

IF IT AIN'T LOVE

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Smashwords Edition

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"Well? What do you think?" Whit gazed across the miles of ink-stained oak to where Charlie Hadley sprawled against cracked leather, his customary scowl mostly hidden behind a scrap of badly typed copy. It wasn't the scowl that worried Whit. It was the extended quiet in a room that was normally loud and frequently blue with Hadley's rants. "Best thing you ever read? Pulitzer material?"

Hadley lowered the copy to the desk and looked at Whit. The dollop of amusement mixed with an even smaller dollop of sympathy made Whit's heart drop a little further than it had the last time—was it only two weeks ago?—that he'd turned in a story Hadley had no use for. If Hadley took it, it would be less out of interest than dwindling hope that time and patience would give him back one of his best journalists.

"What do I think?" Hadley shook a Camel out of the pack at its post beside the smiling wife and kids. "Mrs. Grasby's parakeet will love it."

"So I'll get a Pulitzer for most popular birdcage liner." Whit looked longingly at the cigarettes. Probably just as well he was out of pocket. Camels didn't sit well on an empty stomach. "You taking the story?"

"You think I ought to?"

"I've still got a good nose. It's just—allergy season."

"I figured." Hadley lit the cigarette. "Why don't you get that nose sniffing uptown and check out the Dorington bru-ha?"

Whit shook his head. He still had some pride. "I don't write sob stories over suicides. Save that for the young guys fascinated by the distant spectre of death."

Hadley snorted smoke into the office's stale air. "You're what—twenty-eight?"

Whit resisted the urge to inhale a little of the cloud passing by. "Twenty-nine."

"I think you got some time left," Hadley said.

That had seemed truer four years ago, before the world had gone to hell. Whit sat up a little straighter and tackled the question still hanging like dead weight on his shoulders. "Lend me a little for the week?"

Hadley's brows rose, brushing the unkempt fall of gray hair. "Already? What happened to the five I gave you?"

"I bought a yacht," Whit retorted. "What the hell do you think?"

"You eating at Delmonico's?"

"When was the last time you had a soda and a ham sandwich at Delmonico's?"

"Yeah, all right." Hadley fished a dollar from his own pocket, to Whit's relief; he hated the condescending clerk in accounting.

"Thanks, Charlie."

"Yeah, okay. Save some of it for a sunny day, will you?"

"Sunny days," he said with a laugh. "You didn't hear? Those are over. Done. Settle in and enjoy the rain." Before shame could show through the ill-fitting nonchalance, Whit got up and headed for the door.

"Dorington," Hadley called after him. "Human interest. Sells papers, remember?"

Human interest. As he started down the deserted corridor to the lift, Whit made a face. He'd lost all interest in humans, lately. The street preacher he'd seen standing at the bread line at dawn had only cemented his certainty that humans, the lot of them, were divided into two predictable camps. The hyenas, ever alert to claim the first fresh meat, conscionable or not—and the lambs, who generally wandered right up and threw themselves in the roasting pan, no doubt convinced by all the hollow assurances that tomorrow would be better. Sure it would.

For the hyenas.

God's punishment, the preacher had intoned with grim reproach, as if he were exempt somehow from the sins of his race. Punishment for what, Whit had wondered, looking down the line of tired, hopeless faces. What had any of them done that was so terrible? He took some comfort in realizing no one listened to the preacher. They were distracted by hunger, by worries that had not lulled in months—in years. He was glad for their distraction. It was a shield—momentarily—from just another goddamned worry. The world was falling apart at the seams and no one, not even Roosevelt, would be putting it back together.

Whit smoothed the crumpled bill, folded it, then eased it securely into his vest pocket. Some of the dollar would have to be spared for a bed. He wasn't sleeping in a doorway again, if he could help it. He made his way against a gusty wind to Rivington, nurturing a small hope that the bread line had diminished. That hope was doused as he came around the corner and found the line had grown until he could not see its end. Not even the blackening clouds deterred the crowd. In fact, they hardly seemed to notice. Compelled by growling bellies, they shuffled forward, then stood doggedly as the first raindrops fell.

Whit couldn't take a place in line. Bad enough it was a bitter cold night; but he'd be a damned jerk to make anyone else wait behind him when he had enough in his pocket to buy himself a meal. Funny, how privileged he felt with only a dollar to his name. The one-eyed man in the land of the blind. He walked in the gutter, leaving the sidewalk to the waiting, and made eye contact as he passed. An exchanged nod or a rueful smile shared with any one of them, and he might feel a little less like a Park Avenue high hat going off to dine on meatloaf and macaroni and cheese.

