



The Broken

STELLA NOTECOR

James guards his secrets.

Uncertain as to whom he can trust with his family's secrets, James Bradford has lived a lonely life since becoming Baron of Riverside. When he meets an equally enigmatic violinist named Sheamus, he begins to wonder if he's found someone with whom he can share everything.

Sheamus guards his body.

No one has ever shown Sheamus Flynn affection except his mother. That changes when he meets James, but Sheamus cannot trust him. Sheamus has been used by his master, Cade Edward, and he knows better than to believe James could ever love a mere servant.

They both guard their hearts.

Over the course of the 1876 Social Season they cautiously fall in love, only to be violently ripped apart by Edward. Defeating Edward's deceptions will require both of them to share long guarded secrets.

Can they trust each other?

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THE BROKEN

By Stella Notecor

CHAPTER ONE

The high, mournful notes of a violin beckoned James into the manor. He nodded to the butler and handed off his cloak to his manservant, Richard, who went to join the rest of the servants waiting for their masters.

James entered the ballroom and headed towards the music. It was more than a little rude to arrive and not greet the host and hostess, but for once he didn't care. Propriety be damned, he had to know where the music was coming from. He edged along the dance floor, avoiding both the dancers and the observers, and headed towards the stage, a small raised platform, where the musicians for the evening sat.

The notes of a piano, a clarinet, and a violin intertwined perfectly, creating music more wonderful than any James had ever heard before. The beauty of the music could all be attributed to the violin player. The man slowed and hastened his own playing to match it to the others, playing softly at moments when the others were more powerful and loudly when they were quiet.

The music flowed through the crowd, infecting them with the urge to dance. James had never seen a group of dancers enjoy themselves more. The music was a waltz, by Chopin, James thought, though the tempo was a tad faster than normal. The men and women on the dance floor hardly seemed to notice, but he could tell from the flushed cheeks and broad smiles that they were enjoying the quick pace.

It was all due to the violinist. The trills of his violin pulled the rest of the room into his music and swept them along on the song. James watched him push and pull the bow over the strings as his fingers danced along the neck, nimble and graceful.

The long fingers captivated him, but not as much as the violinist's face. The man was fully involved in the music, his eyes closed, one foot silently tapping out the beat. His hair, long and black, was pulled back from his face and tied with a ribbon at the nape of his neck, and the man paid no attention to it as he played. James was amused as he watched it flip and flop all over the place with the violinist's harsh movements.

As the song ended, the violinist's movements slowed until no more notes echoed in the room. Only then did his eyes open. James found himself staring into them, fascinated by the brilliant green. The man gazed at him in return for mere seconds before shuttering his eyes and turning away. The man's glance made James' breathing stutter and his hands tremble.

He moved away from the platform, anxious to escape before anyone could see how the musician had captivated him. It was dangerous to pay too much attention to a man. Loving men was a perversion. Should anyone accuse him, James would face harsh fines, perhaps even a prison sentence. James didn't dare open himself up to accusations about his preferences—he had too many other things to hide.

Glancing around the room, he spotted Elizabeth Osmond staring longingly at the dance floor. James headed in her direction, partially out of pity for her, but mostly for his own benefit. What better way to hide one's proclivities towards men than by dancing with a woman? He pasted a smile on his face as he grew closer to the beautiful young lady.

The smile she offered him in return was quite attractive, but it did not tempt him in the slightest. James felt sorry for the girl. She'd likely end up a spinster, as she was already twenty-two years of age with no marriage prospects. She had been out for four years, but the gossip amongst the ton was that not a single man had shown interest in her.

James bowed to her. “May I have the honor of dancing this set with you?” he asked, presenting his hand.

Miss Osmond nodded and took it softly, her white kid glove skimming over James’ calluses. He led her to the dance floor, pulling her into position near three other couples as a quadrille began. James could hear the violin above the other instruments again, its notes twining around the spinning dancers and twirling them ever faster.

Following the head couple, he danced carefully with small steps to match his partner. He kept his eyes on Miss Osmond and the dancers around them, refusing to allow himself even a glance towards the musicians. They danced in silence for a few moments until Miss Osmond leaned towards him and whispered, “You seem terribly distracted; I am rather afraid you shall trod on my feet.”

James laughed lightly at her jibe, knowing she expected him to be offended by her mention of her lower limbs. “Fear not, my lady, for I am quite fleet-footed. I shall do my best to offer my attention to you though, rather than focusing on the beautiful music.”

They stepped around and then moved back together, continuously circling about their part of the dance floor. “The music is extraordinary, is it not?” she murmured when they were near enough to speak. The steps of the dance sent her whirling away seconds later, saving James from having to voice his opinion on the music... or the musicians.

Moments later the music brought her back, a gleam of gossip dancing in her eyes. “Lenore Edward informed me that her father hired the pianist and clarinetist for tonight, and it cost her father more for the two of them than all of the food.” Miss Osmond shot him a saucy smirk. “Do forgive me for speaking of money, Lord Riverside. My mother despairs of ever taming my tongue.” She paused momentarily. “I find topics which I am not to discuss most interesting.”

James clasped her hand and squeezed it gently enough that those watching would not see it. “I would agree, though not in the presence of Lady Catherine Osmond. Your mother is a most formidable woman.”

Miss Osmond burst into raucous laughter, startling the couples around them and earning herself a sharp glance from the aforementioned Lady Catherine. It took three turns about their section of the dance floor before she could calm down.

“My lord, that is an understatement if I’ve ever heard one!” she exclaimed. Breathing harshly for a moment, she brought herself back under control. “Still, we’d best turn our conversation to a different topic. My mother has ears like a hawk, and I’d do well not to irritate her. She is already quite irked that I turned down Sir Mitchell’s offer to dance earlier this evening.” She snorted, an unladylike sound that suited her. “As if I would dance with that buffoon. He’d likely trip us both in the middle of the Grand March.”

James watched the young girl flush with frustration. The strong emotion brightened her eyes and warmed her cheeks, making her look quite attractive. It was a pity that such emotions were considered unfeminine—Miss Osmond’s true beauty would never be allowed to be seen in polite society. She’d likely spend much of her time this Season as a wallflower.

“I do not believe that is the most prudent topic to discuss, my dear,” he whispered quietly in her ear, wanting to save her from possible embarrassment if her mother caught wind of her speech.

She blinked at the reprimand and nodded. “Of course, my lord. My mouth does tend to run away with itself. Perhaps... the music, since you spoke of it.”

James wished he had not. It was too bad the girl cared nothing for society's rules or he would silence her with a reminder that conversations should not be held on the dance floor. Instead, he offered little of his own opinion, asking her, "What of the music?"

"Why, the utter pull of it! I've never heard such wondrous music in my life. I do imagine that Sir Cade's money was well spent on the musicians."

James nodded in agreement. "And which of the instruments do you prefer?" he asked softly, hoping she would pick the right one.

She did as he hoped. "I must say that I'm quite in love with the violin. I attempted to play it once and could wrench only the most bothersome sounds out of it. I'm jealous of that man's talent with it."

James turned to look at the violinist again. The man's passion for his music sent frissons of desire through James, and he had to look away. He covered his interest with a nonchalant, "He is quite good."

"He's more than good. He's amazing. Miss Edward told me that he's been with Sir Cade's estate since before she was born, and that her father has not had him play at a ball in fifteen years. She believes it was because her father was saving him for her coming out ball. He has played for private parties though. He played Vivaldi's Spring at a high tea Miss Edward put on this winter and it was easily the best music I've heard in ages."

Miss Osmond gave a put upon sigh. "My mother is glaring at me for talking too much. Nevertheless, it's her fault I am the way I am. She thought that dragging me to the theatre and orchestra would make me a clever but docile wife. She never realized that my intelligence would only tempt me to learn more." Her eyes glittered. "You mustn't tell anyone, but I've even been to a women's suffrage meeting!"

James laughed, though nowhere near as loudly as Miss Osmond had earlier. The song ended and he walked her slowly back to where her mother stood glowering. "I won't tell. Do try to temper your tongue though. Your mother would have the vapors if she knew what we'd spoken of."

She frowned but bit back a response as he returned her to her mother. He bowed deeply and she offered him a curtsy in return. "Thank you for the dance, Miss Osmond."

"Likewise. If it pleases you, do let us dance again. I'd like to continue our conversation." The sparkle in her eyes told James that she knew she was not supposed to be so forward as to ask a man for another dance and that she had done it to irritate her mother.

James suppressed a grin and backed away as Lady Catherine began to berate her daughter for her lack of manners. He had enjoyed their time together, but he would not dance with her again that night. He dare not give her nor her mother the idea that he might be interested in courting her. Instead, he made his way around the room, dancing with as many women as he could, especially widows and spinsters. He didn't learn anything else about the violinist, as the other women he danced with did not attempt to converse with him beyond a few niceties.

Nevertheless, he wanted to learn more about the man. He decided to visit Edward later that week and thank him for the invitation to the ball. It would be a good excuse to inquire after the violinist and perhaps contract him for a ball or two of his own.

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James visited the manor only three days later. He knew he should have waited longer, but he hadn't been able to forget the violinist. Three days had seemed like an eternity.

James handed his calling card, which bore his full title—James Bradford, Baron of Riverside—to the butler and was quickly shown into Sir Cade Edward's study. The baronet stood as he entered, offering his hand.

“Lord Riverside, how nice to see you. May I enquire as to the purpose of your visit?” The older man’s eyes were flinty. James knew Edward hated that he was a baron whereas Edward was a mere baronet.

“I dropped by to thank you for the invitation to your daughter’s debutante ball, Sir Cade. It was truly lovely.” James couldn’t help but emphasize their difference in status by addressing him as Sir—etiquette declared it the appropriate title for a baronet, whereas James, as a baron, was lucky enough to be called Lord.

The man flushed a mottled puce, which contrasted badly with his foppish blond hair that was beginning to gray. “Of course, milord. My wife and I were grateful for your presence.” Edward smiled but his teeth were clenched.

They spent a few minutes making small talk about Parliament and the recent changes in the economy. Edward began to grow antsy, so James brought up his real purpose for visiting. “I enjoyed your ball tremendously. The music was especially wonderful. May I ask how I can contract the musicians? I’m planning on having a few small balls this Season.”

Edward smiled darkly. “I’ll write down the addresses at which the pianist and clarinetist can be reached. The violinist, however, is a member of my own estate, due to a large debt he owes me.”

“Is that so? Would it be possible for me to hire him from you?”

Edward shook his head. “I’m afraid not. My daughter grew up listening to his music, and I’d always planned for him to play for her debutante balls.”

“I’d pay you enough that you could hire someone else,” said James. He knew he sounded anxious, but he didn’t care. Something about the violinist entranced him and he wanted the chance to get closer to him.

Edward seemed as though he were contemplating the offer, but James tried not to get his hopes up. Sure enough, Edward refused. “Having him play exclusively for my balls will serve me far better than money ever could.”

Good music could make a ball, but that seemed a bit extreme. Still, James knew what Edward needed: connections for his daughter. “Perhaps a trade would be more in order?”

Edward visibly perked up. “What kind of trade?”

James fought a grin. “My manservant plays the piano, flute, and clarinet extraordinarily well. I’ve had him tutored in instruments since he was a young boy, but I would like him to learn at least the rudiments of violin playing. In exchange for your violinist staying at my manor and providing daily lessons to the boy, I will loan you my manservant for your balls. He would present a good image to your guests, I promise.” And James would have access to the violinist every single day.

Edward frowned. “It would be nice to have a larger variety of music, which his skills would afford me...”

“I would also, of course, offer your family a standing invitation to all of my events this Season.”

“Will you be having many soirees?” Edward’s eyes glittered with greed. Miss Edward would be able to meet titled men at James’ events, giving Edward the chance to secure a prominent husband for his daughter. James had known Cade Edward for years, and the man never stopped trying to secure a higher social standing for himself.

“I’m planning on three or four balls and a good many small dinners with friends. This is the ten-year anniversary of my mother’s death, and she always loved the Social Season. Filling Riverside Manor with gaiety will be a tribute to her memory.” It was the truth, and it worked

well for James' purposes. He didn't think it would matter to Edward, but he added, "That's why I want to contract your violinist. The violin was my mother's favorite instrument."

Edward ran his hand through his hair. "Your mother was a gentlewoman, God rest her soul." James lowered his head as if saddened to remember her passing, but it was really to hide a frown. Edward, barely out of mourning for his first wife's death in childbirth, had attempted to court the Dowager Lady Riverside a mere week after she stopped wearing her widow's weeds. His mother had been a gentlewoman, but she had still cursed the man many times over for his callous actions.

"I'll gladly allow you to hire my musician, so long as both he and your manservant are made available to play for each of my balls," Edward continued. "There is, of course, the matter of a contract."

James took a moment to grin while Edward couldn't see his face. He straightened his expression and raised his head. "I'd be happy to sign one. Do you have time to write it now?"

"Yes, yes." Edward had already placed a sheet of paper on the desk before him. "I'll make this short..."

Edward scribbled down the terms of the deal and handed it to James to read. He corrected a few things, and when they had both agreed upon the terms and the price to hire the violinist and signed two identical copies of it, they stood and shook hands.

"I'm glad that I was able to visit today, Sir Cade. I do believe everything will work out wonderfully."

Edward agreed and escorted him to the door, where James' carriage stood waiting.

James took his coat from the butler. "Good day, sir."

"Good day, milord," replied Edward.

James was halfway down the steps before something occurred to him. He turned halfway around so he could see the door. "Sir Cade, I didn't think to inquire before, but what is your violinist's name?"

"Sheamus." Edward's eyes gleamed. "Sheamus Flynn."

CHAPTER TWO

Sheamus stared across the bed at the wall. Edward moved above him, his body rocking into Sheamus' and slamming him into the bed over and over. There was pain, of course, but it was no worse than normal.

Sheamus closed his eyes, the flowers in the wallpaper fading into darkness. He had learned to let the music in his head envelop him, removing him from the outside world. A whisper of a song drifted past and he grasped it, drowning himself in Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. The lonely introduction pulled him away from the bedroom and into a peaceful world far removed from his own.

He remained in that world until a familiar grunt told him Edward had finished. Edward collapsed on top of Sheamus and tried to bury his nose in Sheamus' hair. He flinched away as soon as he touched it. "Your hair is disgusting!"

Sheamus had covered the dark strands in animal fat the cook had given him, but he didn't dare tell Edward that. "I apologize, master. I haven't washed it recently." It had been an attempt to keep the man from holding Sheamus close after he'd used him. Sheamus could fall into his music during the act itself, but the moments spent in the man's arms were inescapable. When he was younger Edward had used the time to forcibly bring him off, but thankfully, he no longer bothered with that.

"Well, wash it tonight. You're going to the Riverside manor tomorrow, and I don't want him sending you back because you're unclean." Edward rolled out of the bed, grunting when his feet hit the floor. "Go start packing. You'll be there for a few months."

This was the first time Sheamus had heard anything about leaving the manor. "Master, why am I being sent there?" He sat up gingerly and found the pain was bearable. He sighed and rose to his feet, dragging his clothes back on over his sore body.

"Lord Riverside has decided that he wants you to tutor his musician. You'll be there the majority of the Season, except when you're playing at my balls." Edward was wearing his dressing gown when Sheamus turned to him. "Fix your hair. You know better than to leave looking like that."

Sheamus nodded and smoothed down his slimy hair, grimacing inwardly at the feel of it. "Yes, master."

Edward waved his hand toward the door. "Go on then."

Sheamus bowed deeply. He exited the room, closing the door softly behind him, and then headed for the servant's quarters. Once he had reached his room, Sheamus stripped off his clothing and stepped into the tub of warm water left waiting for him, probably by Adam. The man cared too much for other people; it would be his downfall one day.

Sheamus luxuriated in the water, using the bar of soap on his nightstand to wash out the grease. He was glad it had kept Edward away, but he wouldn't be able to do it often. Thankfully, he would have nearly an entire summer before he would have to submit to the man again.

It was illogical to dream of things that could never be, but Sheamus found himself imagining a life at the manor of Lord Riverside. He hadn't been off Edward's land in years, so he had no idea what the manor would look like. Even if Lord Riverside required Sheamus to perform every day it would still be a wonderful vacation—Sheamus played daily anyway. Music was his escape.

The water grew cold. Sheamus hoisted himself out of the tub, shivering in the icy room. April was still a bit chilly, especially at night, but Edward refused to let the servants have fires past the end of February. Sheamus pulled on some long underwear and his clothing, so that he could take the tub outside to dump it.

Adam Harris was entering his room across the hall as Sheamus exited his. "Can I help you with that?" he asked.

Sheamus' arms were already aching and his body was feeling the pain of Edward's rough treatment. "Yes, thank you."

Adam grasped one of the handles on the tin tub, holding it steady while Sheamus grasped the other. "I overheard Edward speaking with Lord Riverside earlier. You'll be going to the Lord's manor for the rest of the Season." He shot a glance at Sheamus over the dirty water. "Did you know?"

Sheamus nodded stiffly. "The master told me a little while ago."

Adam looked away. "Is it wrong of me to wish you weren't going?"

With Sheamus gone, the person Edward would call to his bed most often would be Adam. "No. It's understandable."

They reached the door to the outside and Adam opened it. After pouring the water onto a flowerbed in silence, they headed inside. Halfway back to their rooms, Adam spoke again. "I can't turn him down, not with Lucy counting on me."

"You needn't explain yourself to me." Sheamus opened his door. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Harris. Sleep well."

Adam snorted and opened his own door. "As if I could sleep knowing he might call for me at any minute." His door slammed shut before Sheamus could answer, not that any response he could give would make the situation more palatable.

Sheamus entered his room and shut the door firmly behind him. There was no lock; Edward did not allow them. He stripped off his clothing, but left his long underwear on, and slipped on a nightshirt. Lighting a candle, he set it next to his music stand and removed his violin from its case. Ever since he was little, Sheamus had played a song before bed, as his mother had. His lullabies had been played on the very instrument he held. He smoothed his hand over the neck and plucked a few strings. The D string was a little loose, so he twisted its peg to tighten it and bring the instrument into tune. Once that was done, he shuffled through his sheet music and pulled out Mozart's Violin Sonata No. 21. The music was well worn and Sheamus didn't actually need it, but the feel of it in his hands brought back memories of his mother attempting to teach him to read the notes on the staff.

