will put his head into his hands. James reached out. He touched him gently at first, a tentative finger moving along the thickness of his coat. He lowered his head to rest it against Will's shoulder, quietly supporting him, and gaining comfort from him in return.

They sat this way for a long time. He asked, "She say anything about us?"

"It doesn't matter now." Will reached for his hand, threading his long fingers between James's, pressing their palms together. James squeezed in return, and saw the smile cross Will's face. "I'm glad I met you."

"You might be the only person in the whole world ever to feel that way." He thought of the things he'd done in his past.

He never left anyone anything but glad to see the back of him, walking away. But Will was here, with him, until the very end. He kept hold of Will's hand, the constant pressure conveying the meaning of the words he couldn't quite find within himself to say: he was glad to have known Will, too. There was no one else he would rather die beside.

“What's it going to be like?” he asked, finally.

He felt Will's body tense against his. “Um,” Will stalled. “Cold.”

“Violent?”

“Maybe. It depends.”

“On what?” he scoffed. “Are there easy ways to die?”

“No,” Will replied. “Probably not. They used to say drowning...was easy. But it's a fight. Your body doesn't ever stop fighting to survive. Not even when the brain's shutting down and there's not a glimmer of hope left.”

“It'll hurt.”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” he said defiantly. He didn't want to die without feeling anything. He didn't want to drift off gently into the darkness. He wanted to feel that final struggle. In a way, he thought, nothing was more alive than dying. That was how he wanted it. Painful, alert, punishment for his sins.

But he looked at Will.

He didn't want Will to suffer or feel pain. He felt helplessness rise up within him, choking him, and it turned to safe anger, the way it always did. "Go get on one of those boats," he ordered, watching the surprise dawn across Will's face. He pushed him, hard, with both hands. "Go!"

Will smiled, a tiny little smile. It was the scariest thing he had ever seen, because it indicated Will understood him as well or better than he did himself. "No." Will's quiet voice settled the matter perfectly. It wasn't because of propriety or duty anymore. Will moved close to him, for a moment, and pressed a kiss at the side of his neck, between the corner of his jaw and his ear. Will's lips were cold, and he closed his eyes. Drowning couldn't hurt more than this did, and no amount of freezing water could extinguish the warmth he felt, and recognized as love.

The sounds coming from the main deck had grown less frantic. There were no more shouts, or screams, or scuffles. Strains of music floated on the air. The ship's band played. Before, it had been ragtime, wild and unrestrained, from somewhere below deck. Now they were here, in the open, with the rest of them, and the music had become slower and more contemplative. A waltz.

"We should plan," Will said. "It's not too late to fight."

He looked at the slant of the deck, and the water lapping ever closer to them. "You should save yourself."

“Us,” Will said. “I’ll save us.”

He decided to allow him the delusion, if it would make him happy. He smiled faintly. He’d made his peace long ago, when his family was all gone and he’d chosen this immoral lifestyle. He knew he was going to hell, and it was only a matter of when. He’d had a good run. Longer than he’d expected. If it had to end, at least it would end like this.

“If we wait until the last moment, we should be able to swim away as the water comes up.” It was coming closer every minute. He watched it, but Will’s eyes were on the horizon, on the distance, still seeing the future where none existed.

“Kiss me.”

“Come over the rail,” Will replied.

“You first.” He gave him a stubborn, saucy smile. Will obliged, a soft kiss against his lips, enough for him to close his eyes, and Will pulled away. Going to the rail. He followed, humoring him.

Will climbed over the railing, bracing himself against it. Facing him, with one hand outstretched. He grasped it, holding it tight again. He wasn’t going to let Will go, not until the last second, and only because he couldn’t deny Will’s tiny glimmer of hope, that Will might survive. He wouldn’t be the one to drag him under. James had done enough already.

Will tugged at his hand, urging him to come over the rail. The water was coming ever closer. Time was running out. Funny how time seemed to expand. The lights were still on, somehow, and the musicians were still playing. He closed his eyes and kissed Will, feeling the iron bars cutting into his belly where they separated their two bodies, on opposite sides. He could feel Will's solidness, his warmth and his strength. It was a kiss to hang onto for the ages, and that was what James wanted.

A horrible noise came from behind him. Twisted shrieks, inhuman, the metal of the ship itself buckling and breaking. The railing hurt him now, hitting his ribs like a punch thrown hard, as everything began to tip. He looked into Will's eyes. Still holding his hand.

“Come on.”

“I love you.” They were words he'd said to a lot of people, under a lot of different circumstances, all of them manipulative. They would be now, too, if he thought he could manipulate Will into surviving somehow. But these were odds he didn't know how to beat. He said the words and meant them, for the very first time.

They were in the water, drenched with it as it cascaded up, in a horrible wave, meeting the deck as things fell all around them. It hurt, the water hurt, like a thousand tiny daggers all shoved into his flesh. The only warmth was from

Will's hand against his, and as the pressure surged, that was gone. In one second, Will was torn from him and he felt himself tumbling through the water as though gravity had ceased to apply. He opened his eyes and saw the lights of the ship shimmer, even under the water, and then, very slowly, they began to go out.

## Chapter Thirteen

The weight of the water closing around him pushed James down hard. It closed over his head and he sputtered, feeling the burn of the seawater inside his nose, in the back of his throat, and scratching at his eyes. He kicked his legs, since his first instinct was to swim, and he was a strong swimmer, but something pushed back. Something hard and heavy and hot, trapping him beneath the sea.

His lungs burned. He kept his eyes open, but darkness surrounded him. The thing crushing him was metal. Some piece of the ship that had broken free, trapping him beneath it as it began to descend slowly toward the sea floor.

He struggled. He fought and he pushed. He was running out of air, and his chest hurt. His ribs had already been bruised, he thought, or maybe broken. It was hard to know whether it was a bone fragment or an air pocket or just plain death stabbing him on his right side. The seawater in his mouth tasted like blood. Only his hand felt warm and alive, the hand Will had held. He wanted him to grasp it again, to pull him from this nightmare.