But almost everyone's attention stayed fixed ahead, to the kitchen entrance. Those who hadn't come alone stood huddled with their companions, still drawn to check the line's progress every few feet, as if they couldn't have told as easily with their eyes shut. A block further, two blocks further, and Whit briefly met the glance of a man standing alone, shoulders hunched, face white under the stark light of the street lamp. The puffy eyes and damp face startled Whit. He'd thought by now he was inured to public tears.

"Hey." He kept it low, trying to single out the man's attention. With a step onto the curb, he came closer. "The food here stinks." He tried on a grin, wanting to feel it. "Come on and I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

The man stared at him, perhaps not sure what to comprehend from that. The woman behind him comprehended plenty. "The end of the line's that way," she said, her indignation waking those around her. She patted the crying man smartly on the shoulder. "You don't let him cut in."

"Wouldn't be fair," the elderly man behind her agreed.

"I'm not cutting in," Whit said, astonished.

The crying man's mouth set in a disgusted line. "You trying to lose me my place? Get me booted off?"

"Leave him alone," the woman said.

"Selfish," the elderly man muttered.

Whit's stomach churned, not entirely from hunger. Selfish. Sure. He had a dollar in his pocket and he didn't have to share, after all. "Enjoy the soup."

He should have gone to the automat. But the cafeteria across the road from the soup kitchen was open and he went there, in full view of the crying man and his defenders. He didn't look around to see if they'd noticed. He didn't want to give a damn. A further damn, anyway.

The cafeteria smelled of onions and garlic, no doubt liberally applied to old meat. Whit looked over the beef stew and the chicken that seemed more skin and bone than meat, and decided none of it was worth spending the night puking in a flophouse toilet. He took a bowl of noodles and some bread and scouted out the loneliest table he could find. Human interest. There was enough human interest in the cafeteria, alone, to fill a dozen papers—but the story might get wearying after the hundredth read. Couple struggling. Family struggling. Everyone struggling.

The noodles were flavorless and he swallowed them down like medicine, along with the stale bread. While he ate, he watched a middle-aged man, hat pulled low, move around newly vacated tables, stopping frequently to shove a bread crust into his mouth or polish clean a chicken bone. What a cruel thing, Whit mused, that people couldn't stuff themselves like bears and sleep the winter away—not that it would spare anyone. Winter had come to stay.

It was raining in earnest when he left the cafeteria; God, no doubt, again passing judgment upon his miserable flock, still gathered on the sidewalk. The rain washed away what remaining color was left in the world as Whit hurried down darker and darker blocks to the hotel—an amusing designation, as far as he was concerned. He might not have grown up a Vanderbilt or Rockefeller, but he knew what a hotel was; this cavernous, damp, dark room with row upon row of iron bedsteads and thin, stained mattresses did not qualify. But the residents, as stained, damp, and miserable as their surroundings, didn't exactly qualify as guests.

Except perhaps one.

Whit had seen some expensive shoes propped on the grubby flophouse blankets, shoes in sad shape, worn down and dulled by the miles walked in search of a job. The damp pair resting on the bunk beside his were all but new, and slick with a recent buff. So too the overcoat, with its shiny dark brown buttons, and the muted brown diamond weave of a suit more clean and brushed than anything Whit had seen on the street in over a year. His first thought, that the fellow was on the run from the law, would have persisted, if not for the introspective quiet in his eyes and the

careless way he lay slumped on the mattress, his hat crushed against the bedframe. He was so far away, he didn't seem to sense Whit's gaze on him, and Whit stole a moment to appreciate features that were all angles, but not unattractively so, framed by hair that Whit sensed was usually neat but now tumbled in a dark brown wave over his forehead. Between crumpled hat and new shoes, the lanky length of him didn't promise an especially strapping figure, but looked fit enough to keep a girl warm at night—or fellow, as the case may be.

Girl, mostly likely. Whit slumped back and wished he'd begged a Camel off Charlie. He let his glance slide toward his bunk mate. "Got a cigarette?"

The dark gaze shifted, with obvious effort, to take him in, and an apologetic smile formed. "I don't smoke."

"No? How else can you pass the time?"

That, to Whit's surprise, made the faint smile vanish in an instant. The eyes—a deep shade of blue, as far as the dim light would reveal—went distant again. "It's not something I've ever had to think about," he said after a moment. "What do you do?" He looked at Whit. "Besides smoke?"

Whit considered it. "Drink. Sleep. Occasionally I eat." Very occasionally. "All good habits, if you've got the time."

"I've got it now."

"Just lose your job?"

"In a sense." The blue eyes shifted away again, listlessly now, taking in the newcomers who marched silently to their beds and dropped on them, to fall, almost to a one, asleep. "Someone's crying," he whispered.

It was a quiet sound a few bunks over. Hearing it, Whit shrugged. "Something else to do to pass the time." He slipped down further against his pillow, letting it take the edge off his hearing. "You drink?" he asked with scant hope.