He supposed it was rude to play the instrument so late at night, but no one had ever complained, so he continued.

He placed the music on the stand and settled the violin under his chin. The groove fit him perfectly, a testament to how often the instrument was used. He ran the bow across the strings a few times, making sure the instrument was in proper condition, and then he launched into the song with a vengeance.

His mother had played this song when she was angry and did not want others to know. He could remember her playing it late into the night when his father came home drunk and empty handed, unable to get a job as an Irishman, and during the days they spent huddled in a small inn, playing for food and shelter in the inn's barn. The money listeners paid them was never enough for a warm bed inside the inn, but the innkeepers were sometimes kind enough to offer them a place by the fire in the kitchen instead of in the hay with the animals.

He let his anger flow through the strings. It was a sad piece, and not an angry one, and that was what made it perfect. His mother had hidden her rage in the bittersweet notes, as Sheamus did now. He knew the others in this wing of the manor could hear the song. They would think him broken and bitter, but he wasn't. He could care less what they thought. He was strong and his mother's memory strengthened him further.

The bow continued to dance over the strings, Sheamus' anger pushing it along. He could feel the music begin to speed up as he grew more enraged, but he slowed his breathing and the bow. Towards the end of the song, he let his bow grow slower and slower until the last note reverberated across the room. As it faded away, so too did his rage.

He sighed and returned the violin and the music to their places. Standing and stretching, Sheamus remembered Edward's admonishment to pack up that night. He looked around the room. Aside from his clothing and violin, there wasn't much to take. His mother's shawl and his father's family bible were all that were left of his memories.

He crawled into bed, determining that he would pack in the morning.

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Sheamus stepped out of the carriage and was directed to the front door by the driver.

"You're to report to Mrs. Bartow in the kitchen, sir. Hurry or she'll snap your head off and serve it for supper!" Kevin chortled so hard his cap fell off the messy brown hair it rested on. "I'm kidding, of course."

Sheamus raised an eyebrow at him. "I'd assumed."

The young man rolled his eyes and snapped the reins. Sheamus supposed he had meant to mutter "arsehole" under his breath, but it came out loud and clear. Sheamus replied, "I heard that."

Kevin's peals of laughter filled the air, and Sheamus headed towards the main building. The door to the kitchen was easy to find—it was propped wide open and the smell of a stew floated through the air. The woman he assumed to be Mrs. Bartow stood at the table, chopping vegetables.

"Good day, ma'am," he greeted her, carefully laying his things far away from the splattering stove.

She looked him over, peering down a nose as sharp as her knife. "You're the violinist then?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very well. You are to report to the east wing, second floor, third door from the end on the left." She pointed towards a door on the opposite side of the kitchen. "Well, off you go!"

Sheamus stared at her for a moment, and then shook his head disbelievingly. "Could you repeat that?"

She snorted. "And the master said you were a smart one. Kevin!"

"He headed towards the barn with the carriage."

She glanced at the door and shook her head. "Take a seat at the table till he arrives. I'm too busy to be showing people around." Sheamus sat down and watched her work. She bustled across the room to grab an onion, which she chopped and tossed into the stew. As she was slicing a potato, a young man entered the kitchen. Mrs. Bartow turned and smiled at him. "Richard, darling, your tutor has arrived."

The young man pressed a kiss to Mrs. Bartow's forehead, stealing an apple from the bowl on the counter behind her. "Thanks, Mum." He turned to Sheamus, palming the apple as he did so. "Hello—Mr. Flynn, was it?"

"Yes." Sheamus stood and held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. ...?"

“Bartow—” Richard shook his hand “—but please call me Richard. My father is Lord Riverside’s butler, so I go by my given name to avoid confusion. And if you’ll excuse me, I’m due at a small event. Riverside likes to lend me out to his friends for parties; he says it’ll help me make connections among the ton.” Richard grinned. “Of course, the only people who try to connect with me at these things are pretty young girls, not that I’m complaining.”

Mrs. Bartow shook her head. “Stop telling stories. Now get out of here before you end up late.”

“Yes, Mum,” Richard headed out the door, taking a large bite from his stolen apple as he walked.

“He’s a bit spoiled, I know,” Mrs. Bartow shook her head, “but he’s my only child. I couldn’t have any after him.” She smiled fondly after Richard, then snapped, “Kevin!”

Sheamus jumped, startled, and noticed the boy who had been sneaking through the room behind him.

Kevin whirled around towards Mrs. Bartow, standing at attention immediately. “Ma’am, yes, ma’am!”

Mrs. Bartow pointed her knife at him. “Take the violinist up to the room next to Richards.”

Kevin’s eyes grew round. “Yes, ma’am. I’ll do it right now, ma’am.” He grabbed Sheamus’ bag before he could protest and almost snatched up the violin case too, but Sheamus quickly took hold of it. “Follow me, please, sir!”

They passed through a small dining room and into a hallway, walking up what appeared to be a back staircase. Kevin jabbered as they went.

“These here are the old master and mistress’ rooms, though they aren’t being used right now. Our current master sleeps down this hall. His rooms are at the very end, and your room is across the hall from his.” Kevin stopped before a door next to a rather scandalous painting of a group of half-naked water nymphs. “Richard’s room is next door to you, and this is the room his tutors usually use.” He pushed the door open to betray a sumptuous interior.

Sheamus glanced between the boy and the room for a moment, his mind reeling. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

Kevin shook his head. “No, that’s about it.”

“Will you take me to Lord Riverside? I’d like to make his acquaintance.”

“I would if I could. The lord is away right now.”

Sheamus frowned. “When will he return?”

“Within the week.” Kevin hauled Sheamus’ bag into the room, dropping it onto the edge of the bed.

Sheamus followed Kevin inside. There was actual carpet on the floor, not merely a small rug but wall-to-wall carpeting, and at least three pillows on the bed, which was twice the size of his own. Testing the pillows, he found they were stuffed with goose down. “Very well. I will... spend the time tutoring Richard, unless he has left me instructions.”

“All he said is that we are to welcome you and show you about the manor.”

How strange. When Edward didn’t have Sheamus playing he had him practicing or working around the manor with the rest of the servants. Servants without orders were a waste of resources. “That’s fine. What time will dinner be served?”

“Half past six, sir. We take it in the small dining room.”

Sheamus blinked. Servants eating outside of the kitchen? The master of this house was odd indeed. Sheamus couldn't decide whether he wanted to meet the man or not. Sometimes different was good... and sometimes it was very, very bad.

"I'll be down for dinner," he said softly.

Kevin bowed, then rushed off.

Sheamus tidied up the room and placed his own things in an empty drawer in the dresser. Peeking through the wardrobe, he found a man's silk garments and a velvet robe. He sank onto the edge of the bed. If the things had belonged to a woman, he would have assumed he had been taken to the mistress of the house's bedroom on accident.

Riverside's deal with Edward was rather strange. With the start of the season, all the gentry had returned to London, and Edward's manor was a short ride from Riverside's. There was no real reason for Sheamus to be living here, not unless he had been contracted for more than his skills as a violinist.

Sheamus might have been thrown head-first into a situation every bit as horrible as his previous one.

CHAPTER THREE

“Lord Riverside, your violinist is simply superb!” Lady Catherine Osmond said as she yanked her daughter closer to James. James smiled politely as she approached. Miss Osmond looked bored, and she was pulling her kid gloves off when her mother smacked the back of her hand. “Elizabeth! Thank Lord Riverside for his invitation!”

Miss Osmond smiled at James and dipped into a deep curtsy. Her mother was just beginning to smile when she spoke. ” Thank you so much for inviting us to this farce of a friendly affair. I’ve truly enjoyed being trotted about like a prize pony before all the men of my mother’s dubious acquaintance.”

Lady Catherine whipped out her fan, fluttering it rapidly in front of her face. “I’m sorry, my lord, but I’m... I’ve a bit of the vapors. Please forgive this disrespect.”

“There is no disrespect, my lady. Do take a moment to rest in the parlor; I wouldn’t want you to become ill.” James graciously pointed out the direction the parlor was located in, and he watched Lady Catherine wander off, still dragging her daughter along behind her.

For all the trials and tribulations James had faced, he was glad that an angry mother had never been among them. He smiled at the memory of his own mother. His father had been stern, as was common among the men of the gentry, but his mother had spoken angrily only once in James’ life—when she berated his father for not fleeing India before everything fell apart.

James pulled himself out of his gloomy memories when he heard the dance end. The dancers on the floor bowed to each other and walked off for a moment, taking the short break between dances as an excuse to nibble on the offered refreshments. As it was his first ball that Season, and a very large one, he had chosen to offer small finger foods and a sweet cider to his guests instead of a full dinner. He’d heard a few grumbles from the older men and even a couple of more rotund gentlewomen, but most everyone seemed content with the spread he had laid out.

Jane was tending the food, bringing more out from the kitchen as platters emptied. Alexander was acting as butler for the evening and Kevin was operating the cloak room. He had seen Tom in and out of the room earlier though, so he supposed Kevin was having a bit of trouble with his duty, as always. Kevin was a fine young man, but he rarely managed to complete a task as directed... at least, not outside of the bedroom.

The men and women milling about the room looked as though they were getting ready to find their partners for the next dance. Miss Osmond was being handed off to a gentleman who looked as though he could be her grandfather. Taking pity on the young woman, he strode up to the platform where his musicians stood.

Catching the eye of his violinist, he said, “I’d like to add an upbeat tune to the evening’s sets. Can you do that?”

Sheamus nodded. “Of course, milord. Allow us but a moment to ready ourselves.” He spun, his coattails flaring out sharply behind him, and began to address Richard.

James wanted to announce the dance for his guests, but he had to wait until a song was settled upon to do so. While he was waiting he took the opportunity to observe Sheamus.

The man’s long black hair accentuated his pale skin, and his shadowed eyes shone shinier and darker than the black velvet of his clothing. When James had requested he change into something a little more festive, Sheamus had raised an eyebrow and explained it was the only formal clothing he had, and indeed, if James remembered correctly, it was what he had worn for

his performance at Edward's ball. James had offered him the clothes Richard's previous tutor had left behind, but Sheamus had paled and refused them.

Still, the man's passion for his music more than made up for the somberness of his clothes. When Sheamus was playing, his features would soften imperceptibly and his posture would become straighter and more statuesque. His eyes would close, and he would drift into another world.

Now though, Sheamus was turning back to him and James let himself regard the man's face. He trailed his gaze over the man's lips and up to his eyes. Sheamus looked back at him solemnly, as if James' interest did not affect him.

"We would like to play Mozart's Concerto in A Minor, if it pleases you."

James nodded. "I will announce it." He moved to the front of the stage, conscious of the fact that the violinist's eyes followed him, and informed his guests that he was adding a new song to the evening, and that it would be danced as a varsouvianna. As he stepped off the stage, he pulled aside a young man and asked him to dance with Miss Osmond. The young man frowned but acquiesced, delighting Lady Catherine and annoying her daughter.

"Playing fairy godfather, James?"

Lance stood near the door to the men's lounge for the evening, a glass of some type of alcoholic drink in his hand. He was in his shirtsleeves, and James could hear a group of young women titter over the sight. He sighed and approached his friend, placing an arm around Lance's shoulders and leading him into the lounge again.

Nodding to the viscount and two barons already occupying the room, James settled the two of them into a pair of richly upholstered chairs in the corner. "Lance, I understand that you are going through a vastly delayed adolescent rebellion, but I do wish you wouldn't do it in polite company."

Lance snorted. "That lot isn't polite company. They're a bunch of vultures is what they are!"

"Really? I was under the impression the only 'vulture' you were concerned about was your mother." James kept his jibe at Lance's mother soft, conscious that there were other men in the room.

Lance had no such inhibitions. "The woman is breeding. She has all of her cronies gathered around her trying to match me up with one of their daughters." He sneered. "It used to be fun to promenade the girls about the room, but I'm not fit company for a young girl, what with me being a convict and all. Now I'm stuck with the spinsters and the widows!"

James reached out and pulled Lance's glass away from him, swallowing the whisky before Lance could protest. Lance's face grew ruddy with anger, and James knew he had had more than enough to drink. "I do feel sorry for you. However, you don't have to attend these balls."

Lance sighed deeply, his words slurring slightly. "It's the old hag's fault. She believes the government when they claim me guilty, disinherits me when they incarcerate me, and then doesn't want to deal with the mess after they say they've made a mistake." He waved his hands about wildly, knocking a book off the small table next to him. "Instead, she tells me she'll only allow me back into the family if I wed the woman she chooses!"

James watched his friend subside into a mess of a man. His clothes were rumpled, his hair disheveled, and his cheeks bright with an alcohol-induced flush. His half-shuttered eyes and harsh breathing brought to mind images of a man in the throes of passion. Sadly, the images were not based on reality. James had never seen his friend in such a state of dishabille, no matter

how often he had wished to. He covered his face with one hand and tried to push away the fantasies his mind forced upon him.

His face still covered, James murmured, "Once you would have refused to cater to her whims."

There was no response, and when James looked up, he found that Lance was asleep.

"You drunkard." James sighed and left Lance behind. He popped his head into one of the servant's hallways. Alexander turned the corner and James called out to him.

"Yes, milord?"

"Lance is asleep in the lounge. Please wake him and help him to the lavender room in the east wing." James felt mildly guilty for foisting Lance on his friend, but unfortunately, that was what butlers were for.

Alexander looked put upon, but he agreed. "Yes, milord."

Grateful that Lance was in capable hands that weren't his own, James returned to the ballroom. The worst part of hosting a ball was that you couldn't simply leave in the middle of it with some trite excuse. At that moment, he would have liked nothing more than to beg off with a headache and take to his bed.

The dance he added had already ended when he re-entered the room. He roamed through the crowd for a bit, speaking with people as necessary and dealing with the minor problems that had cropped up while he was gone. The ballroom was soon filled with music again, and he watched silently as the dancers twirled around each other.

He was surprised to find his tension dissipating as he listened to the music. His eyes drifted to Sheamus of their own accord. He was in tune with the music, as always, his bow moving rapidly. The man's powerful movements and passion made James' blood boil.

Everything about the man attracted James. When he had returned home after his monthly visit with the Duke of Covington, he had found the man brooding in his bedroom, his violin beating out a harsh version of Moonlight Sonata. The fierce light in his eyes at the interruption had disappeared the moment he realized who James was.

James' body thrummed as he imagined what it might take to bring that light back to the man's eyes.

His thoughts were dangerous, and he barely managed to push them away and calm himself when Edward approached.

"Good evening, milord. I noticed you watching Mr. Flynn." Edward's gaze was cold.

James blanched. Could he tell what James had been thinking? "Yes, I was. His playing is quite captivating."

Edward smiled, his lips pulled thin. "I'm glad you think so. I was afraid you had become displeased with him."

"No, no. Indeed, I am quite happy with his performance." James tried to smile, but he probably grimaced instead. It was impossible to carry on a polite conversation with Edward; the man rubbed him the wrong way.

Edward looked towards the violinist and then back at James. "Sheamus has a tendency to become... intractable. If that proves the case, let me know and I will take care of it."

The frosty tone of Edward's voice made James shiver. "I will. Right now though, I must point out that your wife is trying to attract your attention." And James thanked her for it. He nodded his head as he edged away from Edward. "I do hope you enjoy the ball."

"Oh, I will."

The ball was proceeding well, and James had begun to believe it might actually go off without a hitch when Edward's manservant burst into the ball and hurried to James' side.

"Lord Riverside," he said quietly, "Baronet Edward has discovered two of your servants in a compromising position in the barn. He plans to take them to the police."

James frowned. "Why?"

"The two servants were both men, milord."

Uttering foul oaths in more than one language, James strode from the ballroom. The servant followed closely behind, his blonde hair visible in James' peripheral vision.

When he arrived at the barn, he found Edward glaring at Kevin and Tom. The two boys were red faced and only partially clothed. He groaned when he caught sight of a large mark on Kevin's neck. Tom always had been one for marking his partner...

"What is going on here?"

Edward grinned mercilessly. "I caught these two men committing sodomy. I am taking them to the police."

Tom's eyes burned with fury. "Riverside, don't let him do this!"

Edward smacked him across the face. "Respect your betters, boy!"

James' heart thrummed. He knew that if he allowed them to leave without being punished aspersions would be cast on him. Still, if he were to allow them to be taken to the police, they would surely be jailed.

He made up his mind. James strode forward and grasped Edward's arm as he made to slap Tom again. "Stop."

Edward glared at him and pulled his arm free. "Your servant has insulted your dignity and committed a heinous act. He deserves to be punished."

James looked Edward in the eye, both to make his point heard and so that he wouldn't have to look at Kevin and Tom. "And they shall be, but they are my servants, not yours, and they shall be punished under my orders."

"The punishment must be severe."

Edward was pushing him, but he would not back down. He had to protect his servants, even if it meant hurting them.

"My butler will be put in charge of whipping them. They will receive one hit for every year old they are. Tom will receive one beyond that for his rudeness. Does that please you, sir?"

Edward frowned. "I suppose. But if they were to do it again..."

James shook his head. "You won't catch them again, I promise you." Indeed, Edward wouldn't because James would make certain Tom and Kevin were much more circumspect in the future.

"Fine!" Edward stomped off, the manservant who had alerted James trailing behind him.

"Must we really be punished?" asked Kevin.

James sighed and did not look at the young men. "I'm sorry, but it would put too many people at risk if I did nothing."

Tom snarled behind him. James squeezed his eyes shut, hard, hoping the whole situation would go away, but when he opened them, nothing had changed.

"Please stay here until I can retrieve Mr. Bartow." James walked off, his heart sinking with every step. He could hear sobs behind him, and he supposed Kevin had broken down. Why did this have to happen?

He had taken each of them to his bed, taught them how to pleasure a man, and let go of them when he realized they were in love with each other. They had only just begun their relationship. Why did they have to face something like this?

He entered the front door and informed Alexander of what he was to do. The man nodded grimly and called another servant to take his place. James retreated to his bedroom, grateful that the ball was winding down and that he wouldn't offend too many guests with an early departure.

He lay in bed, thinking. He imagined he could hear a horsewhip beating against human flesh. Each illusory whack made him clench up in pain. Still, he was glad that Tom and Kevin were the ones caught. Nothing dreadful would come of their punishment, and afterwards, they would have each other. Not like James. He had no one to comfort and care for him.