He fought without giving it any conscious thought. The water roiled in the tumult of the sinking ship. He began to get purchase, to slide, to get away from the terrible crushing weight. He kicked his legs hard, steering himself in the direction he thought was up, toward the surface, but he didn't know. He could be driving himself toward the soft silt at the bottom. His sense of direction, of up and down, had gone. His chest hurt, lungs and ribs and heart like it would burst, and he closed his eyes.

Hot tears rolled down his cheeks as he broke the surface. Scraping them away, his eyes and his skin burned from the saltwater. He pushed back his hair and turned around, looking for something to swim toward, to cling to. Looking for Will.

Time was, he had been afraid of the dark. When he was little, he'd had a tendency to hide anywhere small and closed in. Anywhere his father with his strap in his hand couldn't easily reach. But slowly, as he grew up, the darkness began to weigh on him in ways he couldn't explain. It closed in around him and made him taste the sharp metal tang of terror. He preferred his father's beating hands to being in the dark.

There was no moon overhead. The sky was black and the water was black and he was alone. He could taste the fear now, as he hadn't in many years, not since he'd grown into a man and taken control of his own life and fate. Now he had no

control, not over anything, and no hope of regaining it out here adrift, with only the darkness for company.

The cold began to seep through his skin and into his bones. It made everything feel sharp as crystal, the stars overhead and the air around him. Even the waves, liquid lapping at him, had salt that stung. When he licked his lips he could taste it. He wasn't going to last long out here in this cold. He knew it even without seeing the people around him, half frozen and growing weaker. Another few moments and he couldn't feel the cold at all. He knew that was when it got you the most.

He'd never expected dying to be like this.

Around him, he could hear the terrible sound of people crying out. Some wailed for help, some in pain, all of them terrified. He didn't want to look but they were there, spots of light and color bobbing in the thick black water. There was debris floating with them—broken pieces of things, wood and wreckage. A small shoe skimmed past and he felt agony slice through his body. Fabric brushed against his arm and his first instinct was to reach out, but then he blinked and recognized that it was a body, face-down in the water.

He could only think of Will. Will, who had been beside him, holding on, and then suddenly wasn't there anymore. It might have been him just now. James almost reached out, but recoiled again. He didn't want to know. Didn't want to see.

He shouldn't be the one of them to live.

The sounds of the people around him grew fainter. He heard soft moans and cries. Splashes. Choking and coughing. The sound of people drowning. Dying.

He kept himself moving, treading water, although he could feel the weariness spread through his body, a warm sense of peace that would be so easy to give in to. His hands and feet and skin ached with the cold.

Above him, in the black sky, the stars shone with a bright, piercing light. He saw one fall and burn out. He remembered his grandmother telling him when he was a little boy that a shooting star was the soul of someone who'd died, aiming up for heaven. If she was right, the whole sky would fill with shooting stars that night.

The lifeboats didn't come back to see if anyone else had survived. But he'd drifted in the water, growing close to a misshapen form, like the bump of a giant jellyfish with wriggling, trailing legs. His vision began to clear and his brain made sense of the images. It was an overturned lifeboat, hull upended out of the water, and the jellyfish tendrils were men clinging on to the sides, holding on, kicking their feet to stay warm and afloat.

He swam toward them, and the icy water felt warm as a bath against his skin. The fear that seized his chest was cold. They might push him away, deny him this chance to hang on

until rescue came. The idea that he would die from human cruelty rather than the cold after surviving sinking and almost drowning was almost more than he could bear. He reached the side of the boat.

“Grab on.” One of the men took his hand and put it against the rough hull of the boat. It sank a little deeper into the water with James’s weight upon it. But it was dry and he could lie against it like the float in the river he used to swim to growing up. All he had to do now was stay afloat, stay alert and keep breathing.

The boat rocked in the water, back and forth, sinking slightly as the men it preserved jostled for position. It seemed that with every breath it threatened to slip permanently into the water and then they would have nothing.

To his amazement, the man next to him held a silver flask and offered it. “Was in my pocket,” the man said. “Little brandy to keep the blood moving.”

James took it and swallowed a gulp of it, feeling it burn through his body. He started to return it to the man to his right, but the man shook his head. “Pass it down. Do us all some good if it can.” So James handed the flask to the man to his left and nodded to him to pass it further on.

“Blimey. This one here didn’t make it.”

The words tightened something in James’s belly. To think of coming this far, of finding the hope of something to cling to

until rescue came and then dying anyway. He put his head down, feeling the roughness of the boat's hull against the side of his face.

“Too cold.” They could still all die out here, freeze in the cold water they drifted in. James wondered if rescue would come. He wondered if he would ever feel completely safe and warm again.

“Ease him off, lads.”

James closed his eyes for a moment as he felt the hull of the boat rise an inch or more in the water. The lost man disappeared under the surface without a sound. James opened his eyes and looked at the sky, seeking another shooting star.

Then he looked around the boat, at the faces of the men who were as cold and wet and desperate as he was, all of them plucked from the sea. Lucky enough not to drown but not so fortunate as to have an upright boat between their bodies and the water. He examined their faces in the darkness, thinking that no one would ever know the name of the man who had almost made it.

He thought of Will, of course. They had been side by side. He should be here, where James was. Now Will was probably one of the silent, nameless few and if the world worked the way it should, before this night was over James would join them. He thought of letting go, of sinking beneath the surface

of the water without a sound or another breath, but he couldn't unclench his fingers.

In the distance, a shooting star seemed to flutter and bob on the horizon, moving along with the water. Like a ship coming to their rescue, except it never came any closer.

Just before dawn broke, James found himself promising that if he survived this, that if he lived to walk again on land, he would become a better person. He might not be the good man Will had been, with his honest and proper ways, but he would try. To make up for the loss; to set right the universe's choice of the wrong man to survive.

Pale threads of pink and gold sunrise began to streak the sky. At the same time, the dark stillness of the ocean gave way to a light breeze. It was just enough to make his shivering worse and contract the muscles of his jaw as his teeth clicked against each other. Their sad raft of a lifeboat drifted in the midst of large chunks of ice, some bobbing on the surface and some as solid as statues. They reflected the light of the dawn like diamonds, with tantalizing hints of blue and green and pink hidden in their planes and facets.