"Now and then."

"You don't happen to—" Whit glanced over as a small bottle appeared from a coat pocket. Trust a man out of a job to celebrate it with good whisky. "Thanks." Since it was nearly full, Whit indulged in a long drink before handing it back. At the stirring of a weary amusement in the blue eyes, he felt an unexpected gladness. "You got a name?"

"Peter—" And there he paused.

That was all right. "I'm Whit."

The trace of amusement turned to curiosity. "Whitmore?"

Whit sent back a thin smile. "Just Whit."

Peter's nod was part greeting, part understanding. "Have you been out of work long?"

Whit lay back. "In a sense."

"Do you usually stay here? I didn't see you last night."

"I stay where there's room." Sleepy, Whit wavered between closing his eyes or indulging his own curiosity. "You get kicked out of your apartment?"

"I—" Peter hesitated before continuing quietly. "Not yet."

"Just getting used to the idea?"

"I like to get a jump on things."

Whit snorted at that, then gave in to a laugh. It felt rather good without the sardonic weight that seemed to always accompany it. "I'd believe you if you weren't dressed to the nines."

"Am I?" There was no sarcasm; only surprise, as if he'd forgotten what he was wearing. "Not proper attire of the unemployed, I know—"

"Don't worry. In a couple of weeks, it will be. Though I'll say I'm amazed they let you in the door, wearing that. The Bowery does have standards."

"So I've noted." Peter matched his sardonic tone—but despair, still too fresh to hide, ruined the effect. "The fellow at the door was dead beat. He didn't pay me much mind. Nor anyone else," he added, as a pair of men staggered past, leaning on each other, and collapsed on a single bunk. The two of them snorted with laughter and began to try to push each other off the mattress. Whit wondered if they were drunk enough to pass out quick or whether they'd be keeping everyone awake. He thought about encouraging Peter to offer them a nightcap, but hated to waste good whisky.

Peter seemed to be considering it; he had glanced around, but suddenly turned back to Whit, eyebrows raised. "I think they're forgetting where they are," he whispered.

Whit leaned up on his elbows and looked past Peter to the bunk on the other side. The two men had given up pushing each other and were going at wrestling of another sort. The bigger of the two had pinned the other, to kiss him—public venue be damned. As they rolled together, the smaller man's suitcoat came open, to spill forth breasts of decidedly feminine composition. Whit's brief shiver of vicarious pleasure melted into rueful exasperation. "For God's sake." He dropped back onto the pillow and shut his eyes. Someone would be along to kick her out. Just probably not soon enough...

Hearing a soft laugh, he opened his eyes, expecting to find Peter observing the proceedings; but Peter was still turned in his direction, and smiling as if Whit's reaction was one he shared. Despite his unfamiliarity with the Bowery, he seemed not at all shocked—not now, nor when he'd thought the two were both men. He produced the whisky and offered it. "Where do the ladies usually stay?"

"Hell if I know." Whit took the bottle. "Easy enough to find company around here, if that's what you're looking for. Maybe too easy." He let his gaze shift to the couple and he watched for a minute, fascinated, as the man thrust with drunken inaccuracy, all the while slobbering on the woman's shoulder. "That apartment—" He turned to Peter. "You've got till the end of the month?"

A shadow of apprehension crossed Peter's face. "I'm not sure. Why?"

"Because I don't think you're in this dump just to get used to it."

Peter watched him guardedly. That was answer enough, but Whit waited. He didn't care to find himself locked up and facing a fine he hadn't the money to pay. He felt fairly confident Peter was no cop; under Peter's wariness lurked a certain yearning Whit recognized. It might not have

showed itself but for the shots of whisky—but the how of it didn't matter. It was there in his face, the reason he was bunking down in a lousy flop when he could be curled up in his own warm bed in his own safe place.

That he wasn't searching the streets for a willing female told Whit the rest.

"If you're looking for company, too—" Whit let the emphasis fall unmistakably. "Well, I play a mean game of gin. Or backgammon. You name it and I'm your man."

Peter seemed to hold his breath. At last he exhaled, softly, as if afraid it would be misinterpreted. "Are you?"

Whit shrugged, then smiled. "It's either me or him..." He nodded toward the couple now sprawled, gasping and groaning, on the other bunk. "And I think he's not going to be much good the rest of the night. So you're stuck with me."

A smile seemed to creep up on Peter. "It must be fate."

"Can't be luck. We're all out of that."

"All out." There it was, that whisper of despair under the dark cheer. It was not an unfamiliar note these days; still it disconcerted when it rang with the finality of a man on the verge of giving up. It only reminded Whit that he, himself, hadn't really lost hope altogether, even when he'd thought he had.