In the darkness, the pain felt worse than ever. He rolled to his side and curled around a pillow. He had imagined being in love once, sharing his bed every night with a man who adored him. He'd never told anyone how he had dreamed of Lance for years. It had been a silly dream, and one that was crushed after Lance came out of jail a different man from the one who went in.

Now James loved no one.

James forced his thoughts elsewhere and focused on the sounds that were coming from the hall. Sheamus and Richard seemed to be settling in for the evening. When the sounds stopped, James figured they had both fallen asleep, but violin music began to drift through the air.

His body relaxed as a sleepy lullaby pulled him to dreamland. His last thought before he fell asleep was of Sheamus' dark, angry eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sheamus set down his violin and stretched. Holding back a yawn, he wanted to crawl straight into bed but his stomach grumbled forcefully, reminding him that he had not eaten since the ball began. He had already put on his nightclothes, but he pulled them back off and shrugged on something that would be appropriate for polite company.

He was glad he had already finished his bedtime routine. As soon as he returned from the kitchen, he would be able to pass out. The other servants were probably still cleaning up from the ball, and he hoped there were still some leftovers.

He slipped on a pair of soft leather shoes, unwilling to be seen without proper clothing. He headed for the kitchen, careful not to slam the door behind him. After Lord Riverside had disappeared earlier and not returned, rumors that he was ill had begun circulating the guests.

In fact, rumors about the lord had been whispered all evening long. Sheamus heard that he was a convict on the run, a man broken by his mother's death, and a bastard. From what he knew of the man, Sheamus doubted Riverside was any of those things.

Some of the stories had been less farfetched than others, and they had been spoken freely, not in murmurs, so Sheamus was more inclined to believe them. He had apparently lost his father when he was young, only sixteen, and had spent the past twenty years taking care of his mother until she died and then devoted himself to various causes. It seemed that Riverside was a generous man who gave much of his money to the church and orphanages. He was also kind to his servants, friendly with everyone regardless of their social class, and an all-around upstanding citizen.

If the ball guests were to be believed, he was perfect. Thankfully, Sheamus didn't believe them. Everyone had a flaw. He just hadn't found Riverside's yet.

He pushed open the door to the kitchen, only to find Kevin bent over the table and Jane, who was the maid and his wife, touching his backside.

"What is going on here?"

Kevin flushed bright red and buried his face in his arms. "Kill me now."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Nothing improper, sir. Kevin's been whipped, so I'm applying a salve for him."

Sheamus walked past them. "Must you do it at the table? People eat there," he said as he grabbed a leftover scone.

The door to the yard opened. "Bloody bastard!" Tom's voice was strong, but he was limping. "Edward should be shot."

At the mention of his master, Sheamus froze. What had Edward done this time?

Jane sighed and maneuvered him so he could lean on the table as well. "You should be more circumspect. Lord Riverside is tolerant of more deviant lifestyles, but most aren't," Jane said gently as she began smoothing salve into his wounds.

Kevin pushed himself upright, wincing as he moved, and walked around the table to take Tom's hand. Tom snarled down at their clasped hands. "Riverside is a bloody hypocrite. How dare he have us whipped when he's liable to have a boy in his bed tomorrow night?"

Sheamus' eyes widened. There, that was the man's flaw. He was as bad as Edward! Sheamus had been right to not trust him. Richard was terribly pampered for a servant's son. He was probably James' plaything, hence the location of their rooms.

Why did some men take young boys to their beds? Sheamus' mind flew back to the first time Edward had taken him, his twelve year old body still undeveloped, his limbs too weak to fight the man, to end the pain...

Jane's sudden shout forced his mind back to the present. "Our lord is not a hypocrite! He's a good man! Would you rather be whipped or be dead?"

Tom said, "Whipped, of course, but what does that—"

Jane cut him off. "Kevin told me Edward threatened to take you to the police!"

Kevin cautioned her. "Jane, you should call him Sir Cade. You know what would happen if—"

"I don't care. That man is the true hypocrite." Her voice broke. "My fiancé refused him, and Edward had him jailed as a thief. He died in prison. Be grateful to Lord Riverside. He whipped you to keep you free."

Sheamus remembered that incident. Laurie had been a rather effeminate man, and that had kept him from garnering too much of Edward's attention at first. After a year on the estate, something about Laurie had caught Edward's eye. Chaos had ensued, the police were called, and Laurie was quickly jailed. Sheamus hadn't known he'd died. Too bad; he had been a good man.

Tom looked chagrined. "Sorry, Jane. It simply vexed me that he would fault us when he was the one who taught us all we know." She nodded and finished smoothing the salve across his buttocks.

Kevin smiled Tom. "You worry too much about what is just. In the end, he is the lord and we are the servants, and we have no right to expect anything. I'm grateful that he allows us to be together and—" Kevin gave Jane a cheeky grin "—that my wife allows it too."

Jane closed the jar of salve and helped Tom stand up. "Don't make me sound like a good girl. You know what I'm getting out of this."

Tom wrapped himself around Kevin. "You've told us—the safety of a husband without the work. Still, it can't be easy knowing you'll never have romance or children in your life," said Tom.

"It's not, but it's better than what most of my standing get, and I'll take it. Love and babies are wants, not needs." Jane shrugged and began cleaning up the leftovers. "Anyway, that's enough of that. The two of you need to get off to bed."

Kevin protested. "We can't leave you all of this work!"

Jane tossed a biscuit at him and he barely caught it. "Of course you can. You're in no shape to do anything. Go."

Tom rolled his eyes, but he did catch the roll she tossed at him. "Night, Jane."

"Goodnight," she replied. Kevin and Tom limped off together, holding each other up. Jane began washing the dishes in the sink, and Sheamus realized they had all forgotten about him. Gathering up some leftovers, he left without saying goodnight.

Letting himself into his room quietly, Sheamus pondered what he had learned. Riverside still seemed to be a kind man. It didn't seem like he forced servants to his bed either, at least not from the way that Tom had spoken. Perhaps Tom and Kevin were simply too old. Kevin was the younger of the two, and he was at least twenty-three. It must be that the lord liked them younger. Sheamus would be safe then, since he was definitely no boy.

Sheamus finished his food and banked the fire for the night, marveling again at the fact that Riverside allowed his servants firewood this late in the year. Aside from his attraction to boys, the lord did seem perfect.

Sheamus moved to the window to draw his curtains closed. A bright star shone in the midnight black sky. He shook his head and pulled the velvet curtains shut. He was too old to wish upon a star, but he couldn't help thinking that it would be nice if he could become a permanent part of Riverside's household.

~*~

When Riverside called Sheamus into his bedroom two days later, Sheamus kept in mind what he had heard. Being invited to Edward's bedroom had always been upsetting because Sheamus had known what would happen. The same fears didn't assault Sheamus as he entered Riverside's room.

Riverside seated them at a trio of plush chairs in his bedroom, claiming he liked the view from the window there. All Sheamus could see was a large tree and the roof of another section of the house, but he pretended he knew what Riverside meant. Riverside poured them tea from a silver teapot and offered Sheamus some cakes and scones from the matching silver tray as well. Sheamus began to relax then, as Edward had never called any of his servants to tea and actually fed them.

Riverside settled himself into the chair closest to Sheamus, even though he had been closer to the one further away. He leaned closer to Sheamus and asked, "Have you found your accommodations to your liking?"

Sheamus recalled the lavish room he had been placed in. Richard was evidently a pampered catamite for his tutors to receive such lodgings. The mere idea of the things that might have been done in that soft bed turned his stomach. He pushed away those thoughts and nodded brusquely. "They are adequate."

Riverside frowned, his young face furrowing into deep wrinkles. "Can I do anything to improve them?" His intent brown eyes focused on Sheamus' face, and Sheamus had to force himself not to look away.

"No. As I said, they are adequate."

He leaned in a little more, his eyes not leaving Sheamus'. "You are worth far more than adequacy."

Sheamus blinked rapidly and finally had to look away. Riverside's gaze was warm, in the way that men's gazes were when they were courting a young lady. Sheamus didn't know what to make of that. He was no young boy to be forced to bed, nor a gentle lady to be wooed. And yet, his gaze thrilled Sheamus to the core. Edward had never once looked at him that way, and there had been no one else in his life.

"Please forgive me, I have misspoken. My room is splendid." His voice was steady, but his hands shook. Sheamus clasped them together to hide his nervousness.

It didn't help much, especially when Riverside leaned even closer and covered both of Sheamus' hands with one of his own. His thumb gently rubbed the back of his right hand, soothing the trembling nerves. Sheamus was glad when his hands stopped shaking, but he didn't know what to make of it when Riverside pulled them apart and drew the right one towards him.

"The room is nothing compared to the beauty of your music." Riverside traced his fingers over Sheamus' veins, down his fingers, and across his calluses. He looked up at Sheamus, holding his gaze as he lifted Sheamus' hand to his mouth. "And your music could never be as gorgeous as you," he murmured, his breath ghosting across Sheamus' fingertips.

"I—milord..." Sheamus' voice drifted off as Riverside took the tip of his pointer finger into his mouth. Sheamus had to smother a gasp at the sensation of a tongue dancing along his finger.

He yanked his hand away from Riverside's loose hold. "What are you doing?" Sheamus asked, his voice cracking slightly.

Riverside frowned and rose from his chair. He stood over Sheamus, looking down at him. The memory of Edward looming over him before he forced him to submit made him want to flee. He knew what Riverside wanted; he had fooled himself into thinking he would be safe here. Riverside liked little boys, but he was probably willing to use any warm body.

Sheamus didn't allow himself to cower, but he did lower his eyes to the floor, unable to look at the man when he knew what was coming. He was utterly surprised by the gentle hand that reached out and caressed his cheek. Sheamus was accustomed to slaps and shoves, not this sweetness. He stiffened.

"I thought you were willing." Riverside's hand withdrew.

Sheamus glared at the floor. He did not want to be forced into this, but it seemed as though he had no choice. "I will do anything you require of me, milord." Uttering the words killed him inside, but they had always pleased Edward and made his subsequent actions less painful.

Riverside sighed. "I require nothing." Sheamus blinked, surprised, and glanced up. He wore a sad smile.

"You do not want me?"

The man's warm gaze drifted over Sheamus' body, making him feel naked. "I want you very much, but I would never force this upon you." He leaned over Sheamus, and pressed a soft kiss against his lips. He pulled back to murmur, "I might make you want it though."

Riverside's kiss was powerful but gentle, nothing like the few harsh kisses Edward had forced upon him. He opened his mouth for Riverside's questing tongue and moaned at the intrusion.

When Riverside pulled away, they were both gasping for breath. He didn't say a word, speaking instead with his eyes as he pulled Sheamus to a standing position. He moved slowly, undoing Sheamus' clothing and pulling it from his body.

Sheamus stood motionless, not sure what was expected of him. He'd never wanted sex before, not with Edward, but he had grown hard from that single kiss.

Riverside pushed Sheamus' shirt from his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor as he smoothed his hands across the newly revealed chest. Sheamus shivered under his touch.

Riverside grinned at him. He began to pull off his own clothing. Sheamus watched his body emerge from the fabric, wanting to see more of the man. He growled and yanked him close, threading his hands through Sheamus' hair as he kissed him deeply. He paused to moan, "Sheamus." Then he kissed and licked his way along Sheamus' jawline towards his temple, stopping at his ear to whisper, "Sheamus."

Sheamus shuddered, his whole body reacting fiercely to his name on another man's lips. He let himself be pushed backwards until his knees hit the edge of the bed, and he ended up sprawled over it. Riverside towered over him, but Sheamus wasn't frightened. He liked how powerful Riverside's lustful gaze made him feel—as if he could hurt the man by refusing this.

Riverside stripped him of the rest of his clothing, then knelt at his feet. He sat up to see why, only to collapse when Riverside leaned forward and took his prick into his mouth. He stifled a cry with his hand and closed his eyes, willing himself not to let it end so quickly. It should have been dirty, that fact that Riverside was putting his mouth on something that urine came out of, but it was too pleasurable to be disgusting. "Riverside!" he moaned as the man pulled away.

He smiled and slid into bed next to Sheamus, pulling him close enough to kiss. "I'd rather you called me James. It seems only proper, since I've had you in my mouth."

"James," Sheamus murmured against warm lips.

At the sound of his name, James groaned and rolled on top. He pulled Sheamus' hands above his head and held them there as he plundered his mouth.

After a few more kisses, James climbed off and began to rummage through a trunk at the foot of the bed. "I'm going to do something," he said. "If it makes you uncomfortable, tell me. I want this to feel good."

Sheamus' stomach clenched, but having the option to call it off reassured him slightly.

James returned to the bed with two scarves. Sheamus wasn't sure what he planned to do with them, but he rearranged himself on the bed as he was told, spreading his arms and legs wide. When James fastened his arms to the wooden headboard with the scarves, he began to feel discomfited. He forced himself to relax, uncertain as to where this would lead.

James tightened the knots. "Test them."

Sheamus pulled against the scarves. They stayed tight. He tugged harder, purposefully trying to get loose, but there was no give.

"Perfect." James grinned wickedly down at him. He reached into a drawer in the oak bedside table, then moved to sit between Sheamus' legs.

Sheamus closed his eyes. There would be no more pleasure for him from this point on. He sighed, and attempted to relax, knowing it would hurt less.

A cold, wet finger prodded at his entrance, and Sheamus contorted away from it. He opened his eyes to find James watching him with a smile. In his left hand, he held a small jar filled with an amber liquid.

"It's oil," James explained. "It makes things easier." He held up his right hand. It was coated in the oil.

Sheamus nodded silently and watched as James reached out to touch him. A single finger touched the edge of his arse hole. It circled the rim again and again. He was surprised to find himself enjoying the sensations that one finger created. His muscles began to relax of their own accord.

James pulled his hand away and dipped it into the jar. When he pulled it out, it glistened with oil. He tugged on his own dick for a moment, then reached out and took hold of Sheamus'. He lavished attention on him, running his oiled hand up and down Sheamus' dick, across his balls, and down to his entrance. Again, he circled the rim until the muscles began to relax. This time, instead of withdrawing, he quickly pressed inside. He began to wiggle his finger in deeper, until he hit a spot that made Sheamus explode.

He arched off the bed. "James!" The finger followed his movements, pressing against that spot over and over until he felt like he couldn't breathe. The pleasure was too much and not enough all at once. He was both disappointed and relieved when James withdrew his finger. Two fingers took its place. At first, they felt intrusive and uncomfortable, but one press of that magic spot and the discomfort disappeared.

James wriggled his fingers around a bit and began to spread them apart, close them, and open them again. He repeated this over and over, spreading the fingers farther each time. Every few movements, James would tickle that special spot, keeping Sheamus hard and ready to burst.

Sheamus shifted between ecstasy and despair, unable to decide if he wanted to come or if he wanted to continue drowning in feelings no one had ever evoked in him before.

The scarves were his anchors in the storm of sensations. Sheamus was full of James, full of intense feelings, and the scarves protected him from feeling too much. When he added a third finger, Sheamus grabbed hold of the scarves, holding on for dear life. The fourth finger sent him overboard in a wave of ecstasy. The scarves kept him from floating away on pleasure.

Long minutes passed. Slowly, he returned to himself. He became aware of the fact that James was now inside of him. He moved slowly, rocking himself into Sheamus with gentle thrusts.

“You’re so beautiful.” James dropped the jar onto the nightstand on a forward thrust and clasped Sheamus’ face with both of his slippery hands. “You have no idea how utterly gorgeous you are.”

Sheamus treasured the words, though he knew not to trust anything said in a moment of passion. His bones felt like melted goo, and he relaxed into the bed. James began to speed up his thrusts, but they didn’t hurt. Being connected in such an intimate way was... nice.

Instead of simply letting James use his body, Sheamus responded as best as he could. He pushed backwards on every thrust, wishing that his hands were free so he could touch James and pull him close.

James shuddered hard as he came. He froze for a long moment before collapsing onto Sheamus.

“You are so gorgeous,” he said as he pressed a kiss against Sheamus’ temple. “So perfect.” He kissed Sheamus’ forehead, then his nose, then his lips. He pulled away to free his hands from the scarves. “Thank you.” He used one scarf to wipe them up a bit.

Sheamus looked away, rubbing his wrists gently. They were a bit sore, but the pain wasn’t too bad. “I enjoyed it.” He sat up gingerly, expecting the soreness that normally came with this kind of activity, but all he felt was a mild tenderness that was almost pleasant. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed so he could get up and get dressed.

James threw the scarf over the edge of the bed. He laid down, yawning. “Stay for a nap, if you’ve nothing pressing.” He placed a hand on Sheamus’ arm and tugged gently.

“I... Alright.” Sheamus wasn’t sure what to make of the man falling asleep next to him. Edward had always thrown him out afterwards. He lay back down, turning onto his side. He was surprised to feel James drape an arm over his stomach.

Sheamus was warm, in the arms of someone who had given him more pleasure than he had ever felt in his whole life. He let James snuggle closer, closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Miss Osmond had been casting glances towards Lance all evening, making her interest in him quite obvious. James had seen her take notice of Lance at the last ball he held, and he had invited them both to this evening's small dinner party in hopes of sparking something. At first, Lance had seemed to return her interest, but his mother, whom James had invited to be polite, had pulled him aside. They had exchanged words, then Lance had returned to the table and began to drink all the alcohol within reach.

James stood, ending dinner, and invited his guests to join him in the small parlor across the hall. He pinched Lance as he walked by, silently urging him to escort Miss Osmond. Lance growled at James and completely ignored the implied message.

They adjourned to the parlor, and James was forced to suffer through Miss Edward singing and playing the piano. She wasn't horrible, but she wasn't good either. She had come, along with her mother, to the small dinner only because of James' agreement with Edward. Normally, James and Lance would commiserate during events like this, but Lance was too busy drowning in his anger and bourbon.

Finally, at nearly midnight, James said goodbye to the last of his guests. He walked back to the parlor and collapsed onto the plush settee next to Lance, who was seemingly trying to drink himself into oblivion.

"You could have been a little less rude to Miss Osmond."

Lance snorted. "Why would I want to be nice to that bint?" His words were slurring a bit. "She's not on mother's list of 'acceptable' brides."

James pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. "Lance. I care for you, really I do, but she's simply a lonely young woman who finds you attractive, regardless of your past. Surely you could be kind to her, even if you don't consider her a potential wife."

Lance glared at him. "Shut up. I saw you makin' cow-eyes at your violinist all night. Don't say nothin' to me, pervert." He waved his wine glass around to make his point, the port in it splashing all over the settee and carpet.

James grasped the glass, tugged it from Lance's hand, and sent it flying across the room. It hit the piano and shattered. Red wine sprayed across the expensive Wilton carpeting.

James stared at the sparkling glass, afraid that if he looked at his friend, he would throw the man across the room too. He knew his inclinations were not normal, but he didn't consider himself a pervert.

It was more than that though. James could handle name-calling, but if Lance had noticed James watching Sheamus through his drunken fog, the other dinner guests had probably noticed too. He hoped word wouldn't get back to Edward. His silly flirtations with Sheamus might end up costing them their lives.

"You're going to get in trouble. Your mum's going to whip your arse." Lance stared at James with bleary eyes.

James sighed and stood. He grabbed Lance's hands and pulled him up too. He staggered against James, steadying once James wrapped an arm around him.

"Your mum's going to beat your arse like a horse!"

James tugged him up the stairs and ignored his rambling. His mother was dead. Lance knew this, but he was probably too drunk to remember his own name. James wanted to hate

Lance for the things he said when he was drunk, but he knew it wasn't Lance's fault. Prison had destroyed him. If only James had known the truth sooner... but the past was in the past.

He dropped Lance off in one of the guest rooms and called Kevin in to keep watch over him. It wouldn't do for Lance to toss up in the middle of the night and suffocate on his own sick. He headed for his own bedroom and the man who was waiting for him.

When he opened the door to his room, he was pleased to find Sheamus stretched out on his bed, wearing nothing but a smirk, just as James had ordered. The smirk fell when he caught sight of James.

"What's wrong?"

James shook his head and sat down on the edge of the bed to tug off his boots.

Sheamus frowned. Moving closer, he swiped his tongue along the ridge of James' ear. James shuddered. "Tell me what's wrong," ordered Sheamus.

James leaned back against Sheamus. If it were anyone else, he would refuse, but he had grown close to the man in the two months since he'd first taken him to bed.

Sheamus bit James' earlobe gently, and James capitulated. "It's Lance."

"The drunkard from dinner?" Sheamus' tone was heavy with derision.

James pulled away from him and snapped, "He is a baron. Be respectful!"

At once, James regretted his words. Sheamus' gaze fell to the bedcover, and he straightened up, sitting gracefully on his heels with his back erect and his face turned down. "Yes, milord."

James wasn't positive, but he believed that Sheamus had been taken harshly by someone before, and more than once. James could tell when Sheamus was uncomfortable because the man would lose the commanding tone that came naturally to him. Instead, he would speak in a soft, subservient voice and follow orders to the letter, regardless of how distasteful he seemed to find them. James liked submissive bed partners, but he did not like dismissive ones.

Apologetically, he captured Sheamus' lips in a kiss. At first, Sheamus was unresponsive, but he slowly began to warm up to James. James pulled away and grinned at the glazed look of arousal on Sheamus' face.

"I apologize for acting so inconsiderately, but please speak kindly of Lance. He is my oldest friend." James began unbuttoning his dinner jacket. "He was once my dearest friend too, but I'm afraid the tortures of prison have changed him. He is no longer the man he once was."

Sheamus wrinkled his nose, but began helping James remove his clothing. "May I ask how he found his way to prison?"

James gave him a smug look. "You may."

Sheamus halfway frowned at James' cheekiness. He pulled off James' shirt, pressing a kiss against his collarbone. "How did he end up in prison?"

James paused in removing his clothing to drape his arms over Sheamus' shoulders. Sheamus held him close as he spoke. "You know of the revolt against the rule of the British East India Company, I'm sure."

Sheamus nodded.

"Lance's father invested in the company and moved his family there when Lance was fifteen. His mother hated it and claimed it was no fit place for aristocracy. Lance considered it a grand adventure. He spent much of his time amongst the natives, learning about their medicines. He always hoped to become a doctor.

"I lived there too, at that time, and met Lance during one of his exploratory expeditions. I was also friends with our butler's son, Alexander Bartow. Both Alexander and I were sixteen

when we met Lance. The three of us became close friends. It wasn't until the Indians rebelled that things fell apart."

James paused, the memories still painful. He stood and stripped off his pants. Sheamus watched, but did not help, giving James time to pull himself together. When he was finally naked, Sheamus pulled him to the bed, and simply lay next to him, not initiating any contact.

James took a shuddering breath and began again.

"When the attacks took place, it became obvious that someone had been sharing confidential information with the rebels. The information was something only Lance and his father should have known."

James had not wanted to believe Lance was capable of such treachery. After all, he had fancied himself madly in love with Lance. At the same time, he had wanted revenge for his father's and sister's deaths. It had taken him years and many private investigators to get to the bottom of everything.

"Many were injured in that battle. My father and sister died. I didn't believe Lance when he claimed he didn't do it. He was locked up in a British jail. It took me four years to realize he couldn't have done it, and another year after that to find proof of his innocence."

Sheamus rubbed James' shoulder softly. "That must have been hard for you."

"It was," he said simply. As much as he wished to be open with his lover, James knew that it was too dangerous to tell him the whole truth. No one could know that his sister had given birth while she was in India—and that the baby had not died in the rebellion.

The attacks had focused on the leaders of the Company. The only civilians targeted had been James' sister and his nephew. The child was heir to a vast fortune and a duke's title on his father's side. James suspected that someone in line for that title had been feeding the rebels secrets, but he had never found proof.

Sheamus seemed to understand that James was finished speaking. He began to run his tongue along James' ear, tickling it. James edged away from the tongue and turned his head, pulling Sheamus into a kiss. Sheamus' hands wandered along his body, teasing him until he was hard and ready.

James sucked in a breath as Sheamus began to crawl down the bed, presumably to practice applying his mouth as James had been instructing him. He grabbed Sheamus' shoulder to stop him. "Hold on. I want you on top tonight, love."

Sheamus was shocked, if his wide eyes were anything to go by. "I've never... I mean, we've never done it like that before."

"Have you ever regretted trying something new with me?"

Sheamus looked away and a light flush suffused the bridge of his nose. "No."

James grinned and pulled Sheamus on top of him. "It won't be that different. I'll still be the one inside."

Sheamus peered down at him blankly. "But how...?" His brows rose. "Oh."

James chuckled softly. "Oh, indeed." He pulled Sheamus down to kiss him.

Sheamus wriggled on top of James until their dicks pressed against each other. As they kissed, Sheamus began to rock back and forth. James grew harder, his dick twitching as blood rushed to his privates. He deepened the kiss. Sheamus nipped his bottom lip in return.

James growled low in his throat. He rolled them over, landing on top of Sheamus. He pulled away to breathe and looked at the man beneath him.

Sheamus' eyes glittered up at him, full of lust and passion. They were so different from the glazed look they had held the first time James took Sheamus to bed. Sheamus' hair fell across

the pillow in disarray, and he smirked up at James. He wasn't the shy, nervous man James had seduced. It had taken nearly two months, but his true personality had begun to show through the facade of submission.

Sheamus pulled James into another kiss and rolled them back over, placing himself in control of the situation. He blossomed more and more each day into the complex, passionate man James saw when he played the violin.

"You're in charge." James lay back on the pillows, relinquishing control.

Sheamus grabbed his dick, holding it tightly. "So if I were to do this—" he squeezed James harder, nearly to the point of pain "—you wouldn't do anything about it?"

"Not right now. But believe me—I will get revenge if necessary."

Sheamus released him. He reached for the drawer where the oil was kept. "You won't want revenge for this." Pouring oil onto his hand, Sheamus lifted himself up. Stretching an arm behind himself, he began spreading the oil between his cheeks. He contorted himself so he could press a finger inside his arse.

"Let me help," James murmured. He slicked his own hand up with oil.

Sheamus pivoted around on the bed, putting his arse within easy reach. As James began to stretch him with one finger, he leaned down and took James into his mouth. He sucked gently, slowly increasing the pressure. James rewarded him with a second finger, scissoring them apart.

"More, I need more."

James swatted his pert rear with his free hand. "So impatient." He did give him a third finger though.

Sheamus' response was to return his mouth to James' cock. He suckled hard, bobbing his head up and down. The movement was glorious, sending waves of pleasure through James. The need to bury his dick in Sheamus' arse overcame him, and he hurried to add a fourth finger.

"Stop." The command was so quiet, James almost didn't hear it.

He ceased all his movements immediately, his pinky still bent at an awkward angle.

Sheamus clenched his arse. "Slower, please." His voice had a slightly panicky tone to it. James wished he could see his lover's face so he could judge if he was alright.

Slowing his movements, he pulled his fingers out. Sheamus' arse hole winked at him, tempting him. He retrieved more oil before sliding three fingers back inside. He moved carefully, opening and closing his fingers repeatedly before attempting to add his pinky. This time the finger slid in easily.

Slumping onto his elbows, Sheamus sighed into James' genitals. He felt around for Sheamus' gland, grinning when he found the slight lump. He massaged it, making the man moan. "You alright now?"

"Yes," Sheamus breathed. "Yes."

"Make your mouth useful then."

Moments later, his tongue lapped at James' bollocks. He groaned in appreciation and returned to preparing him. When he was certain Sheamus was ready, he pulled out.

"No..." Sheamus pressed back, searching for his fingers.

"Enough of that. I want to fuck you."

Sheamus turned around and grabbed the oil before he could blink. He slathered it all over James' prick. He centered himself over it, then paused.

"You're in charge," James reminded him.

With a nod, Sheamus reached down to align the dick with his entrance. It slid into the well-stretched arse easily. After Sheamus bottomed-out, he rested for a second.

“You are so tight.” James wanked Sheamus’ prick, wrapping it in a tight fist. “Even after all that stretching, you fit like a glove.”

Sheamus began to ride him. With every movement, James grew closer to his climax.

“I’m not going to last much longer, love.”

He grinned down at him, a gleam in his eyes. “Good.” He tightened around James.

The extra pressure finished James off. He came hard, pumping his seed inside Sheamus.

Sheamus wasn’t far behind. He bent down to kiss James as he ejaculated into his hand. James slid out of that lovely arse as his cock softened. He pulled back from the kiss so he could focus on his lover’s face.

Sheamus was flushed, his chest heaving from exertion. A bead of sweat dripped down his face. James followed its trail with his finger, ending at kissed-raw lips. “You look gloriously debauched.” Sheamus ducked his head. “I wish I didn’t have to go.”

“Go?”

James sighed. “I must leave in two days to visit the Duke of Covington.” It was a part of the deal he had made with the duke when he proposed hiding his infant nephew away until his parent’s killers were caught.

Covington was getting on in years and required help with his various financial projects. James spent one week of every month tending to business, and he would continue to do so until his nephew turned twenty-one years old and came out of hiding—or until the man who had James’ sister killed was captured. In the twenty years since the rebellion, James had yet to prove who the traitor was, though he had his suspicions

Sheamus slid off James, curling up next to him on the bed. “There’s only a little over a month left in the Season. Can’t you skip this visit?”

“I would if I could, but the duke requires that I visit monthly.” If James didn’t, Covington would bring his grandson out of hiding to take his place as heir. James couldn’t let his sister’s killer find out the baby had lived. Not until his nephew was old enough to protect himself.

Sheamus laid his head on James’ chest. “Promise you’ll hurry back?”

“Believe me, nothing could keep me there any longer than required.”

~*~

Lord Covington glared at him across the wide, messy desk. “James, are you telling me that you cannot spare time for tea before you leave?”

“Indeed. I long for my own bed.” James smiled sweetly, hoping to earn his forgiveness. Most times he stayed longer than required during his visits, sharing tea and gossip with the man who had been a bit of a second father to him after his own died, but he felt the need to return home as soon as possible.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Luckily for him, the man was a softy at heart. “I’m afraid I have some further business to discuss with you though.” He was a shrewd softy though. “Have a cup of tea while we discuss my proposition.”

James allowed himself to be ushered to a comfortable drawing room chair. A young lady attended them silently. She was unremarkable, except for the carrot colored hair that peeked from beneath her cap.

Typically James served tea when they were discussing business. Obviously Covington had a reason for her presence.

After settling in with a few niceties, Covington broached the reason for the girl’s attendance. “James, you are aware that I often help young women receive the training they need to take up positions as maids and cooks, correct?”

It was an open secret among the ton that Covington rescued prostitutes from the brothels. However, Covington also had his staff train young women from the surrounding areas who lacked an education. He never revealed which of the women were prostitutes and which were merely poor and his power kept people from attempting to uncover their backgrounds. Usually those who hired the girls were so happy with their services that they didn't care to find out where they came from.

"Recently I began looking for a position for Miss Mary Kelly," Covington gestured to the young woman, "but none of my acquaintances have need of a serving girl." He leaned forward, peering at James. "Would you happen to know of any available positions?"

James knew what the old man was hinting at, as well as why. "While I could use an assistant for my cook, you really needn't place a spy in my household."

The girl had the good grace to blush, but Covington simply settled back into his chair. "What nonsense. If Miss Kelly were to visit me, say, once or twice a month, it would only be because she misses the staff here on the estate."

The old man really did love his grandson. It had to be hard for him to only see the boy a few times a year when he visited Riverside. And even then, it was from a distance, for the boy had not been told of his heritage. The last cook's assistant had come from the duke's household as well, and she had kept the duke advised of his grandson's life when James couldn't, until she married and left.

James sighed. "Fine. Miss Kelly, you will assist my cook and head maid as they require. You will have three free weekends a month, unless I am hosting an event that requires your services, in which case you will have two days off the following week. You will receive room and board from me." He narrowed his eyes at Covington. "The duke will pay your salary as he sees fit."

The girl bobbed her head. "Yes, milord."

Covington chuckled. "You drive a hard bargain, but we'll take it. Go on and pack your bags, Miss Kelly."

The girl curtsied, then fled the room. When they were alone, James asked, "Is she one of your rescues?"

Covington tsked at him. "You know better than to ask. I'll tell you what I tell everyone: she is a well-trained servant who will provide you with excellent service, and that's all you need to know."

James wondered if that meant yes. "Very well." He glanced at the clock and frowned. "Will she be ready soon? I'd like to return home now." He couldn't wait to see Sheamus, to touch him and taste him. He was rather addicted to the man.

"Of course not." Covington picked up his cup of tea. "She's been instructed not to return until we've finished our tea. Now relax and drink—your bed will be waiting when you get there."

And hopefully Sheamus would be waiting in it.

~*~

When they arrived back at the manor, Miss Kelly requested that James show her around. He was forced to introduce her to all of his servants, including Sheamus, and take her on a quick tour of the house, knowing he would hear about it from the duke if he didn't.

The servants all took to Miss Kelly, offering to help her get acclimated. James ended the tour in the kitchen, passing Miss Kelly off to his cook. She sent him a plaintive look when Mrs. Bartow began listing all of her tasks, but James ignored it in favor of following Sheamus up to his room.

As soon as James closed the door behind them, Sheamus slammed him up against it. James moaned into his kiss, letting Sheamus take the lead for once. He was still worn out from the trip, and it was nice to see Sheamus being assertive. Sheamus abandoned the kiss to tug open James' shirt and start sucking marks onto his skin.

"I missed you," James said. Sheamus responded by sucking on James' collarbone, dangerously close to where people would be able to see. "But I brought you a present."

Sheamus released James' neck with a tiny pop. "A present? For me?"

Grinning devilishly, James admitted, "Well, it's actually for both of us." He glanced around the room and located his bag. Kevin must have brought it up. "In fact, I think we should use it now."

"Now?"

James didn't reply. Instead, he handed the gift to Sheamus wordlessly.

Sheamus blinked repeatedly. "You bought me a corset?" He held the corset out from his body, dangling it by its laces. The dark green satin shimmered as it swung in and out of the sunlight.

James hadn't expected him to be grateful for the gift, but he thought Sheamus would grow to like it. "Trust me," James said. "It is a very pleasurable article of clothing."

"It's women's clothing."

James reached out for the corset and Sheamus handed it back to him. He undid the busk. "Well, consider that properly tightening a corset requires someone else's help." He smirked at Sheamus. "And once it's tightened, you'll find it a bit more difficult to breathe. If we tighten it enough, you'll feel a bit dizzy... a very interesting feeling to have when you're in the midst of sex."

Looking intrigued, Sheamus gave a curt nod. "I want out if it's too uncomfortable."

"Of course!" James had been afraid the corset would be too odd for Sheamus to even consider it. "Choose a word that you wouldn't use in the bedroom, and if you say it, I will end things immediately."

"Why can't I say stop?"

"How many times have you said stop in the past few weeks and meant exactly the opposite?" James was amused to see Sheamus actually consider it.

"Too many to count."

"Exactly. So pick a word."

Sheamus tilted his head to one side as he thought. "Mozart," he said at last.

James laughed. "Of course you'd pick something musical. Mozart it is. Now... strip."

Sheamus did as he was told. Once he was naked, he took the corset back from James and fastened the busk. It hung on him loosely, the laces not yet tight enough to shape it to his body.

He reached back to begin tightening the laces, but James smacked his hand away. "I'll do it," he said, in the same tone that a young child would shout "mine!"

Sheamus grabbed onto a bedpost to hold himself steady as James tugged on the laces. It took a while. James would cinch the corset as tightly as he could, and he would gasp for breath for a moment. They would pause to let him get accustomed to the tightness, and then James would pull the laces even tighter. They used the time to discuss what had happened while James was away.

"I wish I hadn't had to go." He licked a stripe up the back of Sheamus' neck. "I wish I could stay with you always." He laid a kiss on his shoulder as he finished knotting the corset laces.

The corset molded Sheamus' body into a feminine shape, though it was too large near the bust and hips. James resolved to have a corset made specifically for him in the future.

"Why did you go?"

James ignored the question, pretending he hadn't heard. He slipped off his clothing, wincing when he noticed his shirt was missing buttons from Sheamus' rough handling.

"Why did you go?" Sheamus repeated.

He sighed. "Like I told you before I left, I had to visit Duke Covington."