The roar of an engine ruined the silence. It was a ship, real and ugly in the daylight. It was ridiculously small, compared to the majesty of the vessel they'd left behind, but it had power to steer it and warm them, with food to fill their

bellies and beds to rest their battered bodies. It would take them home.

They hauled him up in rough jerks, inches at a time. A rope sling, carrying him from the lifeboat to the large rescue ship. James thought he should turn and climb the rope, but now, when it was all over, he was trembling. His arms had no strength to hold on.

He wanted to plunge back into the water. It was where he belonged, he thought miserably. He didn't want to live, knowing good men had died. With every breath, Will was with him.

The deck felt strangely solid after hours spent intimately on the waves. Someone put a blanket over his shoulders.

He turned to give his thanks for her kindness, but she was gone. Lost in the sea of pale gray faces, all of them with blankets wrapped around them, all of them standing in a forlorn sort of pain, with no distinguishing features among them. They were all the same. He was one of them.

There was warmth in the ship's cafeteria. With one hand he picked up a mug of hot coffee. In the other, he took a bowl of soup. The heated food burned in his belly. It was nourishing and good. Life, filling him. He stood on deck with the rest of the lost souls, but he turned his back on the constant flow of survivors hauled up from lifeboats. He couldn't bear to see, knowing Will couldn't possibly be among them.

Later, a hand on his shoulder shook him gently. He'd closed his eyes, still sitting at the table in the dining room. His first thought was that he was cold, and the second was of Will. Miserably remembering where he was and how he'd gotten there, he opened his eyes. He saw a woman he didn't recognize. They stared at each other for a horrified moment, then she said, "I'm sorry. I thought you were...someone else."

Someone she'd lost.

James heard murmuring in the crowd and knew it was about him. That as a man, he didn't deserve to be there. Didn't deserve to have lived. A woman defended him, saying they'd pulled him from the water, that he hadn't fought his way onto a boat or taken someone else's spot. It didn't matter, though.

He saw Ruth a moment before she saw him. The blanket wrapped around her shoulders made her look small, and her arms were wrapped tightly around her middle, as though she was in horrible pain. "You made it." She stood over him.

He nodded, silent at this statement of the obvious. His voice was rusty when he spoke. "I went down with the ship. Into the water. A boat picked me up." It took so few words to dry his throat. "I didn't...mean to."

"I'm the only one left." Ruth sat beside him. Her head hung down between her shoulders and her body convulsed with sobs. He wanted to touch her, but he didn't dare. "She stayed behind. My mother. They wouldn't let my brother on



the boat, and she argued but they still said no, and she stayed behind with him. She wouldn't leave him."

He put his arm around her, pulling her frail body against his. She buried her face against him. Her saltwater tears were like returning to the ocean. He let her cry for both of them, and it took a long time.

The ship had no place for them to sleep. They had blankets and warm soup and coffee, and some survivors huddled together in the dining room and other public rooms, but he would spend another night below the terrible stars. All of them together in the cold on the deck, just like the previous night, except there was silence now.

Ruth stayed by his side, curled up in her blanket. He didn't know if she was sleeping or faking. He didn't want to be with her, but he didn't want to be alone, either. He began to ease himself up to his feet.

Her body jolted and she opened her eyes. "Stay with me," she said.

"I just gotta take a walk."

She reached out, grabbing the fabric of his pant leg in her thin fingers. "Please." She looked up at him with haunted eyes. "I'm the only one left. There's money—it'll all come to me now. Please, just stay with me."

It would be so easy to say yes. To slip back into his old ways, his old life. Preying on the weak, the helpless, the

disadvantaged. He'd need a place to stay when they got to New York. But he remembered the promise he'd made to himself. What use was surviving if nothing had changed? "I'll be back in a minute," he promised, and eased away from her, to take that walk now that she'd given him something to think about.

He stood in line for coffee in the dining room. The bitter heat of it burned his tongue. It felt good to be inside, without the stars looking down on him.

He should become a better person, to make up for the good men who had been lost. The ones like Will, who'd deserved to live long and happy lives.

He thought about how he'd wanted to become a better person for Will. He'd wanted to change, to make himself worthy. To follow Will's example. It sounded so ridiculous now. But love could change a man.

Losing it could change him back. If he let it. It would be so easy to let it.

Maybe walking away from Ruth wasn't the right thing to do. She was alone, and she'd never been alone in her life. She needed someone. Being there would be the right thing to do, wouldn't it? Even if there was compensation involved?

Or was that meaningless justification?

He looked into the bottom of his mug. He could drink more. Stay in the warmth and the light. He rose from his chair and got into the line again.

In front of him in the line was Will's ex-fiancée, Annie. Her eyes were wide and green and swollen from crying, and her hair fell in a riot of tangled, half-matted curls. His first instinct was to bolt, but it was too late. She'd seen him. "You made it," she whispered.

"Yeah," he agreed, running his hands through his hair and scratching his scalp with one finger. The salt deposited from his tumble into the ocean made him itch. He had to say something about Will. How could he find the words?

"He was a good man," he managed to say. Knowing the wrong man had survived. "He was right there beside me. And then he wasn't." He couldn't explain it to Annie. No one who hadn't been there would understand. He would carry the weight of that with him.

Annie nodded solemnly. "He told me."

"He...what?" He had only been half-listening, pouring coffee into his cup. Now he stared at her, feeling the weight of the cup trembling in his hand.

"You must have done the right thing, for both of you to survive," Annie said. "Or the universe has more planned for you."

“He survived?” Will was alive. *Alive*. It was all he could do not to whoop for joy. “Where is he? Show me.”

“Of course.” Annie turned to lead the way. “He’s with his mother. She’s...not coping very well.” It seemed a huge understatement. None of them were coping very well. But when they reached her, in the corner of the dining room, he saw what she meant. Mrs. Woods’s eyes were dark and haunted. As they shifted to look at him, he sensed a change. Her gaze was sharp, but warm.