Maybe morning would make the world a more tolerable place. Until then, he and Peter could keep each other suitably distracted. Whit, expecting a walk in the rain, exulted silently when Peter flagged down a cab. The man might've lost his job, but he clearly had no compunction about spending his last penny on a good time. When he gave the cabbie a Gramercy Park address, Whit, startled, fell quiet and stayed quiet on the ride uptown. Peter sat shoulder to shoulder with him, just as quiet, and Whit began to wonder if he hadn't been hasty, pressing Peter into taking him home. Hunting the Bowery for amusement, he'd run into all types of men; but he'd never wrangled an invitation from a Rockefeller or Vanderbilt before.

His doubts only grew as the cab drew up to a stately home tucked among a handsome row of them, their windows lit with a serene glow that kept the night at bay. Only Peter's house stood dark, but for a lone lamp at the door. Whit was glad for the near-dark as he followed Peter up the steps. He was more comfortable indulging in the illicit out of the view of Good Society. He'd grown so used to the misery around him, he'd forgotten not everyone had gone broke.

Or maybe they had. The light Peter raised in the alcove spread into a roomy parlor nearly empty of furnishings. It drew the eye to the marble mantelpiece and the silver candlesticks there, absent the candles. Above the mantle, a silver-framed mirror cast Whit's dim reflection back at him with a distinct air of disapproval. He was a grubby lump of humanity soiling the gleaming hardwood with his mud-encrusted shoes. He glanced around, sensing only more dark, empty rooms further on. Were the homes of the rich always so damned quiet? He'd only ever visited in the midst of parties, luncheons, and other opportunities to write up a bit of nonsense posing under the guise of journalism. He hadn't cared for those assignments, nor had he considered that at the party's end, the chatter died, the music departed, and the shine on the marble turned cold.

Peter, beside him, shivered as if he felt it, too. Then, to Whit's surprise, he laughed. "Gloomy old place, isn't it. They've sold most of the furniture. The house is next. It will be a relief, really." He started into the darkness, glancing back once with a reassuring smile for Whit. "We'll go to the kitchen." He waved the whisky bottle. "Find some glasses and maybe a bite of something, if you want. Kitchens are the cheery spots, even in an empty house."

"You live here alone?" It was the first question in a dozen waiting to be asked. The lonely echo of his step and Peter's seemed answer enough. A long corridor led to a short stair that descended to a cold, dark kitchen. But the press of a button brought a little warmth, kindled by bright light on brass knobs and green tile. Peter took glasses from a cabinet and set them on the center worktable, under the lights. The whiskey flowed into cut crystal as if it belonged there.

"I live here alone," Peter said. "No one will bother us."

The man seemed intent on assuring him, but Whit noticed an absence in his manner, as if he were merely seeking a tryst out of habit, without any real interest. Filling time, as it were; waiting for...something.

Whit decided to wait, too. He took a stool and a whiskey and let another question wiggle past. "Divorce?"

Peter's eyes widened. "I'm not married. Never have been. You?"

"Couldn't afford it, if I wanted to."

"Do you want to?"

Whit grinned. "Not so far. I haven't been lacking for company lately, anyway." At least, no more than he'd been lacking in everything. "You hungry?"

Peter started and, seeming to recall his earlier offer, jumped up and hauled wide the ice box door. Where the rest of the house stood bare, the ice box bulged to overflowing with wine, fruit, cake, and dishes of all description. It was well-stocked for a man living alone, Whit mused, as Peter took out dish after dish and laid it on the table.

"You cook all this?" Whit lifted the lid on the largest pan and found treasure; roast chicken and potatoes. "You could feed half of New York."

"I don't cook. The housekeeper left some of this yesterday and—well, people brought some things by."

"Let's warm it up." As hungry as he was, he could have eaten it cold. But a hot meal was worth the wait. He snuck an orange from the enormous bowl of them. "Were you planning a party?"

Peter poked around the stove, clearly lost as to the workings of it. "No. Say, you're not any kind of a hand at this, are you?"

Cheese, crackers, oranges, and cake were scavenged before Whit took the chicken, hot and crisp, from the oven. Though Peter did not eat as much, he seemed pleased with Whit's appetite. When they finished, the table was a fine clutter of chicken bones, empty plates, and scattered crumbs. Serene with the rediscovered pleasure of a full belly, Whit eyed the mess with a twinge of guilt. "I'll help you clean up. We don't want your housekeeper to quit in disgust."

"No need to worry. Yesterday was her last day." Peter looked over the mess and smiled wryly. "It can sit for a little while. Want to see the rest of the house? I was thinking of one last good look around, for old time's sake. I just didn't want to do it alone," he added sheepishly.

Whit laughed. "Big old house to be wandering on your own. I don't think I'd like it, either. You moving into a smaller place? That seems the fashionable thing, these days."