Sheamus studied him, as if weighing James' words. His stomach began to flutter. Had Sheamus discovered his secret? Even the servants didn't know—how could he have figured it out?

"And where did Miss Kelly come from?"

James wanted to growl at him. What business was it of his? "Covington helps poor young women get the training they need to become sought-after servants. He informed me that Miss Kelly needed a place to work. I offered her a job here."

Sheamus was too astute for his own good. "You are speaking of the Duke of Covington, who is rumored to rescue soiled doves, are you not?"

James nodded tersely. "Yes."

"So, you brought yourself home a prostitute."

None of Covington's girls deserved that name. James reached out and slapped him before he realized what he was doing. Sheamus' hand snapped to the side, but he didn't turn back to look at James.

"Mozart," Sheamus said quietly.

CHAPTER SIX

Fingers trembling, Sheamus began undoing the clasps of the corset. He'd been afraid of this since the moment James walked in the door. He had escorted Miss Kelly around as if she were queen of the household, showing her off to everyone. Sheamus had compared that to his own arrival at the manor. James hadn't even been there to greet him.

If that wasn't enough, the other servants all took to Miss Kelly, addressing her simply as Kelly, which she said she preferred over her given name. Even two months after his arrival, everyone still called Sheamus 'sir'.

The first two clasps came undone easily, but he fumbled with the third one. The corset was pulled very tight around the waist to make his figure look feminine. Sheamus didn't know why James had bothered to have sex with him when it was obvious that he wanted a woman. Now he had Kelly.

Sheamus knew she was supposed to be a rehabilitated prostitute, but no one could escape their roots. Once a whore, always a whore. James would probably find it easy to seduce her, and he could be happy with his 'soiled dove'.

At last, he got the third clasp open, but before he could reach for the fourth one, James grasped his hands, holding them lightly.

"Why are you upset?"

Sheamus pushed him away. "Don't coddle me. I'm no woman." He finished opening the corset and threw it at James. "Go give that to Kelly. I don't want it."

James dropped the corset to the ground and stepped over it to get closer. Sheamus refused to look at him, staring instead at the bedpost he had held onto earlier.

"Are you upset that I brought Miss Kelly here?"

"I don't give a damn what you do with that whore." He waited for another blow, but it didn't come. Instead, James gently ran his hand along his cheek. Sheamus glared at him.

"I don't want her." James pressed a kiss against his cheek. "I want you."

Sheamus wanted to believe him, but too many people had lied to him before. Edward had promised to care for him once, and look how that turned out. James would lie to get what he wanted too.

He continued to touch Sheamus, trailing gentle fingers down his side. "I am attracted to you, not to Kelly."

Sheamus was tired of being lied to. "Why the corset then? Why try to make me into a woman?"

"I was never trying to make you into a woman. I have played with a corset before, and I like the way they feel."

James' hand settled on his hip and Sheamus shoved it off. "Then why weren't you the one wearing it?"

"It'll look better on you," James said. "You've such a thin body..." He placed his hand on Sheamus' stomach. "I wanted to see what you'd look like in it." Sheamus moved to smack his hand away, but he let it fall. "It didn't look right."

James' words stung. Sheamus crossed his arms to hide the pain. Edward had always said he was ugly. Though he wouldn't admit it, wearing the satin corset had made him feel good in a

way he couldn't explain, especially after James admired him in it. Obviously, he had lied about that too.

He continued, "I should have had a corset made for you. That one was made for a woman, and it doesn't fit you at all."

Did he wish he had made a corset for Sheamus because he didn't want him to look like a woman? Or was it that he wanted one that would fit well and make him look more feminine?

Letting his arms fall at his sides, Sheamus sighed. "I don't understand."

James took both of Sheamus' hands in his and pulled him closer. "I want you. I don't want a woman. They are nice to talk to, but I much prefer men in my bed. More than that, I prefer you."

"Why me?"

"Because you create magic every time you play the violin," James said. "Because you are open to new things. Because there is something inside of me that only you have ever touched."

Sheamus let James embrace him. He didn't say anything. He was too afraid that James would say something that would expose his pretty words as lies. He didn't want to lose the perfection of that moment, so instead of talking, he let his body speak for him.

He pivoted them around, and pushed James onto the bed. Straddling his lover's thighs, he grasped James' head with both hands and pulled him into a kiss. James responded enthusiastically, pushing his hips upwards. Sheamus' cock had gone soft in the fight, and each brush of James' hardening penis sent a little extra blood rushing southwards.

"You are beautiful."

Sheamus hushed him with a harsh kiss and a hard grind.

James shut up.

They rutted against each other for a long while, reveling in the feel of each other's soft skin and hard muscles. James seemed rather infatuated with the patch of hair in the middle of Sheamus' chest; his hands rarely left the area. In contrast, Sheamus wanted to touch every part of James. He ran his fingers down his chest, tracing the muscles he could feel. James was in good shape, and there were quite a few muscles to explore.

It had been a long week, and no amount of masturbation could replace the sheer eroticism of warm skin against his own. He pressed against James, connecting them at as many points as possible. His skin tingled where it touched James, sending shivers down his spine. His heart pumped hard and his nerves burned with pleasure. He felt over-heated and chilled at the same time.

When Sheamus felt his arousal heading towards its peak, he withdrew from James' grasp. He wanted more than a quick hump. He climbed off the bed and headed for the dresser.

"I went exploring while you were away," he said over his shoulder. "I didn't realize you had so many toys hidden away."

James winked at him. "All the better to torture you with, my dear."

Shaking his head, Sheamus retrieved the toy that had haunted his fantasies for a week. "I think it's my turn to torture you." He unlocked the handcuffs and placed the key and its chain around his neck.

James wrinkled his nose. "I'd rather not use those tonight. I want to touch you."

"Oh, no. These aren't to keep you from touching me." Sheamus snapped one cuff around his wrist. He tightened it enough that he was sure James couldn't get out, but not so tight that it would hurt. He tugged James' hands above his head and locked the other cuff into place so that the bedpost was trapped between his arms. "This is to keep you from touching yourself."

James pouted. "Fine. But my word is England."

"By the time I'm done, you certainly won't be lying there thinking about England."

Sheamus scooted down to the end of the bed, laying on his stomach so that his mouth ended up close to James' prick. He had practiced sucking on various phallic objects while James was away, but none of them had the same delicious weight as his dick. He leaned forward and took the tip into his mouth.

James moaned and arched up, fucking his mouth. Fighting the urge to gag, Sheamus shifted so that he could press down on James' hips to keep him from moving. With James under his control, he began to bob his head up and down. James writhed beneath him and fought against the cuffs.

"Let me out, I want to touch you."

Sheamus ignored his plea. He swallowed his dick as deeply as he could, then slowly raised his head. He looked up and caught James' eyes.

James moaned. He tried to arch up, but Sheamus held him down, leisurely swallowing his cock again. He held James' gaze, refusing to let him look away. With his mouth full of dick, he began to hum an upbeat march.

James' eyes fell shut and his hips jerked as he orgasmed. Sheamus swallowed carefully, trying to avoid using his tongue. He loved seeing and feeling James' pleasure, but he didn't enjoy the taste of it. When James' body relaxed beneath him, Sheamus scooted up the bed. His own arousal begged to be taken care of, but he wanted to worship at the altar of James first.

Sheamus ran his fingers along James' face. For a relatively young man, he bore awfully deep worry lines. Even in this moment of tranquility and relaxation, his brow was furrowed. Sheamus traced the lines, wanting nothing more than to erase them and the events which had formed them.

James blinked at him blearily. "Hello there."

"Hello."

He twisted his arms, trying to pull them free. "I can't reach you."

Sheamus pulled his hand from James' face, settling it instead on his cock. "You don't need to." He pumped his dick with a slow rhythm, letting his arousal strengthen.

James stuck out his lower lip. "But I missed you. I slept alone all week. It was miserable without you to steal the covers."

"You push the covers off anyway," Sheamus protested, but his stomach fluttered happily with the knowledge that James hadn't slept with Kelly or anyone else.

Sheamus leaned in and kissed him quickly on the lips.

James smiled into the kiss. "What's this for?"

"For being you." Sheamus nipped at his bottom lip. "It's just for being you."

James licked at the small bite, brushing his tongue along Sheamus' lips in the process. He shivered at the touch and sped up his hand movements. James delved into the kiss, using his tongue like a cock to fuck Sheamus' mouth.

While much smaller than James' cock, his tongue served as a reminder of the pleasure Sheamus got from servicing James. He could almost feel that delicious cock laying heavy on his tongue again. With a groan, he began to reach his climax. James belonged to him, and no one else. He let his seed spray across James' stomach.

He shuddered through his orgasm, waves of pleasure peaking with each spasm of his muscles. Every part of his body tingled happily as he came down from his high. He released his softening cock and trailed his fingers through the semen with which he had painted James.

James wriggled. "That tickles."

Sheamus laughed, but he pulled his hand back. He rolled over and grabbed a washcloth from the nightstand. He tidied both of them up a bit, then dropped the washcloth to the floor. Retrieving the key from around his neck, he released James.

James rubbed his wrists but remained reclined. "You certainly know how to wear a man out."

"I suppose we old men should take a nap then." Sheamus tugged the disheveled covers out from under James and covered them both with a light sheet.

James grinned and tucked himself next to Sheamus. "Yes, well, we've plenty of time to act young over the next few weeks. For right now, I'd like to get some proper rest with my sheet-stealer."

~*~

Four weeks passed in a whirlwind. James held a small soiree each week, hosting dinners that were more like feasts, and Edward held two large balls that Sheamus and Richard were required to play for. Sheamus enjoyed attending these events as a mere musician. He was not expected to speak, though he did add his thoughts to the conversation more than once.

He especially enjoyed it when James caught him playing a funeral dirge whenever Lance's mother attended the evening's entertainment. It was easy to make fun of the bitter old woman, whose favorite topic of conversation appeared to be her lumbago. James would berate him for it afterwards, but he always ruined his rebukes by following them up with a round of enthusiastic sex.

With every passing day, Sheamus began to feel more for James. He wasn't sure if the proper term for it would be love, but at the very least, it was strong affection.

On the rare occasions that Sheamus let himself hope, he liked to imagine that James felt the same way. When James sent him secret smiles during balls and kept him up into the wee hours of the night talking, Sheamus wished that he could stay with James forever. But the final ball of the Season was quickly approaching, and Edward would soon demand his return.

There was nothing Sheamus could do. He owed a debt to Edward that would have to be repaid before he could leave the man's services. After his mother's death during the Irish famine, Sheamus and his father had fled Ireland to England, his mother's home country. Edward had given Sheamus' father a job on his estate. When his father died only three years later during a cholera epidemic, Edward had given his father a funeral and allowed Sheamus to stay on the estate. Later, he provided training for Sheamus so that he could learn to play his mother's violin. If he had known the price he would pay for those things before he accepted them, Sheamus would have found some other way to survive. Living on the streets would be better than being forced into Edward's bed.

James might have been able to purchase Sheamus' debt from Edward, but Sheamus doubted he would. For one thing, it was unseemly for a man to show so much interest in another man. For another, it would mean that he felt something for Sheamus that was worth the hundreds of pounds of debt that he had accrued, and Sheamus had no doubt that while James liked him, his affection did not run that deep.

All of these thoughts and worries built up in Sheamus as time passed, and when James' last ball of the Season rolled around, his emotions were in turmoil. He knew it was showing through his music as well. The waltzes he played were more upbeat than ever before; the minuets, more beautiful; the promenades, more stately.

He watched the dancers surreptitiously, careful to look at the entire room, though he wanted nothing more than to focus entirely on James. As he was scanning the room, his gaze fell on Edward. His bow faltered in his hand when he noticed how furious Edward looked.

The man's face was an angry red, and he was gesturing violently while speaking to his wife. She wasn't paying much attention to him, which only seemed to make him angrier. Finally, he snapped something at her, whirled, and left the room.

Sheamus couldn't say he was sorry to see him go.

~*~

Sheamus walked into the kitchen late that night to retrieve some snacks, as was by then a post-ball ritual for him. He found himself in the midst of a scene that gave him a horrible sense déjà vu. There were no people laughing at each other this time though.

Jane was gently applying salve to Kelly's wrists. Kevin was hovering nearby, wringing his hands anxiously, and Tom sat at the table, staring into an empty cup of tea as if he could see the future in the leaves.

Kelly attracted his attention. She was sobbing heavily and her face had a huge bruise forming on it. It slashed across one eye, which was already black, and down her cheek. Her bottom lip was split, and her nose had dried blood on it. He assumed Jane had stopped the bleeding somehow.

Sheamus had an urge to ask if he could help, but he didn't think they would appreciate it. They barely allowed him to use their first names. He doubted they would tell him what had happened.

He ignored them, and they ignored him, as he gathered up some food. He left the room, letting the door slam behind him, and he waited.

From outside of the door, he heard them begin speaking again.

"Who did this, Kelly? Please, you have to tell us." It sounded like Jane was the one trying to elicit information from her.

Kelly's voice was sharp with pain when she said, "I don't have to do anything."

"Please," a masculine voice added. "Let us help you. We'll protect you from him."

"No, Kevin," Kelly said. "Stop asking."

Tom spoke softly. "But Kelly, please—"

Kelly shrieked suddenly and cut him off.

Jane's response was shrill—"Tom, don't get so close!"—and he heard something bang in the kitchen, making Kelly sob.

"Damn it!" Tom said tersely. "I'm sorry. I'm not like him. I promise."

Kelly's reply was incoherent, she was crying so hard. "I know you're not him... but you're a man. I can't..."

"I'll... I'll go then." Tom's voice moved closer to the door. "If you need me, or you want to talk... I don't think I'll sleep much tonight." Sheamus stepped back into some nearby shadows as the door swung open. Tom raced out of the room, wiping his eyes with a fist as he passed.

Kevin followed him out of the room. "Tom, wait."

Tom spun around to look at him. His face was distraught. "I want to comfort her, and I don't know how to do it without frightening her."

"Just be there for her," Kevin said.

Tom shook his head. "I will be... in the morning, once I've cooled off a bit. Right now, all I want to do is go rip someone's head off for hurting her. If I only knew who it was..."

Kevin snorted. "If you knew who it was, you'd go kill him and land your arse in jail." He wrapped his arms around Tom's waist. "Let's go to bed. We can see how she is come morning."

“Alright,” Tom muttered. They headed towards the servant’s quarters together. Sheamus stood alone in the silent hall.

~*~

“How can you leave?” Sheamus threw James’ bag into the dirt.

James picked up the bag and continued climbing into his hired carriage. “I’m sorry, Sheamus, but I have to go. I promise I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

Sheamus wanted to stomp his feet and scream. “Miss Kelly was raped last night. How can you leave?” The Season was almost over. How could he leave when their time together was coming to an end?

James settled into his seat and leaned closer to Sheamus. “I must go. There is much at risk, more than you could imagine. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I wanted you to have a happy last ball.”

It was stupid to think that he could keep James from leaving. Sheamus obviously meant nothing to him. Edward would be back to retrieve Sheamus soon, and he would never see James again. Sheamus’ throat tightened with anxiety.

James beckoned Sheamus closer. Sheamus approached, but remained a polite distance away, cautious of the carriage driver’s eyes on them. “I’ll return before the Season ends, Sheamus. I promise.”

Sheamus held his gaze. “See that you do.” With that, he stepped away from the carriage and James nodded to the driver. They moved off down the lane that led to the manor.

Sheamus turned to go inside and found Richard watching him from the porch.

“I thought you’d be able to do it,” said Richard. “No one’s ever been able to keep him from going on his visit.”

Sheamus stepped closer to Richard. “What is so important that he has to abandon those who care for him?”

A grin lit up Richard’s face. “You do care for him then! I was right!”

“What do you know?” It seemed as though everyone except Sheamus knew James’ secret. He desperately wanted to know what could be more important to James than Sheamus. He brushed that thought away immediately.

Sheamus meant nothing to James, and he shouldn’t let James mean anything to him. He knew it was only a matter of time before Edward appeared. After that, he would probably never see James again.

Richard leaned against the porch railing. “I don’t know much. It’s all because of what happened in India.”

Sheamus didn’t know much about India, beyond what James had mentioned once. “He lived there as a young man.”

Richard scuffed his feet on the ground. “His father and sister died there, but his sister was ten years older than him. His sister was married to the only son of a duke—a very rich and powerful duke. The duke returned to England before the rebellion began, but his son stayed behind and died. A week after Riverside returned from India with his mother, they both went to visit the duke. Since then, he has gone to see the duke each and every month. Rumor is he made a deal with the duke to be named the heir to his fortune as long as he visited the man every month.” Richard shrugged. “Of course, this all happened twenty years ago. Everything I know is based on what I heard my parents whispering about. I was only a few weeks old when they fled India.”

“Do you know anything else?”

“Only that nothing has ever kept him here during the last week of the month. Even when his mother was on her deathbed, he continued to go. She breathed her last breath one night while he was away. I don’t think he’s ever forgiven himself for that.”

Even though the mystery had deepened, Sheamus sighed a bit with relief. He had not questioned James’ disappearances at first. It had seemed plausible that he was merely going on business trips. Business could wait though. These trips apparently couldn’t. Perhaps James had not been lying. Perhaps he truly had wished to remain with Sheamus and couldn’t.

Perhaps he would miss Sheamus as much as Sheamus would miss him.

Sheamus focused again on the boy before him. “As the master of the estate, he should be finding Miss Kelly’s attacker.”

Richard grimaced. “I can’t imagine what kind of monster would do something like that.”

Sheamus could imagine many monsters, all human, who would indeed do such a thing. He was to return to the house of one of those monsters in a few days.

Sheamus laid a hand on Richard’s shoulder. “Let me see how Miss Kelly is faring. My mother taught me some herbal remedies that might help her improve more rapidly.”

Richard blinked at him. “Thank you, sir... Sheamus.”

Richard’s words gave him a feeling of acceptance. Sheamus savored it. He wasn’t sure why, but he liked James’ servants. He followed the boy inside the house. It felt like he was coming home.

~*~

Sheamus’ fears came true the next day. Adam arrived from Edward’s manor wearing a frown. Sheamus had been prepared to return, so he gathered up the few items he had not packed and walked to the front door.