“Will, look who I found.”

Will was already looking. Pure amazement shone on his face. James couldn’t believe anyone looked at him that way. “You’re here.” Will’s voice was filled with disbelief.

“So are you.” The words were small for all they meant, they were meaningless. He wondered if his own face betrayed as much. His eyes burned at the sight of Will. He ached to touch him, feel the life flowing inside of him, but he couldn’t. Not here.

Will’s hand rested gently against his shoulder. The pressure of his touch was warm and real. He was real.

“Annie—”

“I’ll stay,” Annie replied.

Will cast a long look backward as they walked away from his mother. The door to a linen storage room was ajar, and James pushed it open, steering Will inside, among the pure

white napkins and tablecloths. “I can’t believe this,” Will said softly.

James marveled at the feeling, of being wanted in return. It had never happened to him. He touched Will’s hand fleetingly, for a second. “What happened to you out there?”

Will let out a rough laugh. “Not worth telling.”

James waited, knowing the words would come.

“I managed to swim away from the wreck. There was this boat. A lifeboat. It came back.” Will gave in to the expanding silence, filling it with reluctant words. “For a little while, you could hear people yelling. It grew fainter until it wasn’t there anymore.

Will let out a sigh. James remained quiet, thinking of what it had been like. He knew because he’d been there, but he didn’t know what it was like for Will.

“During the night, one of the guys died. Didn’t really find out till we got here. Pulled him up and gave him a burial at sea.” Will’s laughter was like a crack widening in his soul. “All that, just to end up back in the water.”

“Will.”

“And I thought you were dead,” Will said, his voice small. “Why didn’t you hold on? Why didn’t I hang on tighter?”

“We couldn’t,” he replied. “The water, the pressure. It was too much.” Will blinked at him, sucking his tears back

inside rather than letting them fall. “I thought you were gone too.” His voice was rough. “You’re not. Neither am I.”

“Just touch me.” Will stood there, shoulders hunched, bereft. James put one hand over Will’s, sliding it up his forearm and back down to grasp his hand, threading his fingers through, forming an unbreakable bond. He slid his body against Will’s, thighs touching, chests meeting, and he wrapped his other arm loosely around Will’s waist, letting his hand settle into the curve at the bottom of his spine. He started to nuzzle Will’s neck, burying his nose against the soft flesh underneath his jaw. Will’s body stiffened, not accepting him.

“Stop thinking about them,” he murmured, knowing exactly where Will’s thoughts had gone. He saw it too, the field of debris and all those people, every time he closed his eyes. Unlike Will, he knew how not to let it in. That’s why they needed this, right now, at the most inappropriate time. They needed to focus on life for a minute instead of all the death. He pressed his lips against a tender spot where he could feel the rush of Will’s blood underneath the skin. Whirled his tongue against it, then raked it with his teeth. The tension flowing through Will’s body now was the good kind, excitement and arousal coming in waves that matched the pulse in his throat.

“What happens now?”

Will shook his head like he didn't know. "I've got my mother to look after."

"And Annie." He could taste the bitterness in his words.

Will shook his head, just once. James felt guilty for feeling happiness at that gesture. "What about you?"

All he wanted was to be with Will. Being asked about his plans—implying Will had no bearing on them—hurt. "Ruth's here. She's shattered by this."

Will nodded solemnly.

"The right thing to do would be to take responsibility for her." He thought they were the words Will would want to hear. It was what Will would do. "She begged me to stay with her." Never mind about the money.

"The right thing to do isn't governed by guilt. Or society or honor or duty."

He looked at Will curiously.

"I learned that from you," Will told him. "It comes from your heart."

"Will—"

"She's already lost my father." He meant his mother. "I don't know how long—" There were tears in his voice, but he shook them away. "I have to be there for her."

James had learned a lot, in just a few short hours. Thinking of a future without Will hurt. "I would wait forever for you," he offered. He saw the surprise in Will's eyes, and

he knew Will wouldn't be coming back for him. Will kissed him, very softly. "It shouldn't have to be goodbye," he said.

Will slipped out of the small supply closet, dreading the walk back to where he'd left Annie and his mother. He didn't want to be responsible anymore. He wanted to be free, like James was, and even thinking such a thought made him feel like such a terrible person. He could have died. He almost did. They had all come so close.

Close enough to realize that there was more to life than doing what you should with no time for doing what you needed. Not having love to stir his soul was like being dead inside. He could see it all so clearly, the life laid out in front of him so similar to the life he'd been leading. Promising to marry Annie out of misguided loyalty and expectation, to make other people happy. He couldn't give up his whole life to take care of his mother.

James was his life now.

He might never have known it if he hadn't come so close to losing everything.

Relief washed over him as he approached Annie and his mother in the dining room. His mother's eyes focused on Annie's face, as quick and bright as ever. She reached her hand up to her son, taking his hand in hers.

"I'll get some coffee." Annie slipped away quickly.



“You survived.” His mother looked up into his face as he crouched down.

He nodded. “We survived.”

“It’s funny. I never thought of myself as a survivor. If you’d asked me yesterday, I’d say I’ve been taken care of my whole life. Your father—he did that, for a while. Then he died, and I survived that. Now I’ve survived this.” She smiled faintly. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

He shook his head. He knew exactly how she felt. Despite her face and her body appearing as fragile as ever, he could see the newfound strength in her eyes. It contrasted so strongly with the pain he’d seen in James’s eyes.

“There’s one thing I want now from life, and it’s up to you to give it to me.” Her hand squeezed his. “You have to be happy, Will. No matter what. I don’t want anyone or anything to stand in your way. I’m not going to stand in your way. I won’t let you do that. Not anymore.”

He nodded. He felt uncertain about this. His duty was to her. A lifetime of that didn’t fade so quickly, especially when he knew how easily he could have lost her in this too. But he heard the words that she said, and he knew that she meant them. “What about you?”