Peter left the kitchen lit, the door open, and followed the path the light made to the foot of the stairs. "I don't know. I was thinking of Anchor Point."

"Anchor Point? Where's that?"

"A little place in Newfoundland."

"Really? Anything to do there?"

"Fish for cod, mostly."

"Sounds like a cold, lonely spot."

"I suppose it is."

"Then why go? Easy enough to be cold and lonely in New York," Whit said with a snort.

Peter smiled, a now-familiar wistful curve of the lips that couldn't seem to reach full bloom. "Haven't you ever wanted to stand on some isolated shore with a cold wind whipping through you, just to see if it feels any lonelier than walking with the crowd? To be there with the wind and the sea and convince yourself the whole world is just that frail strip of land with great, cold, heaving water all around, and it will swallow you up if the wind doesn't shrivel the flesh from you first..." He stopped at the landing. "Do you wonder if the fellows there, in their boats, ever think about market failures or estate sales or even what the rest of the world thinks of them?"

"I wouldn't guess so. It's enough to think about getting back to the fire, to warm up before frostbite sets in."

The wistful light yielded to humor softened even further by a flash of gratitude. "Just being warm and safe, that's something. Like being a kid again. I remember all the times I felt most comfortable and protected. Don't you?"

"Sure. Who can't remember a few million years back?" They reached the main staircase and Peter switched on the lights. The chandelier seemed to burst as a mingling of crystal and electricity spread light over the curved balustrade and thickly carpeted steps. Under that glow, Whit noted that Peter's eyes were as dark a blue as they'd seemed in the dim hovel of the flophouse. "I think I can save you the trouble of traipsing all the way to Newfoundland," he commented, hoping a little honesty might be helpful. "I've been on the beach at Coney in February. I wouldn't recommend it."

"Any particular revelations come to you, then?"

"Yeah. If you're going to walk to the bottom of the ocean, do it in the summer."

"Things were that bad?"

"Things still are. Just took some getting used to." Whit had to smile, himself. "I guess you *can* feel less lonely on an isolated shore. At least you can hear your own thoughts well enough to have a damned good argument with yourself about just how lonely you're willing to get. And you

can catch on that things might get better, but only if you're still around to give them a chance." He broke from Peter's sympathetic gaze to look around. "A hell of a place. Where's your favorite corner?"

The stairs brought them to a wide landing that broke in two directions. Where the left-hand corridor took an abrupt turn, a lone door stood ajar and a light within burned low. Peter, it seemed, could not let darkness linger. Whit imagined it was an oppressive force in this particular isolated shore of a house. It didn't feel like a home or even a refuge of sorts. No wonder Peter had been willing to curl up on a hard flophouse mattress. Sometimes there was comfort in the crowd.

The bedroom was more furnished than he expected, in an understated style; a quilt-covered bed, mahogany wardrobe towering in one corner, some photographs of foreign vistas on the walls. The only sign of disarray was the black suit discarded in a rumpled pile on the windowseat. Whit dropped onto the seat and glanced out at the dark garden. He plucked away a cushion and retrieved the suit coat. "This what you sleep in?"

Peter's laugh was a rusty sound, to Whit's ears. "Just once." He gathered up the suit, bundling it, and pushed it into a corner of the wardrobe. Whit leaned back and let his gaze roam the room.

"Just once? You're doing better than I am." An understatement. Whit unbuttoned the coat he'd slept in more than once in the past few months. "Many more days and I'll need silver polish to scrape the tarnish off." He caught sight of a door that surely led to the bath. "Do you mind if I clean up a little?"

Peter opened the doors upon a pristine bathroom, and Whit, given leave to make himself at home, filled the porcelain tub and lowered himself into the warm water by tantalizing degrees. He couldn't recall the last good scrubbing he'd had. Baths had been more rag and sink affairs since losing his apartment, and he hadn't cared to make use of the public bath by selling himself to a patron with the coin to get in.

He'd never wanted to stoop that low. But maybe he was now. He hadn't turned down the meal nor the bath and he wouldn't pass up the bed, either. Unless Peter had changed his mind.

That was the mystery of the moment, as far as Whit was concerned. The quiet man who had flirted subtly with him at the flophouse had become only more reticent and inscrutable since, leaving Whit wondering what Peter really wanted. Maybe the reticence was only shyness or inexperience; though Whit had gotten the unmistakable impression it wasn't Peter's first time, seeking companionship in dark corners. It could be that all Peter needed was a little encouragement.

"You can come in, if you want."

The door stood ajar, but Peter had remained on the other side, occupied with little more than staring out the window, from the sound of things. Whit's offer brought him to the door, to peer around it. At his hesitancy, Whit broke into a laugh. "If you're only looking for someone to talk to, just say so. Anticipation complicates things, you know."