He was surprised to find some of the servants of Riverside Manor there to see him off. Kelly was speaking with Richard by the carriage, her eye covered in the green paste Sheamus had prescribed for it. Kevin gave him a shy smile as he passed, and he offered him a nod in return.

“Are you ready to go, Sheamus?” Adam asked.

Sheamus nodded. He climbed into the carriage, then looked back at the people he was leaving behind.

“Goodbye, Sheamus,” Richard said.

Sheamus nodded towards the boy. “Goodbye, Richard.” He waved at the other two. “Kevin, Kelly.”

They offered farewells in return, and then Adam climbed into the carriage and clucked the horses forward.

Sheamus waited until they cleared the gate of the estate to speak to Adam. “How have things been?”

Adam shook his head. “Edward’s been a bastard the entire time you’ve been gone. I think these have been the longest three months of my life.”

“Who has he called to his bedroom in my absence?” It was a strange question to need to know the answer to, but Sheamus knew that his treatment upon arriving at the manor would hinge on how Edward felt at that moment.

Adam’s shoulders slumped a bit. “I took the brunt of it.” Adam looked over his shoulder and caught Sheamus’ eye. “But he came home two nights ago from Riverside’s ball in a mood. He hasn’t called anyone to bed since.”

Tonight would be painful then. “I appreciate the warning.”

Adam nodded and faced the road, leaving Sheamus to his thoughts. They arrived back at Edward's manor far sooner than Sheamus wanted. Adam stopped in front of the kitchen door to let Sheamus off. "I'm sorry, Sheamus. He told me to tell you to go to his office as soon as you arrived. He said he'd be there waiting." He tethered the horses near the door and followed Sheamus inside.

Sheamus dropped his bag next to a chair at the kitchen table and took a seat. "He'll do nothing in his office, and he doesn't know I've arrived. I'll take some tea before I go to him." In truth, Sheamus needed to steady himself beforehand. Edward often took Sheamus on the floor of his office, though Sheamus knew he was the only one who received such treatment.

"I wish there was a way to get him locked up." Adam slammed a kettle onto the stove. "If only I could get a job elsewhere. I'd take Lucy and run as far from here as I could."

Sheamus knew it wouldn't happen. Adam had blonde hair, but his ten-year-old daughter's hair was as red as red could be. It was nearly impossible for redheads to find work. Jobs were difficult to find if you were Irish, or even if you looked Irish, and had been since the potato famine. It was one of the reasons Sheamus himself was trapped with Edward.

His father had been Irish, and a Traveller at that. The Travellers were the "Irish gypsies". His family had abandoned him for marrying a stationary English woman, and so Sheamus could not call on them for help. His mother had been an orphan, so Sheamus had no relatives on her side. With the stigma of being born to an Irish Traveller who became a drunkard after his wife's death, Sheamus had no options. No one would hire him if they knew, and Edward would make certain that they did.

Adam handed him a cup of tea. They drank together in silent understanding that they were trapped and nothing could change that.

Sheamus went to his room after finishing his tea. He put away his things, delaying the inevitable for a little longer. When all his things were put away and the room was as tidy as could be, Sheamus gave up.

He walked towards the office with trepidation. At last, he could stall no longer. He stood before the door for only a second before he opened it.

When Edward looked up at him from his seat at the desk, Sheamus lowered his eyes to the floor. "Harris said you wished to see me, sir."

Edward stood and approached him. "I'm very disappointed in you, Sheamus." He tsked lightly as he passed Sheamus and insinuated himself between Sheamus and the door.

"Sir?"

Edward crossed his arms. "Imagine my surprise when I came upon two men practicing sodomy in the barn during a visit to Lord Riverside's Manor. I did not see both men's faces, but I saw yours, that night."

Sheamus' hands began to shake. Edward knew how to twist the truth. He had taken Kevin and Tom's story and thrown in the mention of having seen Sheamus' face "that night."

"That wasn't me. I was in the manor playing—"

Edward burst into motion, grabbing Sheamus by the throat and pushing him backwards until he slammed against a wall. "Oh, I know it wasn't you."

Edward's hand was tight. Small black dots began to appear in Sheamus' vision. He couldn't breathe.

"But that will be the story I tell people who come looking for you." Edward's face contorted into a grotesque parody of a smile. "Unfortunately for you, someone reported you to

the police. You were jailed and died in prison. Too bad, so sad. No one will ever think to look for you again.”

“No...” Sheamus struggled for air, but found none. He blacked out.

~*~

Sheamus woke in a darkened room to screeching notes played on a violin. His mouth ached deeply, and he was lying naked and prone. The notes stopped when Sheamus tried to sit up. His tongue felt like it had been ripped off. His limbs were weak, and he could not push himself up.

Edward loomed over him then, Sheamus’ violin and bow in his hands. “Good. You’ve woken in time.”

For what? Sheamus wondered. His answer came a moment later when Edward laid the violin on the bed. He held the bow in both hands for a moment before snapping it in half.

Sheamus cringed. The bow had been his mother’s, like the violin, though he had replaced the bowstrings many times.

Edward threw the bow carelessly into a corner and picked up the violin.

Sheamus tried to scream. Pain sliced through his mouth, and grunts and shrieks were all that he could produce. He struggled to move, to grab the violin, but his movements were sluggish.

Edward smirked down at him and tossed the violin to the floor. It made a small cracking sound. Unsatisfied with the damage, Edward stomped on the violin, crushing it.

Sheamus closed his eyes and stopped struggling. James had left him, his parents were dead, and his connection to his music had been destroyed. There was no reason to fight anymore.

Edward climbed onto the bed a moment later. “Time for you to take your punishment.” He remained clothed, opening his trousers to pull himself out.

Sheamus wanted to retreat into the music as he usually did, but with the loss of his violin, it felt as though his safe place had been destroyed. There was no music left within him.

He lay still as Edward took him viciously, ripping him open.

“I know what you did with Lord Riverside,” said Edward.

Each thrust tore Sheamus apart. There was nowhere to run. He was too weak to fight back, and he didn’t even try. In the seventeen years Sheamus had suffered through Edward’s punishments, he had never once been able to escape. He felt like that twelve-year-old boy again, trapped under the sweaty, corpulent body of his master.

Sheamus closed his eyes as Edward’s grimy hands roamed over his body. A caress now accompanied each thrust, making the situation into a mockery of the lovemaking Sheamus had shared with James. Each touch erased the feeling of James’ hands, leaving behind the sensation of dirt coating his skin. Sheamus had known this kind of dirt before. James’ touch had cleansed him, but Sheamus knew now that he would always be soiled.

“I watched him watching you at those balls.” Edward slammed into Sheamus once more, groaning with pleasure as he came. “You must have been a good whore. I’ve never seen a man so enraptured.”

Sheamus didn’t bother answering him. His whole body felt abused, the pain radiating from deep within him.

Edward pulled out and tucked himself away, buttoning his trousers. He shoved Sheamus over onto his stomach, then climbed off the bed. Sheamus hoped he would leave.

He wasn’t that lucky. Before Sheamus knew what was happening, a horsewhip slashed through the air and sliced across his lower back. Sheamus arched away from the whip and tried

to cry out when the pain inside of him intensified. He screamed, and pain filled his mouth, cutting off his cry.

The whip came down, again and again. It came at random moments, ripping open the skin.

Sheamus wanted to move, to escape, but the pain held him motionless. It came at him from all angles, pulsing from his mouth to his abused throat, down his back and deep inside of him.

He opened his mouth to scream, but the pain was so bad it choked him, trapping the sound in his chest. Edward chuckled. "Have you figured it out yet?"

"What?" Sheamus asked. Or tried to, at least. It came out sounding like "Waaa?"

"You'll never talk again."

"Waaa?" Why?

"I cut out your tongue. Not the whole thing, but enough that you cannot speak properly." Edward chuckled. "I'll never have to listen to your smart mouth again."

The whip slashed across his buttocks. "You see, you are mine. And yet you slept with that baron. Indeed, I think you enjoyed sleeping with him. You liked being his slut."

Sheamus shook his head. It wasn't like that. It had never been like that. James cared about him.

"I know you did. You've never played as beautifully for me as you did at his balls. Why is that?" The whip opened up wounds across his back.

Sheamus whimpered and hated himself for it. He didn't want Edward to have this power over him. He didn't want to be so weak.

"No matter. From now on, you will play for no one." Edward whipped him faster, leaving behind deep wounds that Sheamus could feel bleeding. "You'll be mine, forever."

Sheamus' vision grew dark. Each crack of the whip made another gouge in his skin. Each wound meant more pain and more lost blood.

At last the pain was too much to bear. Sheamus passed out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

James shot out of the carriage, glad to be home. He had rushed through his visit with Duke Covington for he was anxious to return to Riverside Manor and Sheamus.

He left the driver to unload his baggage and raced up the front steps. He opened the front door. Noise greeted him from the parlor—music. He headed towards it.

Ever mindful of appearances, James took his time walking. Each step filled him with dread as he heard the music more clearly. It was not the notes of a violin that danced through the air. It was a piano, and the song was one of Richard's favorites. He opened the door to the parlor.

Richard sat alone, playing a mournful piece by Mozart. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Lord Riverside, you're back."

"So I am." James slumped against the door frame. "I assume Mr. Flynn is gone?"

Richard faltered and hit a sour note. "Edward sent for him the moment he found out you'd left for the countryside." He spun around on the piano bench. "That man is incredibly odd. Do you know that when we played for his balls, he would spend nearly half the evening glaring at Flynn?"

James nodded. He had attended one of the balls and had thought Edward's behavior quite odd. Sheamus had brushed it off at the time, leaving James to wonder what the real story was. "Did Edward explain why he needed Mr. Flynn so quickly? I hadn't planned for any more events this season, but he could have continued tutoring you for a few more weeks." Perhaps James could call him back to continue the lessons for a few more months.

"That may have been my fault. At the last ball he held, he asked me how my lessons were going." Richard smiled sheepishly. "I wanted to make Sheamus look good, so I mentioned he was such a fabulous teacher that I had almost mastered the violin."

While James wouldn't say Richard had mastered the violin, Sheamus had proclaimed that he had taught him almost all that he could, being only partially trained himself. If only Richard had less musical talent...

James sighed. "I suppose we won't see Mr. Flynn again unless we have need of two musicians for an event." He couldn't think of any events he could host that would require two musicians, at least not until the next Season. And hiring Sheamus for anything else would seem odd, since he already had an in-house musician.

"Too bad." Richard turned back to the piano. "He was rather quiet, but I liked working with him." He began to play the same mournful tune.

Then again, Richard would be leaving for the university after he turned 21. James would need a musician then. Perhaps he would be able to purchase Sheamus' debt from Edward.

James settled into a chair. It would be months before he could see Sheamus again, but James would find a way to install Sheamus in his household. They would never have to be parted again. "Play something a little more cheerful, Richard. I'm feeling rather content at the moment."

~*~

Only a month later, James was given a reason to call Sheamus back to Riverside Manor. It was just past nine in the morning when Alexander escorted Lance into James' library. Lance was smiling, a sight James hadn't seen in years.

"Good morning, Lance. Do have a seat."

Lance shook his head. "I can't sit. I've too much to do. I just wanted to share the good news with you two." He grinned. "I'm getting married."

"Congratulations, sir." Alexander gave a slight bow and escaped.

"You look excited," said James. "I thought you didn't want to get married."

Lance leaned on the back of a chair. "No, I didn't want to marry the women my mother picked out for me."

"Who's the lucky woman then?"

"Elizabeth Osmond. We're getting married in December."

James nearly knocked his inkwell over. "That's five months from now!"

"I know." Lance flopped into the chair. "It's so far away."

Not a month past, all Lance could talk about was how he never wanted to marry. "I thought your mother disapproved of Miss Osmond."

Lance's smile disappeared. "She does. I was disowned after I announced our engagement." Lance crossed his arms. "I don't care though. I am the Baron of Franklin, whether she likes it or not. She may control the family money, but Franklin is entitled property. I'll always have somewhere to live."

"You've finally grown up." James stood and moved around the desk to get a bottle of scotch. "I suppose congratulations are in order... and consolations, seeing as how you are trading in a crazy mother for an insane mother-in-law."

Lance accepted a glass of scotch. "Lady Catherine isn't that bad, really." He peered into his glass. "She's in favor of our marriage. She's been worried about Elizabeth getting married since her husband doesn't have a title." He took a big swig. "That's really all she sees me as—a title—but she's paying for medical school for me, something my mother would never do, so I can't hate her for it."

"You may tolerate the mother, but how do you feel about the daughter?"

"I love her." Lance set down the scotch. James hadn't seen him voluntarily put down a glass of alcohol in years. "And for some strange reason, she loves me too. Which reminds me, I'm supposed to meet her in an hour." He stood up and walked away from the alcohol without glancing back.

Grabbing him by the shoulder, James forced Lance to stop. "Let me throw you an engagement party."

"I would never refuse a party!" Lance grinned and pulled James into a quick hug.

In the past, when they had embraced even briefly, James' heart had always begun to beat in double-time. Now he felt nothing except happiness that his friend had found someone to love—as James had found Sheamus.

Sheamus! James could borrow him from Edward for the engagement party! He'd have to come at least a week before the party. They could spend that time together again.

He pulled away from Lance. "Go on, get out of here. I've got planning to do."

~*~

James wasted no time. He visited Edward's country estate the next day, anxious to see Sheamus again. Kevin had hardly brought the carriage to a stop when James clambered out of it. He took a deep breath, reminding himself that he needed to maintain appearances, and strode to the door. He knocked loudly and smiled at the butler when he opened the door.

"Good day, sir. I'm here to see Sir Cade. He isn't expecting me, I'm afraid." James stepped inside of the door when the butler opened it. "My calling card." He presented the card to the man, who scanned it and bowed.

"Please wait here," said the butler.

James waited patiently, glancing around the entryway. It was overly ornate, and it was obvious that a lot of money had been spent on the gaudy furnishings. Edward had made his money in the British East India Company. He had withdrawn from the company before the revolt occurred and had escaped with most of his accrued riches intact.

The gilt mirrors and plush carpets were lovely, but not to James' taste. He wrinkled his nose at himself in the mirror and laughed. He felt like he was on top of the world. He'd see Sheamus soon, and hopefully James would be able to convince Edward to let Sheamus stay at Riverside Manor for a little while after the engagement party—so that he could play at a few small dinner parties, of course, and not because James wanted to tie Sheamus to his bed and ravish him.

At last the butler returned, and James followed him to Edward's office. Edward stood as he entered and nodded. "Good day, Lord Riverside. How are you?"

James chafed, not wanting to waste time on small talk, but he replied in the same thread. "I am well, and you?"

Edward shrugged, "As well as can be expected, I suppose. What can I do to help you?" He sneered at the word "help", but James ignored it.

"I've come to inquire about hiring Mr. Flynn again, for an engagement party I'm hosting for Baron Franklin." James bit back all of the emotions that wanted to come flooding out of him and gave Edward a sedate smile.

Edward winced. "I'm afraid that's quite impossible."

James' smile fell. "Why?"

"The police learned of his perverted nature. He'd been cavorting with men." Edward shook his head slowly. "Mr. Flynn... well, he's buried in the plot out back." He clucked his tongue. "He was stabbed soon after arriving at the prison. Seems the boy couldn't keep a civil tongue in his mouth to save his life."

James' chest tightened and his throat clenched. "He's dead?" Sheamus couldn't be dead. James didn't want to think about it. He took a deep shuddering breath. "I have no further reason to trouble you then. Thank you for your time. I'll be on my way."

He didn't hear Edward's reply. He left the room without looking back, his steps growing faster and faster as he returned to the front door. He waved the butler off, pulling the door open and shutting it forcefully behind him. Heart racing, he began walking around the side of the house. He'd seen the Edward family plot before, and he headed in that direction.

Kevin raced over from his place by the carriage to intercept him. "Riverside, where are you going?" His shorter stride made it difficult for him to keep up with James and he began running. "What's wrong?"

James swallowed hard. "Sheamus is dead." He didn't want to say the words or even think them. It made his death feel too real.

Kevin froze and fell behind, but James couldn't wait for him to catch up. The mausoleum was in view.

He entered the small burial plot. The majority of those buried there would be the Edward family, who had lived on the estate for many years. They were the ones inside of the mausoleum though. Outside were the servants' headstones.

James knew the more recent graves would be along the edges of the graveyard. He walked along the edge of the plot, looking at all of the stones. Most were simple and bore only a name. The lower classes didn't usually keep track of birthdates, though it was becoming more common for them to do so.

James had nearly circled the entire plot when he finally stumbled on single small gravestone surrounded by weeds. The weatherworn stone bore only one name—Flynn.

James sank to the ground next to the stone and let his sorrow pour out of him. Sobs shook his body and tears flowed from his eyes. Appearances no longer mattered. Sheamus was dead, long dead by the looks of the grave, and James had failed to be there for him, as he had failed his mother.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The lucid moments were few and far between. Edward kept Sheamus locked in the darkened room at all times, sending Adam with food and water twice a day if he was feeling generous. Sheamus had lost track of the days quickly, and now his life was a never-ending cycle of sleep and pain.

Mostly, he slept. It was easy to imagine things were different in his dreams. He dreamed of his mother, alive again. He imagined what his life would be like if he could have stayed with James. He wished, during his nightmares, that he had died.

The pain was excruciating. Edward continued to take him daily, as far as Sheamus could tell without being able to see the sun or a clock. The welts on his back healed slowly, and they opened up every time he moved. He was constantly thirsty, but with only a stub of a tongue, he struggled to swallow and often choked on plain water.

The first two weeks were clear in Sheamus' mind: pain, little food, endless night. Then infection settled into his wounds, and fever ravaged his body. Hallucinations overtook his mind. At one point, he felt his mother wiping his brow with a cool cloth. At another, the walls fell in on him, burying him alive. Monsters with the face of his tormentor were his constant companions.

Through it all, he was voiceless. He had discovered that he could make a few different noises—vowel sounds mostly—but words were impossible.

The infection progressed, and his world narrowed. There were only a few moments a day when he knew what was going on around him. Usually, he was alone during those moments.

It surprised him when he surfaced from the depths of his illness one day and heard voices.

“Why is Mr. Flynn locked in here?” The voice of a small girl echoed Sheamus' thoughts, probably part of another hallucination.