“I had a long time to think, out there in that little lifeboat. I’ve spent my whole life being defined by other people. The

good daughter, wife, even your mother. I think it's time for me to find out what else I might be."

He had never considered her as someone who might struggle with her responsibilities the same way he did. They had become her identity, even in his eyes. Hearing her say that she needed to explore all the possibilities of life made him see her differently. He was proud of her, for surviving, and for setting him free. He knew the only thing he could do to thank her was to give her what she wanted, and make her feel about him the way he felt right now. That out of this tragic ending, there would be new beginnings.

He knew it wouldn't be easy. The world would not be accepting of his relationship with James. His mother would probably find it just as difficult, not only as a woman alone, but to maintain the way she currently felt about him, as her son. Her "no matter what" might not include *that*. There would be a lot of silences and things left unsaid. He only hoped that these new relationships would be strong enough to endure.

She released his hand.

"I need to go talk to someone for a minute."

His mother nodded. "I thought that you might."

It was all he could do not to run across the deck to find James. A part of him felt fear, that James would have made

good on his statement and gone straight to Ruth. Gone straight back to that life that he felt so ashamed of.

But James was still there. James's eyes brightened, but warily, when he saw Will approach. That moment's hesitation dissolved, and James met him, wrapping him up in an embrace just as hard and tight. "Didn't you learn a damn thing from almost dying?" James demanded.

"No," Will said. "I learned it from finally living."

James had heard Titanic called the Ship of Dreams. Now, undoubtedly, she would be remembered only for this nightmare at sea. But standing there with Will, their hands confidently intertwined, James couldn't help but think an unspoken dream of his had finally come true.

## About the Author

Reilly Ryan read her first romance novel at the age of twelve. Her mother paper-clipped the pages with the sex scenes closed to try to keep her from reading them. That plan, while well intentioned, obviously didn't work. She's been reading and writing romance ever since. She currently lives in Oregon with an ill-behaved tabby cat and lots and lots of books. For more information, please visit [www.reillyryan.com](http://www.reillyryan.com).

*He thinks he's just a wallflower. Little does he know he's  
the guest of honor...*

## Object of His Desire

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It's the last night of a week-long house party in remote northern England. Every sensual delight imaginable is right at Henry Shaw's fingertips. Yet all he wants is to be with his host, the deliciously handsome and enigmatic Arsen Grey. Henry's certain it's love, not mere infatuation. He's also sure it's hopeless. After all, the party's purpose is to find Arsen a new mistress.

Arsen longs to leave the glittering, jaded world of the ton behind and find someone who will value him for himself, not his wealth and his title. He suspects that someone could be the strapping country gentleman he's caught staring at him. Henry is loyal and dependable, nothing like his other acquaintances. Arsen sets a plan into motion, one designed to get Henry into his bed. One that includes a test of devotion.

Arsen never expected that in winning Henry, he risks losing his heart.

*Warning: This title contains a m/m romance between an obscenely wealthy marquis and a strong, silent country gentleman.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Object of His Desire:*

Arsen opened the door. A large man was sprawled on the bed, as if he'd wandered up to it and simply passed out. One arm and one booted foot hung off the mattress. His face was pressed into a pillow. He appeared completely out of place in the overly feminine bedchamber. Almost everything was a noxious shade of pink, from the drapes covering the windows to the silk coverlet adorning the four poster bed.

Henry followed Arsen inside. He paused when Arsen held up a hand.

“Shut the door and wait here.” Arsen continued to the side of the bed without a backward glance.

Henry flicked the door closed. Like hell he was going to cower like some callow youth! Ignoring Arsen, he crossed the room.

“Milton.” Arsen shoved the man's massive shoulder.

The rhythmic pattern of the lord's snores went undisturbed.

Arsen's features hardened. “Milton. Get your arse up.” He grabbed a fistful of dark hair and tugged.

Without warning, Milton bolted up, swinging one long arm, fist clenched and aimed at Arsen's handsome face. Henry lunged forward, hand closing around the thick wrist, stopping the blow in mid-arc.

Rage flashed across Milton's bloated face. Displaying far more strength than a drunk should possess, Milton jerked hard, pulling Henry forward. Using the momentum to his advantage, Henry landed with his knee on the small of Milton's back, pressing the man flat on the bed. Twisting Milton's arm behind his back, Henry held him down.

"Get the fuck off me!" Milton thrashed, pushing the pillows off the bed and knocking a wine glass off the bedside table.

Settling all his weight onto his knee, Henry tightened his hold and wrenched the man's arm higher up his back.

Milton let out a pained grunt and tried to throw him off. "You bastard!"

"Cease!"

At the authority in Arsen's voice, both men stilled.

Henry glanced up.

Arsen stood next to the bed, a look of severe displeasure on his face. What appeared to be Bordeaux stained the sleeve of his white shirt and dripped from the tips of his long fingers. "Quit behaving like an arse, Milton. You're in the wrong room, you damn fool."

Milton turned his head left and right as much as he could in his current position. His low rumbling growl vibrated Henry's knee. "I hate the color pink."

“As do I. Now will you behave yourself?” Eyes narrowed and green depths glinting with an undisguised threat, Arsen stared down at him.

“Yes,” Milton grumbled.

“All right then.” Arsen glanced to Henry. “Let him up.”

Suppressing a few choice words, he gave the man’s arm one last twist before releasing him. He got off the bed and tugged on the end of his coat to straighten it.

Raising one eyebrow, Arsen glanced to him and let out a barely audible harrumph.

Henry lifted his chin, not caring if Arsen was annoyed at him for interceding. He may not be fond of his own size, but it did prove useful at times.

Milton slowly pushed up. Swaying slightly from side to side, he sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed his hands over his face. His bloodshot gaze swept the room, stopping on Henry. His fleshy lips curled. “Shaw. Always toadying up to Somerville. Kissing his arse.” Milton let out a snort of contempt. “You’d like to, wouldn’t you, Shaw?” He looked to Arsen. “You should let him, Somerville. Bet he’s good.”

For a moment, the only sound that could be heard was the faint squeal of a woman from down the corridor.