"Would you care to talk—if that was all I wanted?"

Whit shrugged. "I'm in no rush to get anywhere." But he couldn't deny a tinge of disappointment. If Peter was backing off now, there had to be a reason for it. Suddenly Whit felt rather more entitled to his questions. "Why do you live here alone?"

Peter retreated a step, the line of his mouth tightening. Then he let out a breath and put on an unconvincing smile. "Well, I have to live somewhere, don't I?"

Whit submerged himself, then surfaced with a sputter and pushed wet hair out of his eyes. "Lots of people don't live anywhere—so, no, you don't. But the only reason a guy lives alone in a house this big is to show off. And you don't strike me as the type."

"To live in a house this big or to show off?"

"Either."

Peter sat on the lip of the tub. "What type do I strike you as?"

Whit, pleased to have roused his curiosity, decided not to satisfy it. "I'm still putting that puzzle together. Ask me in the morning. If you haven't kicked me out before then." He stretched his legs in the water, letting Peter get an eyeful of just what he was forgoing. "Want to come in? Water's still warm."

Peter merely smiled, got up and walked out of the room. Whit heard a radio come on in the bedroom, the tail end of a news program. He snorted softly. Well, at least he'd gotten a decent bite to eat. Even if it wasn't all he wanted, it was closer than he'd come to anything good in a long time.

Peter reappeared, bearing a towel that seemed more the size and weight of a blanket. He came to the edge of the tub and held the towel aloft. "Stand up."

Surprised, Whit stood, then shivered as the cold hit him. The towel—warmed—enveloped him and he sighed. "That is one hell of a goddamned towel." Soft cotton brushed the sensitive skin below his navel, and he shivered again, not with the cold. He met a hesitant but curious gaze with a sly grin. "Sure you just want to talk?"

Peter's lips curved. Then he leaned forward and pressed them against Whit's with just enough inquisitive pressure to spark a desire for more. But when Whit pursued it, fingers curling in folds of Peter's shirt, Peter drew back, gaze darting around the quiet bath. Whit kept hold of the damp handfuls of shirt and tugged gently. "No good?"

Peter's smile flashed weakly, then slipped away as if it were too much effort to sustain. "I think the place is haunted." He wriggled loose. "I'll get you something to wear."

He all but ran out, leaving Whit to finish his ablutions—and anything else—on his own. Whit wanted to wait on that, finding greater appeal in the possibility of winning Peter over—or at least sussing out the man's reasons for leading him on.

Dry, combed, and once again smooth-chinned, Whit took the pile of clothes Peter handed past the closet door and dressed. The silk pajamas were a new sensation—one that only heightened his desire to touch and be touched. Hell, he wasn't going to complain. Just the chance to curl up in those clean sheets and relax—that would be something, after so many days of narrow beds and rough blankets. Still, seeing Peter settled on the far side of the bed, propped

against pillows and paging through a magazine, he wanted a little more than a cuddle and a good night's sleep.

The sheets were soft and cool, and Whit scooted across them until he was beside Peter and leaning to look at the magazine as if he were interested in what was on the page. "Don't have today's paper, do you?"

A faint frown touched Peter's mouth. "I haven't been reading the papers lately." He offered the magazine and Whit shook his head. Tossing it to the quilt, Peter turned on his side and fixed a contemplative eye on Whit. "Are you comfortable here?"

Surprised, Whit shrugged. "Were you comfortable at the flop? New surroundings take some getting used to. Of course, it's easier to get used to better surroundings," he said, caught by the graceful way the muslin curtains fluttered in the night breeze through the window Peter had cracked. "I didn't expect to end up in this neighborhood, on this street, if that's what you're asking. But I've fallen into the habit of taking every good thing as a small miracle in the past few years. I don't look for 'em. I don't hope. I just live 'em while they're here. You know?"

"I'm a small miracle?" Peter asked, half-jokingly.

"You might be a big one," Whit said, matching his tone. "God knows I'm due."

Peter's smile turned soft. "Please don't have expectations. I'm so tired of people having expectations." He rolled onto his back and gazed at the ceiling. "I'm not as impressive as this house or this street. I don't know anything useful and I know a whole lot that isn't. I'm not even any good at this," he finished quietly, meeting Whit's gaze. "I've been to that hotel—flophouse, I guess you call it—a few times. You're the first I've invited here."

"You've never—"

"Not here. I went with them, to their apartments. We never talked, though. We just..." He snorted. "I liked it in the beginning. I felt awake and alive for a while..." Peter lay a hand on his chest. "My heart pounding, muscles so sore, I could barely move. All the thoughts spinning in my head all day—they'd slowed down. Gone distant and indifferent. It was a relief."

"Didn't last?"