Adam answered the voice anyway. “Lucy! You aren't supposed to be in here!”

“But Daddy, why is he locked up?”

Adam sighed. “Because the baronet ordered it.”

A small, cool hand brushed across his brow. “He's hot. Is he sick?”

“Yes. His wounds are infected.”

The hand withdrew. “We need to call the doctor!”

“Edward won't let me.”

“But we need to take care of him.”

“He's been given alcohol to dull the pain, and I've cleansed and bound his wounds. I've done all that I can for him, Lucy.”

“No, you haven't.” Sheamus could hear a frown in the stubborn little girl's voice. “You have to tell someone how sick he is.”

“I can't, and neither can you, Lucy. Not if we want to keep our jobs.” The door opened. “Now get out of here before Edward sees you.” The door closed.

Sheamus began to drift back into the darkness. Adam couldn't tell and keep his job. Sheamus understood. But was a job really worth Sheamus' life?

Lucy returned; how many days later Sheamus couldn't tell. This time he was awake when they entered his room. He couldn't move for the pain and illness, and he couldn't speak, so all he could do was listen to them discuss him.

"Did you tell?" Lucy asked.

Adam's voice was terse. "I can't."

"Before mother died, she called you her knight in white armor. I thought that meant you were brave."

"Do you want to starve, Lucy? Do you want to end up living on the streets or in the poorhouse?"

"No, but I'd rather live in the poorhouse than see Mr. Flynn die."

"Lucy..." Adam approached the bed and knelt next to it. Sheamus could see him from the corner of his eye, but Adam didn't notice he was awake. He bent lower, disappearing under the edge of the bed.

When he emerged, Sheamus' violin was in his hands. Only the neck of the violin was intact. The strings held part of the body to the neck, but the rest was in small pieces.

"I saved this," said Adam. "I'll take it to Lord Riverside and tell him to make of it what he will."

"Thank you," Lucy breathed, and Sheamus wanted to echo her.

"I can't tell him everything, but hopefully it will be enough to make him understand."

They left and the room was dark and silent once more. Sheamus expected to lapse back into unconsciousness then, but he lay in the dark thinking for hours. If only Adam would tell James everything. If only James would save him. If only he were safe.

If only...

CHAPTER NINE

“James, you need to take better care of yourself.” Alexander stood next to James’ desk, a concerned look on his face. “It’s been a month since you found out. Flynn... he wouldn’t want you to live like this.”

“You can’t say that. You hardly knew Sheamus!” snapped James.

Alexander leaned forward and snatched away James’ bottle of rum. “Milord, truthfully, would he want you to mourn him to your own death by alcohol?”

James couldn’t answer that. He and Sheamus had never discussed anything like that. They had had so little time together, and James had taken it for granted.

“Besides,” said Alexander, “you’re turning into a bigger drunkard than Lance.”

Alexander’s look of disgust shamed James. He had once been appalled by Lance’s drinking habits.

“I... thank you. I think maybe you are right. Sheamus would not expect me to mourn like this.” Sheamus expected nothing from anyone. James wondered what it was that had made the man feel he could trust so few.

Alexander nodded. “Naturally, I’m right.” He paused to look at the bottle in his hand. “And that, of course, means you won’t fire me for speaking to you so bluntly.”

James snickered, amused. “Your job is safe.”

Alexander sighed in relief. “Then, I will continue speaking my mind. How do you know Flynn is dead?”

James covered his face with his hands. “Edward told me Sheamus had been jailed. He died in prison with no one there to protect him.”

Alexander cocked his head to the side. “But Edward never actually said Flynn was dead, did he?”

“He said Sheamus was buried in the Edward’s plot. I saw the gravestone myself. All it said was the name ‘Flynn’. They couldn’t even write his first name on it!” James was beginning to babble, likely due to the alcohol. He forced himself to focus on the question. “I’m quite sure that meant ‘He’s dead.’”

“Or, it could mean that Sheamus ran away, and Edward doesn’t want anyone to know.”

James stared at Alexander for a moment. “What?”

“Edward’s servant brought you that violin, right? If Flynn had been sent to prison, why would he break his violin before going?”

James didn’t know.

“Perhaps someone else broke the violin and drove Flynn away.”

“But why would Edward say he died?”

“Edward is a prideful man. If he had broken the violin, I’m sure he would rather people thought Flynn died than managed to escape his debt.

James wanted to let himself hope. He wanted to believe there was a chance that Sheamus was alive, but he risked losing Sheamus all over again if he learned he was truly dead. James closed his eyes. Did he dare risk it?

He opened his eyes and began searching through his desk drawers. “If there is any chance that Sheamus is alive, I will find him. The private investigators I worked with to free Lance are still in business. I’ll hire them to search for him.”

Alexander hopped off the desk. “He’s probably still nearby.”

James grinned for the first time in a month when he found the paper bearing the investigators' address. "I'll find him, no matter where he is."

~*~

Mr. Winston, private investigator extraordinaire, greeted James at the door to his office and escorted him to a seat. Not bothering with any small talk, he began, "We found him, milord, but I don't think you'll be happy when you learn where he is."

"And where is that?"

Winston grimaced. "He's being held captive by Sir Cade Edward."

James leaped up. "He has no right to do such a thing! I will retrieve him at once."

Winston shook his head. "You should let the police do that, milord. Edward has committed numerous crimes upon Mr. Flynn's person, and you'll need the police as witnesses if you wish to send the man who killed your sister and her husband to jail."

James fell back into the chair, his legs unable to support him. "What?"

"In the course of investigating Edward, I spoke with a servant of his. She procured for me these documents." Winston pushed a few pieces of paper across his desk.

James picked up the top paper, which was written in a mix of English and Indian. Using the knowledge of the language he had retained, he picked out the meaning of the note. *I cannot pay you, but I understand you have an interest in Covington's title. Give me the information and I will give you what you want.*

Edward had been one of the first men James had investigated after the rebellion, as he was third in line for the duke's title, but Winston had not found any proof of his part in the attack back then. "How do I know this is real?"

Winston shrugged. "You don't. I don't know myself. But the servant who gave me these papers is a ten-year-old girl, so I'm inclined to believe they are real."

James stared down at the note in his hand. For twenty years he had been civil with the man who ordered his sister killed. He had even sent his nephew into the home of the man who wanted him dead. "Is this enough to prosecute him?"

"No. But the sworn testimony of the police officers who rescue Mr. Flynn will be enough to charge him with wounding with intent to cause bodily harm, choking in order to commit an indictable offence, and neglecting a servant whereby life is endangered. All three charges bear the sentence of penal servitude, two for life. He won't be able to pay his way out of two life sentences."

It wouldn't be true justice for his sister's death, but it would lock Edward away for life. It would keep him from ever being able to touch Sheamus again. With all the harm Edward had done to Sheamus, that was worth more than being able to prove his involvement in the rebellion.

"Call the police. I want Sheamus saved tonight."

~*~

Sheamus teetered on the edge of death.

James sat at his bedside, holding the hand of the man he loved. The things Edward had done to Sheamus were even worse than Winston had reported. When the police burst into the house to arrest Edward, they discovered him sodomizing Sheamus. While James wished he hadn't had to go through that, at least it was yet another lifetime sentence that was added to Edward tally.

No amount of jail time could bring back Sheamus' tongue though. James had hardly believed the doctors when they included that information in the tally of injuries inflicted upon Sheamus.

Sheamus moaned. James squeezed his hand gently to calm him. “Don’t worry, love. Edward’s trial ends today. Between the doctors’ and police officers’ testimonies, he’ll never get out of the charges.” Covington had used his political power to get Edward case brought to trial just over a week after his arrest. After three days of deliberation, the verdict would be given that afternoon.

James wished he could be there for the decision, but after two weeks of treatment, Sheamus was still suffering from a high fever and infection. James wanted to be at his side if he woke up—or if he passed on.

The door opened and Adam popped his head in. James had hired the man after Edward’s arrest when he learned Mrs. Edward had fired him. If Adam hadn’t brought him the violin, James would never have looked for Sheamus. He would have died in the hellhole Edward had hidden him in.

“Mr. Bartow needs you in the kitchen,” Adam said. “Something about Richard and Kelly?”

Oh, dear. James hoped it wasn’t what he thought it might be. He had seen the two flirting and giggling together, but they hadn’t seemed too serious.

In the kitchen, Victoria Bartow was hustling around preparing dinner, a worried frown on her face. Jane was assisting her and pretending she wasn’t paying attention to what was happening. Alexander sat on one side of the table and Richard and Kelly sat on the other, holding hands.

Alexander looked up as James entered. “I’m sorry, milord. I didn’t realize they had gotten so close.”

James patted him on the shoulder. “I didn’t either. We knew this was coming though.” He took a seat next to Alexander. “Am I to understand you wish to marry Miss Kelly?”

Richard nodded. “Yes. I don’t know what the big deal is. I tried to tell Mum and Dad we were getting engaged and they both clammed up and refused to talk to us!”

It was time for Richard to know the truth, but James couldn’t be sure it was safe until Covington arrived from court. “Can we discuss this later? The duke should be here soon, and he needs to be a part of this conversation.”

Miss Kelly blanched and ducked her head. “I know I’m not exactly pure,” she said quietly, bringing one of her hands to rest on her pregnant belly, “but I’m not who you’re thinking I am.”

Richard glared at James. “How dare you? Kelly was never a prostitute. She was raped.” He placed a hand on top of hers. “Once the child is born, she’ll be able to prove it.”

James shook his head. “The duke should be here any moment...” That was something else to consider though. If Kelly had been a prostitute once...

Kelly’s shoulders shook as she began to cry. “Please, my lord, my father was the second son of an Irish baron whose brother took the family money and left him penniless.”

Ah, well, that made that easier. She was certainly of a high enough social standing to marry Richard, even if her family had been impoverished. “It’s not that at all. The duke—”

“Has arrived, though no one was at the door to greet him,” Covington drawled from the hallway. “I come bearing good news and find a hullabaloo awaiting me.”

James rose from his seat and offered it to the duke. “Duke, what happened at court?”

“Edward will spend the rest of his miserable life working for the Queen.” Covington sat down. “He was sentenced to three lifetimes of penal servitude.”

Kelly’s eyes widened. “You mean... he’s locked away forever?”

“Forever and a day, my dear.”

She burst into tears.

“Kelly?” Richard rubbed her back. “What’s wrong?”

“He was the one...” She sobbed loudly. “It’s... his babe.” She buried her face in Richard’s shoulder.

The duke shook his head. “Yet another sin to add to his tally sheet.”

Richard patted her awkwardly on the back. “It doesn’t matter. I still love you and the baby.”

Kelly cried harder. “But I don’t!”

Jane hurried over, her pretense of not listening broken. She squatted next to the crying woman. “Kelly, remember what I said that first night when you were worried you’d end up pregnant?”

Kelly pulled her face from Richard’s neck. “Did you really mean it? You’ll take the babe?”

Jane nodded. “You don’t need the baby to prove what he did to you, not anymore. He’s already in prison. You’re safe.”

Kelly threw her arms around Jane’s neck. “Thank you. I’d never be able to look at it without remembering... but I want it to have a happy life.”

“Jane will be a wonderful mother.” Victoria smiled sadly. “You’ll love the baby as if you carried it yourself.”

“Yes, I will.” Jane patted Kelly’s stomach, then stood up so she could return to cooking.

Covington nodded approvingly and leaned forward in his seat. “Now that we have dealt with that, did I hear my grandson declare himself in love with you, Miss Kelly?”

Victoria dropped her knife. Flustered, she picked it up and threw it in the wash basin. She began rummaging through the silverware drawer for a replacement.

Kelly flushed, her pale cheeks filling with red. “Yes, my lord.”

Richard’s eyes widened. “Kelly?”

She looked away.

Richard stood up, his chair screeching across the floor. “I don’t understand.” He spun to face the duke. “I thought your grandson died in India.”

Victoria stopped fiddling around in the drawer. “No. The baby who died was my son Lucas.” She turned back to face them all, silent tears dripping down her cheeks.

“I don’t understand,” Richard said. “You said you only gave birth once. If your son died... who I am?”

“You are Richard Fairfield, Marquess of Livingston, heir of the Duke of Covington.” Victoria turned away.

Richard looked at Alexander. “Father?”

“She’s telling the truth.”

Richard met the eyes of everyone in the room. No one appeared surprised except Jane. He fixed his gaze on Covington. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

James walked around the table so he could place a hand on Richard’s shoulder. “It was my idea.”

Richard shrugged off his hand. “Why lie to me?”

“Because I was there during the attack. I saw your mother, my sister, bleed to death on the floor.” James bowed his head. “I couldn’t let that happen to you.”

“But why the secrecy? We’re in England now.”

“You and your mother were the only civilians targeted in the attack. Someone sold the Indians information in exchange for your deaths. I knew that if they discovered you were still alive, you’d be targeted again.” James motioned towards Victoria. “Your parents lost their baby in the attack, and I convinced them to pretend you were their own. I was able to hide you in plain sight.”

“Did you never wonder why you received an education beyond anything someone of your social standing could hope to receive?” Covington asked.

Richard shook his head. “I thought it was because Riverside was friends with... Alexander.”

Alexander flinched at his name.

“He’s still your father, even if he is not a blood relation,” James said softly. “And Victoria is still your mother.”

Victoria wrung her apron anxiously. “Even knowing I’d lose you one day, I still loved you with all my heart. I’ll keep loving you until the day I die.”

Richard blinked rapidly. “Mum... I...”

Alexander stood and crossed to Richard. Taking hold of him by the shoulders, Alexander forced Richard to look him in the eye. “We lied to keep you safe. We lied because we loved you.” He hugged Richard, then stepped back. “Never forget that.”

“So why tell me the truth now?”

“Because Edward was the man who had your parents murdered, and he is safely locked away in prison.” Covington patted the chair beside him. “Now, would you all please sit down? I’m getting a crick in my neck from looking up at you.”

Everyone laughed nervously, and they settled into seats, except for Jane who returned to fixing their supper. Covington took control of the conversation, explaining to Richard why they had chosen to do what they had done. James nodded along as the duke spoke, interjecting only when necessary.

Richard sat rigidly, holding Kelly’s hand. His parents sat on the other side of him quietly. It couldn’t have been easy for them to sit there and lose the son they had raised just as they had lost the son they conceived. Victoria had been stabbed in the gut during the attack while caring for James’ sister and both babies, and she’d been left unable to conceive. Even at the small funeral for her baby, she had cared for Richard as if he were her own.

James did what he could to smooth things over, but when Richard cringed away from his mother’s hug, he knew there would be more work to do.

On the other hand, Richard took the news that he was heir to a duke exceedingly well. The skills James had his tutors instill in him quickly reappeared; when Richard and Covington began to discuss business affairs, James slipped out the door.

Upstairs, Adam was sitting next to Sheamus’ bed. The man’s head was bowed and his hands were clasped in his lap. He looked up as James entered the room.

“There’s been no change. He’s mumbled a few times and jerked his arms a bit, but he hasn’t opened his eyes.”

James nodded and took Adam’s place at the bedside. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be here. Please call me when dinner is ready.”

Adam nodded and backed out of the room.

Using a wet, damp washcloth, James wiped Sheamus’ brow. It was deeply furrowed. James supposed he was having a bad dream. He sympathized; all of his dreams had been nightmares since he discovered how Edward had treated Sheamus. He wished Sheamus had told

him before what a monster Edward was; he would never have left Sheamus in the man's hands, not even to fulfill his deal with the duke.

He draped the cool washcloth across Sheamus' forehead and settled back into his chair. He would wait this time. He would never leave Sheamus to face the world alone again.

CHAPTER TEN

Sheamus woke up to James' snores. James was sleeping in a chair next to Sheamus' bed. How odd; James always slept in bed with him. Had he finally stolen the covers one time too many?

Sheamus shifted—then cried out. Pain filled his body. The room shrunk around him, darkness creeping into the corners and fear filling every crevice in the floorboards. The plush bed turned into his dank cot, soiled with bodily fluids. He could smell his blood and sweat combining into an acidic, coppery scent that burned his nostrils. He closed his eyes.

“Shh, shh, shh, it's okay.”

The voice was a light in the darkness. Sheamus opened his eyes and found James leaning over him.

James smiled brightly, lighting up the room. “You're awake. You're finally awake!”

Sheamus shook his head. He was still trapped in that dark room. Edward would be there soon to torture him. This was simply another dream.

James leaned forward and kissed him, hard. “God, you're alive!” Another kiss. “I was so afraid...”

The kisses were sweet—literally. James tasted like chocolate cake. His hallucinations had never tasted like chocolate cake before. Sheamus peered around James' head. They were his bedroom at Riverside, the one he had hardly slept in since he spent most of his nights in James' room. His violin and music stand were missing from the corner where he had always kept them; in his other imaginings, the violin had always been there, unbroken.

James rested his forehead against Sheamus', squeezing his eyes closed. “Everyone said you wouldn't make it; you'd been sick for so long.”

“Ames...” James' name came out sounding like nonsense. With only a stub of a tongue, Sheamus couldn't make the “J” sound, and his “S” was more of a hiss of air than anything recognizable.

James opened his eyes. “What is it?”

Sheamus tried again. “Ames.”

“Aim? Aim at what?”

Sheamus shook his head. “Ames.”

James pulled back. “I don't understand.” He frowned. “Can you point to it?” He lifted one of Sheamus' weak arms.

Sheamus twisted his wrist to point at James. “Oo.”

“Me?” James face lit up, his eyes wrinkling at the corners as he grinned widely. “James?”

Sheamus nodded.

“I'm right here. I'm going to stay right here.” He laid Sheamus' arm back down gently. “I'm never letting you go again.”

Sheamus looked around the room again. Everything seemed so real. The bed was incredibly soft beneath him. The sheets were warm and soft. He felt clean, and the welts from the whip didn't burn like they had.

This was no hallucination. Sheamus was safe. He was free.

Elation washed over him. Sheamus wanted to shout that he had been saved, but he was too weak. The fever had wiped him out.

Already he could feel himself slipping back into sleep. He grabbed James' hand with his own. "Ames."

James squeezed his hand. "I know. It's late. Sleep."

Sheamus closed his eyes. He would find some way to talk, to thank James for saving him. The peacefulness of sleep began to overtake him.