“Shaw. Call for a footman,” Arsen said, his tone one of patent boredom. His attention never wavering from Milton, he flicked his fingers to the burgundy stain on the cream



patterned rug. “This needs to be cleaned before Miss Cassandra retires for the night.”

But Henry’s feet wouldn’t move. His pulse pounded in his ears. Deafeningly loud. *Thump-thump. Thump-thump.*

“Now, Shaw. Before the stain sets in.”

He turned and forced his legs to take him across the room. His hand shook as he grasped the knob and opened the door. Stopping next to the nearest footman, he cleared his constricted throat. “Lord Somerville needs your assistance.”

The burly footman gave him a deferential tip of the head and walked to the room.

Closing his eyes, Henry clenched his fists.

Enough. He would not be made the brunt of an arse like Milton’s jokes.

This infatuation was over.

Finished.

Shoulders slumping, he dropped his chin to his chest and let out a heavy exhale. The tension slipped from his body. His fists unclenched. His arms hung limply at his sides. Oddly, he felt no pain. The vicious beast that had once gnawed at his chest was gone. He felt...nothing. Only emptiness. Vast, hollow, endless emptiness.

He heard the sound of footsteps approaching yet he didn’t move. He just stood there wanting only to be left alone.

A soft bundle hit his chest. Reflexively he caught it and opened his eyes. In his hands was a black silk embroidered waistcoat, the fabric still warm. He looked up to see Arsen's white shirted back striding down the corridor.

Henry quickly glanced over his shoulder. Dark hair disheveled, Milton staggered in the opposite direction.

“Shaw.”

His head snapped around at the sound of Arsen's voice. *What, no “come along”?*

Continuing down the corridor, Arsen flexed his right hand by his side then disappeared into a room at the end.

Henry meant to stay where he was, but his legs moved. “Just need to return his waistcoat,” he mumbled. He had no use for it—certainly wouldn't fit him and he sure as hell wasn't going to keep some token of Arsen like a lovelorn fool. The garment clenched in one fist, he followed for the last time.

After closing the door behind him, he passed through a darkened room and went into the next. As the knob clicked shut on that door, he paused. His lips pulled in a smirk devoid of all humor. *He trained you well, Shaw.*

He turned from the door. “Somerville—” The words stopped in his throat.

His back to Henry, Arsen pulled his shirt over his head. “Ruined,” he grumbled, tossing the shirt to the floor.

The man's back was...*Christ*. Perfect. The light from a nearby candle illuminated every detail. The hard muscular contours. The deep line of his spine. The sleek sweep of the small of his back. Arsen dragged his left hand through his hair, his shoulder blades working with the motion. Fluid. Graceful. Yet powerful.

"Leave the waistcoat on the table next to the door. My valet will take care of it in the morning."

Henry lifted his arm but found his hand empty. Perplexed, he glanced down. A bundle of black silk was on the floor by his feet. Hastily, he picked it up, turned and set it on the narrow console table. A glint of green and gold caught his attention. Also on the table was a small black marble dish, and inside were two emerald studded cufflinks and a gold pocket watch.

He knew exactly where Arsen had led him.

To Arsen's bedchamber.

It meant nothing. *Nothing!* Likely Arsen just wanted to change his shirt.

Yet still, excitement roared through his veins. A tremble of anticipation wracked his spine. He took a swift breath. Sandalwood and a hint of citrus. His cock reacted instantly to the scent.

*Damn it!* He gritted his teeth. He could feel the swollen length pressing against his linen drawers, demanding to be set

free. Like the rest of him, his cock was oversized. A damn club between his legs. A very hard club Arsen wouldn't be able to mistake for anything but a raging erection.

“You needn't linger by the door, Shaw.” Arsen paused and the haughty boredom vanished from his voice. “Milton's an arse. Don't spare him a second thought.”

Henry let out a low, mirthless chuckle. He was tired. Tired of fighting himself. Tired of hiding how he felt. He'd be leaving tomorrow and he'd do his best to never lay eyes on Arsen again. Might as well be honest now. He had nothing to lose. No reason to preserve a valued friendship when he was willingly giving it up. “He may be an arse, but he's right, you know.”

“Really?”

Henry could well imagine the arrogantly arched eyebrow, the condescension on Arsen's face. On a weary sigh, he turned from the door. Arsen stood at the foot of the bed, that damn eyebrow raised. Henry's gaze skimmed down Arsen's bare chest, down the flat abdomen, down—

His eyes flared.

Arsen's cock strained against his black wool trousers.

*Hell.* The man was hard.

Henry's heart slammed against his ribs.

The edges of Arsen's lips quirked. “You have entirely too many clothes on, Shaw. Why don't you remove them?”

*What if the man of your dreams is also the one of your nightmares?*

## Sleight of Hand

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Edwin Matthews just wants to get some sleep. Traveling by steam train with his family, the melancholic nineteen year old is plagued by restless nights and recurring dreams of a fiery disaster. When a mysterious magician comes aboard, the troubled insomniac's trip takes an interesting turn.

Tall, dark, and incredibly handsome, the flamboyant Sir Marco Satori offers to cure what ails Edwin. Spurred by equal parts curiosity, desperation, and attraction, Edwin agrees to the experiment. Suddenly he finds his quiet journey turned into a wild ride of life, love, sex, death...and a few strange things in between.

He also finds himself claimed—in more ways than one—while a promise of “eternity” may be more than Edwin bargains for.

*Warning: This book contains violence, dubious consent, masturbation, anal penetration, light D/s, frock coats, cravats, questionable Victorian parlor tricks, and hot sex between beautiful men on a fast-moving train.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Sleight of Hand:*

Edwin sat in the center of the tufted fainting couch, spine straight and hands folded primly in his lap. Satori rummaged through the bar selection, tracing a finger across the bottles rattling gently together in time to the clack of the train wheels. Edwin stole a glance at the older man's backside. Satori had removed his coat, revealing his svelte frame of slightly broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist. A strip of white silk shirt showed between the hem of his waistcoat and his tightly fitted trousers, the waistband hanging unfashionably yet enticingly low on the hipbone.