"I wanted it to. But I was only living the same night over and over, just for a few minutes of peace at the end of it." Peter shook his head. "Two bodies close as bodies can be, rubbing like sticks to start a fire, and I was still alone. All through it. Awake and alive—but for what?"

Whit swallowed and pushed away the images Peter had conjured. "So why bring me home? You don't know me, either."

"I'm not sure," Peter whispered. "It felt, for a few minutes, like I did."

Whit had to smile at that. "It did, didn't it? Just a little." He shifted nearer, resting his head on Peter's pillow, and looked up at the ceiling, ornamented with an intricate molding of garlands and scrollwork. Tinted a soft blue by the moonlight, it had a fairytale air about it. The whole house did—complete with sad and winsome prince. "Maybe you do know me. Sounds like you've walked some roads I'm pretty familiar with."

"I may be walking one or two you haven't reached yet."

The emotion poorly buried under the wry remark made Whit hesitate. Peter might have preferred a nonchalant rejoinder; but curiosity—and maybe something more—pulled Whit in another direction. "That what you wanted to talk about?"

Silence followed, a silence that held Whit immobile, caught up in the desire to know what sort of secret could render Peter mute, when he had been so expressive before. It took another long stretch of quiet, interrupted only by the soft chime in the hall marking the hour of one, before Peter exhaled a shaky breath. Whit glanced at him, to see a damp gleam on his lashes. Peter caught his eye, then looked away. Whit rolled toward him, leaning hard against his shoulder. "Come on. Who's not crying these days? Nobody I know. Hell, just yesterday I walked past a group at the docks, waiting on a call for one lousy job, and half of them were bawling like babies."

"Oh for God's sake," Peter said, and laughed—a watery sound, but a laugh, all the same. He turned and kissed Whit, a move so unexpected, Whit let it go on for a good five seconds before summoning the presence of mind to respond. Peter might not have believed it was an antidote for what ailed him, but all trace of reticence vanished with the kiss. He tugged open Whit's pajamas, careless of the buttons, and splayed hands on skin, exploring.

Whit, already wild with the wait, had little hope of lasting—but he didn't have to, for Peter had him flat on his back and stripped of his clothes in short moments, as if well aware he'd already pushed Whit past the point of no return. Still, he tormented Whit with lips and tongue that tasted each sweet, hard inch before claiming the whole of him with fervent purpose. It was a merciless consumption that had Whit clutching at the bedsheets and gasping for breath, to be hit in a bare instant by a blinding, almost painful burst of pleasure. Through it, he felt Peter's mouth still on him, demanding every last shudder and twitch that could be coaxed, and Peter's hands, loosening their grip on his hips to glide up his stomach and rest in a tender fashion on his chest.

When he could breathe again, Whit still wasn't ready for words. He covered Peter's hands with his and squeezed a silent thanks. Peter rose on his knees, undressing before, to Whit's surprise, turning over to lie, chest to back, on top of him. He drew Whit's arm over his chest, his own arm against Whit's, and his voice came, soft and shy. "It's a little awkward, but—do you mind?"

"I'm up for anything," Whit said with a laugh. Quite literally, he thought, aroused by the way Peter's body cradled against his. His slid his free hand over Peter's stomach and the muscles seemed to shrink away before Peter groaned and rose into the touch. Whit slid his palm lower over a pleasingly flat stomach, then lower still, to surround the silken weight of his balls. At the caress, Peter arched, then collapsed, his head falling back on Whit's shoulder. His hips lifted and Whit obligingly pressed a thumb along the underside of the heavy shaft, until a low cry encouraged Whit to take possession of him.

Whit stroked gently until Peter's hand, covering his, begged for a near crushing hold. Whit honored the request, conscious he was growing hard, himself, against the soft cushion of flesh pressing down on him with every buck of Peter's hips. He'd tightened his arm across Peter's

chest, he realized belatedly—but Peter only encouraged it, clinging to Whit like a drowning man. He seemed all at once to stop breathing—then start again with a gasp. Whit rolled over, taking a writhing Peter with him, and driven by some primal ache, rocked against the warm, damp cleft. Pushed into the mattress, Peter shifted, legs parting, and curled his fingers around handfuls of the blanket. But Whit, unwilling to hurt him, kept up the slow rocking until a more muted pleasure spread through tired muscles and left him, sprawled and exhausted, against a too-quiet bed companion.

"Sorry," Whit whispered. "I usually take things easier."

Peter's laugh was muffled by the blanket. He rolled to face Whit, for a kiss clearly meant to reassure. Peter was no tease. Then Whit figured out something else. "You thought if we went straight to it, I'd leave right after. I thought you were shy. Or maybe not so interested."

Blue eyes dark as midnight locked with his. "Did you? God, I'm sorry. I just wanted to know more than..." His faint, embarrassed smile turned wry. "How you usually take things."