Sheamus could write—not very well, but good enough. If he could get some paper and a pen, he could tell James thank you. He could tell James that he loved him...

~*~

Sheamus woke up the next day with no fever. The world was bright and cheery, sunshine flowing in the window and filtering through the dust motes to shine on Sheamus' bed. The reflection of the light off his white sheets was blindingly perfect compared to the darkness he half-expected to find.

James slept beside the bed, his hand still within reach. Sheamus grasped the hand and squeezed it.

He awoke with a start. "Wha... sorry... Sheamus!"

Sheamus squeezed his hand again.

"I am so glad you are alright." James' smile was beatific. "You were asleep so long..."

Releasing James' hand, Sheamus mimed writing in the air.

"Conducting?" James frowned.

Sheamus tried again, this time using his other hand to mimic writing on paper.

"Oh, writing!" James scurried over to the dresser and opened the top drawer. "Adam mentioned you can write, so I tucked this away." He pulled out a small book and a pencil.

Sheamus took the pencil, but he had to motion for James to place the book on the bed—it was too heavy for him to hold. With James' help, he rolled onto his side and opened the book. It was full of blank pages, ready for him to spill his thoughts upon them.

The first thing he wrote was *I Love You*.

James read it slowly. He bit his bottom lip, then smiled. "Me too." He sat down on the edge of the bed and leaned over to kiss Sheamus, who responded happily before withdrawing so he could write again.

Tell everything, Sheamus scrawled. He wanted to know everything that had happened. How had James gotten him away from Edward? And how had James met Adam?

James sighed. "It started when I learned you were dead..."

Sheamus listened with rapt attention as James detailed all of the lies Edward had told and how he, with the help of a private investigator, had discovered the truth. Adam and his daughter had helped gain proof of Edward's crimes, and James had rewarded them with positions in his household after Edward was captured.

Edward was jailed on multiple counts, but they hadn't been able to catch him for his worst crimes—ordering the deaths of James' sister and infant nephew. Only, James' nephew wasn't actually dead. He had been hidden away under the ruse of being the son of James' servants, and Richard Bartow was in fact heir of the Duke of Covington. Sheamus was shocked, but delighted for the boy. He was especially pleased when James explained that he would never have to go to the duke's estate again, as Richard had begun to take over the duke's various businesses.

Finally, James said it had only been three months since Edward had first attacked him. It had felt far longer to Sheamus. So much had happened in such a short amount of time.

"And Edward has been sentenced to penal servitude for three lifetimes."

Sheamus took a deep, shuddering breath. Edward would never be able to hurt him again. Being convicted of a felony meant he would lose his baronet title. He'd be disgraced among the ton. No amount of money would release him from three lifetime convictions.

Edward couldn't touch him

For the first time in his adult life, Sheamus was free.

James wiped Sheamus' face with a soft cloth—"Shh, don't cry."—and he realized tears were leaking from his eyes. He forced the tears away and gave James a smile.

James kissed him again, and all thoughts of Edward flew from his head.

Then visitors began to show up at his door. All of James' servants came to visit, including Richard, who was decked out in expensive clothing but still had the same easy-going attitude. He stayed long enough to play Mozart's Violin Sonata Number 21 for Sheamus. The song sounded bittersweet to Sheamus. His violin was gone, but his mother's memory would live on in that song.

A doctor visited late that morning and declared his recovery a miracle, especially when he was able to prove that he hadn't suffered any brain damage from his fever, which had lasted two and a half months. However, Sheamus wasn't well yet. He hadn't eaten much except broth for the past two months. His muscles were weak and he had lost a lot of weight. It would take a long time for him to regain his energy.

Sheamus had been awake for only three hours when the doctor left, but his body was heavy with exhaustion. James had stayed by his side through all the visitors, and Sheamus penned him another message before he fell asleep.

Stay with me.

James climbed into bed with him, wrapping his arms around him. "Always."

~*~

Two months of convalescence later, Sheamus was finally well enough to leave the house for short drives. One morning, as Sheamus and James were riding about town in a carriage for some fresh air, James instructed the driver to stop in front of a shop. It was mid-January, but they were in the midst of a warm spell, so James had taken to letting Sheamus ride along on his shorter errands.

James hopped out of the carriage and offered Sheamus a hand down. He had not gotten out at any of their previous stops, and Sheamus wondered why James wanted him to come along now. Sheamus waved off the help, not wishing to look weak in public, though he struggled slightly as he climbed down from the carriage.

They entered the shop, which smelled of wood and varnish. The owner, a very large man, stood to greet them. The walls of the shop were covered in instruments, and Sheamus winced. Since his rescue, Sheamus had considered buying a new violin, but it wouldn't feel the same. It wouldn't have belonged to his mother.

"Good day, Lord Riverside!"

"Mr. Smith, this is my close friend Sheamus Flynn, a talented violinist. Mr. Flynn, this is Montgomery Smith, an expert instrument maker."

Smith beamed. "Thank you for your kind words, milord. It is wonderful to meet you, Mr. Flynn."

Sheamus nodded.

Smith frowned.

James rushed to fill the silence. "He lost his voice from an illness."

Smith nodded knowingly. “Ah, but a musician is never silenced. We speak through our instruments.”

James nodded. “Speaking of instruments, is the violin ready?”

“It is!” Smith turned and waddled his way to the back of the store. “I’ll be just a minute.” He disappeared through a door.

Sheamus took the privacy of the moment to grab James’ hand and squeeze it. James had bought him a violin. He wanted to kiss him. He settled for smiling.

Smith returned far too quickly and Sheamus had to drop James’ hand. Smith had retrieved a violin almost identical to Sheamus’ mother’s. He moved to hand it to James, but James shook his head. “It’s for him.”

Smith smiled. “A splendid gift.”

Sheamus took the violin from him gingerly, running his fingers along the edge of the body and over the strings. It was already tuned and sounded beautiful.

“I’m afraid I wasn’t able to salvage much of the original. The bow was a lost cause, as was the body. The neck was in good condition though, aside from a few scuffs, and the chin rest was fine, so I crafted a similar body to attach it to. I did use a slightly thicker wood to make it sturdier, but I think you’ll find that it’s virtually identical to the broken.”

Eyes wide, Sheamus stared at James.

“Yes, it’s made from your old one,” said James. “Adam brought it to me, and I contracted Mr. Smith to repair it. I hope it is acceptable.”

Sheamus nodded vigorously. It was bloody perfect. He hefted it to his shoulder. The fit wasn’t quite the same, but it was close. More importantly, it felt solid. His fingers itched to play it and test its strength.

Smith hustled to the back room and returned with a bow in hand. “Do play a song for us, Mr. Flynn.”

Sheamus took the bow and ran it across the strings, getting used to the feel of the instrument. He knew exactly which song to play—Mozart’s Violin Sonata Number 21, his mother’s lullaby.

The notes came slowly at first, his hands clumsy. By the end of the song, he was playing as though he had never lost his violin. The instrument felt even sturdier than before it had been broken, and it sounded even more beautiful.

He smiled at James, conscious of Smith. He wished he could tell James how much he loved him, but he didn’t have his notebook. Instead, he launched into a song that James had complimented him on after a dinner, letting his love flow through his music.

James caught his eyes, and he knew his love was returned. Sheamus fell into the music, letting himself drift away from the real world.

~*~

Back at the manor, James escorted Sheamus to his room. “I know you want to play, but it’s time to rest.” He lifted the violin case from Sheamus’ hands and carried it over to the dresser where he carefully set it down.

Sheamus wasn’t worried about playing his violin, however. He had something much more strenuous in mind.

While Sheamus healed, James had not initiated anything between them. When Sheamus attempted to seduce him, James would let things go as far as a mutual wank, but no further. While Sheamus appreciated the gesture, he was beyond ready to be fucked.

While James was mumbling about sleep and searching for Sheamus’ dressing gown, Sheamus slid off his clothes and climbed onto the bed. He grabbed the oil from the drawer in his

nightstand and slathered some on his fingers. Reaching backwards, he tentatively circled his entrance with one finger, then slid it inside.

He had been practicing stretching himself, uncertain as to whether he would be able to handle any abuse after what Edward had done to him. He found that his arse hole was a very resilient body part—it could easily stretch to accommodate four fingers with no pain, so long as he took his time.

By the time James found the dressing gown, Sheamus had already added a second finger and begun scissoring them apart. James turned to him—“I found it!”—only to drop the gown on the floor. “What are you doing?”

Sheamus gave James a look. What a silly question. Pausing to get some more oil, he added a third finger.

James shook his head. “No, stop that. I didn’t fix the violin so you would have sex with me.”

Well, obviously, since Sheamus had been trying to tempt James for at least a month. He spread his fingers wide. There was a slight burn, but no real pain. He continued stretching nonetheless.

James put his fists on his hips. “Honestly, is this because of the violin?”

“Mo,” said Sheamus. It was the closest he could get to ‘no’.

James threw his hands in the air. “Why are you doing this?”

Sheamus set the oil aside for a moment and pulled his other hand out of his arse. He pointed at himself, then crooked his two pointer fingers into horns on either side of his head.

“You’re horny?”

“Es!” Sheamus set back to work stretching himself, making sure to cry out with overly dramatic moans and groans of pleasure.

“Are you sure you’re well enough for this?”

No, Sheamus really wasn’t sure he was well enough. Physically, he would be fine. Mentally...

Edward had done a lot of damage.

But he had to try. “Es.” He crooked a finger at James to beckon him closer.

Shaking his head, James stripped off his clothes. “Fine, but we’re going to do this carefully.” He slid onto the bed. He tugged at Sheamus’ wrist until his fingers slipped out. “Give me the oil.”

Sheamus handed it over, but instead of laying back and letting James do all the work, he scrambled out of bed and over to the dresser. He grabbed the scarves he had secreted away then returned to James. He handed over the scarves, laid back, and put his hands above his head.

James stared down at the scarves. “I don’t need these.” He tossed them aside. “I don’t need anything except you.”

Sheamus grabbed the scarves and handed them back to James. “Me. Me.” He pointed at his chest to emphasize his muffled words. James might not need the scarves, but Sheamus did. He needed an anchor to keep him here, to keep his mind from falling into the memories.

James considered the scarves for a moment. He looked up at Sheamus, studying him.

“What’s your safe word?”

“Mosaw.” Mozart came out as a jumble of sounds. Sheamus tried again. “Mozaw.”

“It sounds like you’re saying ‘More, sir,’” James laughed. “Try this.” He grabbed a sock off the floor next to the bed. “Hold this in your hand, and if you want to stop, drop it.”

Sheamus accepted the sock. He held onto it tightly as James bound his wrists to the headboard. James laid down next to him and began to stretch him.

He took his time, starting over with one finger. As he stretched Sheamus, he kissed him. First his nose, then his cheeks, then his forehead, all over his face until the only place he hadn't kissed was his lips.

At last, he gave him a proper kiss, slipping a second finger into him at the same time. Sheamus gasped into the kiss, and James took advantage of his open mouth to slip his own tongue inside.

This was something else they hadn't done since Sheamus' recovery. He waited for James to realize what he had done. Kissing with tongues required just that—tongues. He grasped his tethers, waiting for a reaction.

But James didn't stop. He moved slowly, exploring Sheamus' mouth. Sheamus responded tentatively. When his stubby tongue brushed against James', a shock ran through him. It felt... good. Different, but good.

He moved his tongue again, pressing it against James'. He waited for him to pull away in disgust. Instead, James moaned happily. After kissing for a few more moments, he withdrew, resting his forehead against Sheamus'.

“You are beautiful.”

Sheamus closed his eyes and clung to his scarves. It was a blatant lie, but James honestly thought it was true. Even though scars from the whip crisscrossed his chest and back, James thought he was beautiful.

Sheamus pushed himself onto the fingers. “Moh!” He needed more than two fingers inside him; he needed James.

James responded to his plea, adding a third finger. Still, it wasn't enough. He needed James inside of him. He wanted James to make him feel beautiful everywhere, to wipe away the filth that Edward had left behind.

Three fingers soon became four, and Sheamus began to writhe on the bed. With his arms tethered, he couldn't get enough leverage to shove himself back towards James. He wriggled around, trying to get the fingers deeper inside of him, but James moved with him, refusing to let him have control.

Then James withdrew his hand completely.

“Moh!”

James chuckled and pressed a kiss to Sheamus' throat. “Relax. I'm getting ready to fuck you properly.” He grabbed some pillows and placed them under Sheamus' hips. He slathered oil on his prick and dribbled some into the crack of his arse. He moved into position, kneeling between Sheamus' legs and putting his hands on his hips.

Sheamus froze when James' cock touched his arsehole, a memory of the pain Edward had inflicted on him making his muscles clench tightly.

James must have noticed something was wrong, for he stopped moving. “Alright?”

Sheamus nodded.

James kissed his cheek. “I'm going to move.”

He held his sock tightly and forced himself to relax. There was a little bit of pressure and, if he were completely honest, a twinge of pain as James pushed the head of his cock inside. He made it past the ring of muscles and slid all the way in. Sheamus breathed slowly and deeply until the slight pain faded away.

“Still good?”

Sheamus nodded.

James began to withdraw slowly. When he was halfway out he stopped, then eased his way back in. He had always found that one spot in Sheamus that sent him over the moon, but the short, shallow thrusts that he continued to use weren't hitting that spot.

"Moh," Sheamus moaned. "Fasaw." His words were garbled nonsense, but James responded, speeding up slightly and pressing in deeper on each thrust. Still, his thrusts were only *moderato*, and Sheamus needed a vivacious *vivace*. "Fasaw!"

With his next thrust, James hit that special spot, a spot Edward had never once hit with his tiny, disgusting dick. Upon realizing this, Sheamus took a slow breath in and held it. This one small part of him was still pure, still precious. It belonged to James, and nothing could sully it. He hit the spot again, his thrusts speeding up to a steady *allegro*, and Sheamus released his breath as a long, throaty moan.

His body shuddered beneath skillful hands. James played him like a fine instrument. His soft kisses and sweet touches played counterpoint to his increasingly savage thrusts.

"I thought I'd lost you," James whispered into his ear. "I'm never going to leave you again. Never."

He clung to Sheamus, wrapping his arms around him and holding him tight. It made movement awkward, trapped as he was between the bed and James, but he didn't care. He wasn't being held down and taken against his will. Instead of pain, he was filled with pleasure and love. He was in control. He could stop everything by simply releasing his sock.

James kisses grew more demanding, and Sheamus responded in kind. Measures of different songs floated through his head, tempting him to drift away into the music. He held tight to his sock and his tethers, forcing himself to stay in this reality. He didn't want to lose a second of his time with James. He had no use for his safe place, not anymore.

Poco a poco, bit by bit, Sheamus' pleasure built up to the crest of his orgasm.

Unfortunately, James reached his first. He cried out as he slammed into Sheamus one last time and froze, his arms still wrapped around Sheamus. His body pressed tight against Sheamus, who wanted to move, to grind up into James so he could reach his own climax.

After a few moments, James shuddered and relaxed. Sheamus gave him a few moments to bask in the afterglow before bucking his hips and demanding "Moh!"

James cringed. "Sorry!" He pushed himself up onto his elbows and looked down at Sheamus' poor, neglected cock. "I'll take care of that."

He pulled out of Sheamus and scooted down the bed. Wrapping one hand around the base of Sheamus' dick, he licked around the head once before taking it into his mouth.

He began to flick his tongue along the underside of Sheamus' prick. The sensations caused by the quick licks returned Sheamus to his previous high, but the realization that he would never be able to use the same technique on James stole some of that pleasure.

But did it really matter?

Sheamus thought of himself as unattractive and disgusting, but James loved him and thought of his body as beautiful. That was what mattered.

James swallowed hard, making Sheamus moan. His pleasure raced to the peak, where it teetered for long seconds.

Sheamus wavered. How could James love someone as broken as him?

James looked up. Their gazes locked.

In that moment, Sheamus could see himself through James' eyes. He truly saw Sheamus as gorgeous, from his scarred chest to his stubby tongue.

And through him, Sheamus could finally see his own beauty.

This realization sent him soaring into his climax. Music swirled around him, happy notes singing cheerful melodies, but he remained firmly grounded in reality. James kept him grounded, the scarves useless tethers that kept him from touching his love. He dropped the sock.

James eyes widened and he scrambled to untie Sheamus. “Sorry.” His hands shook as he struggled with the knot on Sheamus’ left wrist. “I knew this was a bad idea.” He got one knot undone and moved on to the other wrist. “Sorry.”

Sheamus grabbed his arm and squeezed. James paused to look at him.

“Ah us wammed oo ush oo.”

Frowning, James continued to fiddle with the knot. “Let me get this undone and I’ll get your notebook.”

He was too worried to focus on Sheamus’ words. Sheamus let him do as he wished, waiting patiently as he was untied.

James rushed over to the desk to retrieve a notebook and pencil. He handed them to Sheamus, who wrote, *I just wanted to touch you.*

James collapsed onto the bed, wrapping his arms around Sheamus. “Thank goodness.” His eyelids began to droop as his anxiety trickled away. “I was afraid it was too much.” He let out a deep breath. “I promise, I’ll never hurt you.”

“Mo.” Sheamus knew he wouldn’t. He tossed the notebook over the edge of the bed. They didn’t need words to communicate. He cuddled closer to James, grabbing a corner of the sheet to wipe them both off, and then buried his head in James’ shoulder.

They lay there quietly for a few minutes and let the adrenaline of their lovemaking fade. James’ breathing evened off quickly; he always fell asleep after an orgasm and even his recent panic couldn’t affect that fact.

Sheamus took advantage of the resulting silence to hum his mother’s lullaby. The sad song had always been the voice of his emotions, and not being able to speak didn’t change that. Losing his tongue hadn’t made him mute. He simply had to learn to speak in a new way, with his music instead of his voice.

Like his violin, Sheamus had been broken, but his wounds had only made him more resilient and, in James’ eyes, more beautiful.

About the Author

Stella Notecor believes that love has no boundaries and we cannot help who we love. This belief is reflected in her stories which involve homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, pansexual, transsexual, etc. characters. She refuses to limit herself to writing one sexuality. Instead, she writes what the story requires, be it a straight, gay, or polyamorous relationship.

If you are interested in reading more of her stories, please visit her website at <http://tiny.cc/stellanotecor>.