Tearing his eyes away before they drifted lower, Edwin scanned the coach's interior and was affected by the same vague sense of disorientation he'd experienced upon entering the carriage. The space was furnished with the usual trappings of a gentleman's parlor, adorned in sumptuous velvets, silks, brocades and leather, in varying hues of black and red trimmed in ebony wood, the floor checkered with black and white tiles—nothing too out of the ordinary, if perhaps a bit ornate.

What lent the private saloon such an unusual quality was that the dimensions seemed off. At first, the space had appeared a touch wider than it should have been. Now, as Edwin shook his head and blinked, the width seemed proportionate but the floor appeared to have been stretched a

few feet longer. He considered that the checkerboard pattern created an optical illusion—at least that was the only logical explanation for Edwin’s skewed spatial perspective.

His gaze focused back on the bar, a curiosity unto itself. The requisite bottles of brandy and rum and such were interspersed with various sizes, shapes and colors of bottles, jars and crockery, appearing to serve more as a pharmacopeia than a place to shelve liquor.

“Ah, here we are,” Satori announced. He stepped from behind the curved, polished counter with a small blob-neck bottle in hand. On first appearance Edwin thought the glass to be black, but as the illusionist passed through the window light, Edwin noted it to be dark olive amber.

Satori levered the wire bail stopper from the neck, releasing the pressure of the contents with a soft *pop*, followed by the tell-tale hiss of effervescence. He passed the bottle to Edwin, the brush of fingers sending another surge of current down Edwin’s arm, charging him to the very core. Clearing his throat, Edwin wafted the opened neck under his nose. The liquid bore no scent, the fizzy substance greeting him only with a light kiss of moisture across his upper lip.

“Mineral water,” Edwin observed, one eyebrow lifted in question.

“Lithia water, to be precise.” Satori took a seat in the wingback chair directly across from Edwin. “Bottled at a

secret source for which the location may not be divulged. Widely touted as a hangover cure, although users have reported other benefits.”

“Such as?” Skeptical, Edwin held the near-opaque glass up to the light. He thought back to the acrid tincture of black hellebore he’d been prescribed daily at the hospital, the one which had left him doubled over for the next hour while his gut clenched in painful spasm. After his discharge, he’d read up on the herb and learned it to be toxic. He’d concluded that the alienists were no worse than charlatans peddling snake oil.

“A calming of the mind,” Satori replied, “a soothing of the nerves.” He crossed one leg over the other and propped an elbow on the chair arm. Two fingers denting his brow, he nodded. “Drink.”

Deciding he had nothing to lose—and at the point where he would gladly welcome being poisoned—Edwin took a tentative sip. The bubbles fizzed pleasantly against his lips, while a scant taste of metal lingered on his tongue. Head tilted back, he continued drinking, allowing the cool beverage to trickle down his throat. Pausing to lick his lips, Edwin hazarded a glance at his would-be shaman and found the other man watching him intently. Despite the cool drink, Edwin felt the unwanted flush creep back up his neck. He shifted in his seat, and realized the bottle had gone dry.



Satori rose. “Very good. Let’s get started, shall we, before we enter the tunnel.”

As he took the bottle, their bare fingers brushed, jolting Edwin’s senses once again. Attempting to cover his reaction, he cupped his fist to his mouth with a feigned cough.

His ploy failed. “My dear boy, this simply won’t do.” Satori set the bottle aside on the end table. “If the hypnosis is to be a success, you must relax.”

Satori nudged between his knees and thumbed Edwin’s chin. Edwin had long grown accustomed to the closeness necessitated during a physical exam and had learned to tolerate the trained, analytical touch of the medical practitioner. However, Satori was no licensed physician, and his approach came off as decidedly more intimate. Discomfited, Edwin began to shut his eyes, but instead found himself captivated by the mage’s searing gaze.

He flinched at the sensation of Satori unpinning his tie. His pulse raced at the whisper of crisp silk being slid from around his collar.

“There, doesn’t that feel better?” Satori asked.

“Yes,” Edwin conceded with a mumble, his neck free of the starched fabric.

Satori opened the first few buttons of Edwin’s shirt. Edwin swallowed, his heart pounding now. The magician cupped his face in both hands and rolled his head from side to

side, tracing the pads of his thumbs across Edwin's cheekbones. He massaged the pressure points behind Edwin's ears. Examining the throat nodes, his touch lingered at Edwin's throbbing jugular.

“There's no need to be nervous, Master Edwin. Lie back and make yourself comfortable.”

Cradling Edwin's head in one hand, he eased Edwin sideways. Following Satori's lead, Edwin lay back against the headrest. Peering up, he watched the magician take his place behind the high rounded corner that graced one end of the sofa. Satori smiled downward, his ebony mane framing his face, and began to massage Edwin's temples.

*It takes a young castle guardsman with the heart of a lion to love a Duke...and survive.*

## Heart of a Lion

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During a chance encounter, Curran is offered his dream job in Duke Luthias' personal guard. The job soon sours as the lies and deceptions within the castle walls multiply like rabbits until Curran can no longer stomach them.

Tanis, the lover the Duke made Curran surrender as part of his oath of loyalty, is the only man he can trust to help him stop the Duke's ill-fated campaign to punish the northern raiders. But Tanis has secrets of his own. As much as he loves Curran, they could lose much more than their lives if he got involved now.

When the northern savages retaliate for the Duke's acts of war by laying siege to his castle, all three men are forced to take refuge within the fortified walls. Who lives and who dies depends on one man having the heart of a lion...

*Warning, this title contains the following: explicit, erotic sex, graphic language, mild blood-letting, and hot nekkid man-love.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Heart of a Lion:*

Tanis had no chance to whisper a word of warning to Curran as he grabbed his sword and followed the mounted men up the dirt trail that led back to the castle. He doubted the young man would have heeded his counsel anyway. His eagerness to please his Grace had been evident each time Luthias spoke. Poor, unlucky sod.

Then Tanis noted a detail that had escaped him before. The Duke normally traveled with twelve men, a legacy of the roundtable knights that Luthias superstitiously thought would protect him against the Celts' attacks. At present, there were only ten. Two riderless horses trailed after the last man up the hill. Most of the men had kept to the edge of the trees. Moonlight had cast shadows upon their faces, shielding their identity. Who among Luthias' innermost circle had not made it home alive?

The Duke dismounted and ground-hitched his warhorse. As he wrested his hands free of the steel gauntlets, he said, "I see you have discovered my closest ranks have been lessened by two."

"Who?"

Luthias continued as if the question had never been asked. "The casualties were heavy this time. Some will speak against me for risking so many lives. I would counter, however, that we left behind a greater number of dead godless raiders so the

sacrifice was not in vain. It will be some time before they rally enough men to strike against the might of England again.”

“Who?” Tanis repeated. Fear as to the answer chilled him far more thoroughly than the steam from the hot spring could counteract.

“Sir Kloven. Damn fine man, but not the best fighter. He was lost early on in the campaign.”

Tanis knew little about him, other than Gavin had been the one to champion him as a candidate for joining the Duke’s tight ranks. “And the other?”

“Gavin,” Luthias said shortly.

The Duke managed to free the buckles holding on the leg pieces. They fell to the ground in a noisy clatter. It was nothing compared to the angry buzzing in Tanis’ head. “Gavin is dead?”

Luthias nodded. “A great loss, to be sure. His death came at a most fortuitous time, however. His end became a rallying point. Without that inspiration, I doubt any of us would have made it out of the last engagement alive. Instead, we turned the tide and chased those soulless bastards back into the hills where they belong.”

Gavin. Dead. The reality of it had no substance in Tanis’ existence. He needed to know more. “How? How did he die?”

“Oh, bravely, you may be assured.” The Duke huffed in exasperation as his fat fingers failed to free the breastplate.

“Come see to these bindings, will you? They are too tight for me to loosen from this angle.”

Tanis launched himself out of the water. Naked and dripping from every possible point, he advanced on Luthias. “Tell me how he died.”

“The camp minstrels crafted a song about it. Bloody, useless idiots sing it endlessly. You will hear a thousand different versions of the tale before the month is out, I am sure.”

“Give me no tales. I want the truth.”

Tanis wrenched at the tight fastenings, aware that if he didn't find something for his hands to do, they'd end up around the Duke's throat. As enjoyable as that act would be, he'd be taking his own life as well. There were ten witnesses, eleven counting Curran, who knew the man last in Luthias' company. And though there were many times he'd longed for death to strike him down, he'd not ever stand for it to come about in this fashion.

The last strap came free, the steel chimed like a death knoll. Luthias heaved a sigh of relief. “The truth is seldom palatable.”

Tanis refused to back down, physically or verbally. “Tell me.”

“Gavin's last command decision was quite foolhardy. He led his charge at a pace that far outstripped others in the field.

He took a good number with him as he went down swinging, but one of those Celtic animals gored him through the heart before any of us could reach him.”

Tanis assessed what he saw in the Duke’s steady gaze. “You did not even try to save him.”

“Well, I do admit that my unit was closest, but we were engaged. I had no free swords to send to his rescue.”

Still trying to comprehend the magnitude of such a betrayal, Tanis said, “You stood by and watched him die. He was your lover, and yet you did nothing to save him.”

“It had been several months since Gavin had chosen to warm my bed. I assure you, I no longer considered him my lover by the time he died.” Luthias removed the rust-stained padding and other undergarments until he was stripped bare.

Tanis rocked back on his heels, his world spinning.

Words continued to spill from the Duke’s mouth. “I demand unswerving loyalty from my men. All who take the oath understand this. Gavin wavered. I no longer had an obligation to watch over him. It was his own choice, Tanis.”

“You filthy, despicable offspring of a goat.” Tanis backed Luthias into a tree, a sinewy forearm pressed against the Duke’s throat. The impact shook the leaves all the way up to the very top. “Gavin loved you.”

“Once, perhaps. But then he chose Kloven over me. I could not have that.”

“Your damn pride will one day kill us all. I should end your life now and spare the few innocents who believe a human heart still beats in your empty breast.” Tanis raised his arm to strike a killing blow with naught more than his hammer-like fist.

“No one lives forever, and eventually my time too will come. However, remember that if my death should come at your hands, there is more than yourself who will pay the price.”

No, Tanis hadn’t forgotten that, although the implications of extracting revenge for Gavin’s murder—and it was murder, surely as if Luthias had held the killing sword himself—hadn’t completely filtered through his mind. But now that the connection had been made between act and punishment, Tanis’ hands were tied. He let the Duke go, watching as the man nonchalantly returned to the pool.

“Fate will see that you pay a high price for your treachery, Luthias.”

“Perhaps.” The Duke lowered himself into the steaming water. “Young Curran looks a lot like Gavin at his age, do you agree?”

Please, no. Not the sweet rascal Curran. Hadn’t the man ruined enough lives for one lifetime? “I did not study him that closely.”



Luthias fingered the earth that had been roughened during Curran's violent release. "He looks quite the capable sort. Now that there is room in my inner circle, I will have to see if he meets my standards."

"He is soft from guarding your simple-minded wife. Too soft for your tastes, I am sure."

"I thought you did not get a good look at him."

Tanis silently cursed himself. He never should have strayed into the clearing. His company brought nothing but misery of one kind or another to those he met under the moonlight. "I know his duties well enough."

"Speaking of duties, I think it is time that you see to your own. I am sure my people will want to celebrate my victorious return."

Tanis bundled his clothes under his arm, then left the small clearing without so much as a backward glance. By the Gods, he prayed he would live to see the day that Luthias paid for his many sins. Until then there was naught he could do but continue to lead the solitary life that kept meat on his Grace's table and his head off the executioner's chopping block.

And try to forget about Gavin, Curran and any chance at happiness he might have had.

Overhead, Athena soared, releasing the wail that he could not permit to escape his aching, heavy chest.

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