"I take things as I find them, these days." Whit kissed him. "And I don't walk away from miracles, no matter how small."

Bing Crosby crooned from the bedside table and the night wind had gone colder. Buried under blankets and tucked against the heat Peter radiated, Whit wandered the dark field toward sleep, thoughts tripping drowsily down the paths he'd taken to get where he was. Someone had once said there was no such thing as luck, and maybe it was true. But he felt damned lucky at the moment and he didn't want anything to change that.

Morning might. But he'd learned the hard way that trouble borrowed always had the highest interest rates. He'd worry about morning when it came.

What morning brought was a soft sun through the muslin drape and a sleepy smile in his direction, two things that indicated his luck might continue.

"Stay over tonight?" Peter asked. "I've got an engagement this evening, but it'll be only an hour at most."

"Another flophouse date?"

Peter looked reproofing but the humor in his eyes ruined the effect. "An acquaintance's party. I'd rather not—but you know how it is."

"No, but I'll take your word for it." Whit sat up. "I've got to run some errands, anyway. If I can find my clothes."

"I'll lend you something to wear."

Whit wanted to object, but the thought of putting on clothes in need of a wash seemed the greater evil at the moment. He followed Peter to the dressing room on the other side of the bath, only to stop short in the doorway. Past the suits—a dozen at least—stood shelf upon shelf of neatly ordered shirts, ties, gloves, shoes, and hats. "I hope you've got plenty of suitcases."

"Adequate to cart most of this to the second-hand store." Peter handed him a shirt. "It will be a little small on you, I think."

Whit didn't care. It was as much a pleasure to put on clean clothes as it had been to slip into the pajamas last night. Catching his reflection in the glass took him instantly back to the long-ago hour when he had the world in hand. He wanted to pick up the pieces of that world and put it back together. First thing he'd do was go to the office, so Hadley could get a look at him—and maybe see Whit Stoddard, journalist, instead of the has-been who'd been hanging around lately. Then he'd tackle a story—any story. He had to pay Peter back for the suit.

When Peter came out of the dressing room, Whit pulled him in front of the mirror and leaned on his shoulder. "Aren't we a pair of swells. Say—" He reached around to straighten Peter's tie. "It was a hell of an evening."

Peter turned to him, smiling. "Come down and have a bite to eat."

Whit laughed. "Jesus. I owe you enough already."

"You don't owe me anything. I'm glad one suit's going to someone I know."

"They'll all go to someone you know. Someone down to his last dollar, with no place to call home and no hope that anything can get better." Whit rested his forehead against Peter's. "They're all me. You too, now." An idea struck him. "You're really selling your suits?"

"I'll keep two or three, I think. Why?"

"There's a fellow I met at the flop. Jimmy Westbrook. He's been working off and on, mostly off—but he's got a chance at work he knows. He's going up tomorrow to talk to the boss and I just thought maybe..."

"I could lend him a suit?"

"And let him come by to clean up. Guess I never thought about it much, what a difference it makes—having a chance to pull yourself together after going for so long without things. I know he'd want to pay you back, too. He's all right that way."

"And other ways?"

Though it was asked casually, Whit was hard-pressed not to grin. "He's got a girl. Probably going to marry her, if he finds work. I just figured he deserved a boost."

"Bring him by. But be sure you tell him I don't want anything in return. We may as well make what use we can of the house before we're booted out."

Whit grinned, then. "We?"

Peter looked sheepish. "If you want to stay."

After a breakfast of leftover chicken and a promise to meet for supper, Whit left sunny green Gramercy behind, to discover the beautiful dream of the night before hadn't vanished with the morn. It was more than a bath and a new suit, he knew, that had him walking down 43rd Street like a man with the world in his pocket. Not even Hadley's scowling puss could pull him down from the clouds. "Good morning, Charlie."

"Who says?" Hadley glanced up from the newspaper spread on his desk. "Goddamn, Stoddard. You put that dollar down on a fast horse?"

Whit laughed aloud and dropped into the leather chair with an ease he hadn't known last time. "In a sense. You still got that copy I gave you yesterday? I was thinking of a new angle—"

"Forget that. I've got something that'll put a few dollars in your pocket. Assuming you still need it," Hadley said, giving Whit another dubious once-over. "Winston Michaels is down with the flu."

"Poor old Winnie. You want me to take him some hot soup?"

"I want you to take his assignment for the evening."

Whit sat up. "You're kidding. Hob and nob with that crowd all night? You know I hate that stuff. Besides, what if it rains? I can't afford the cab fare, let alone the monkey suit."

Hadley grunted. "Winnie says you can borrow his tux. You remember where his office is?"

"Hold on, will you? I don't know any of these people—and I don't want to. What am I supposed to write that anyone will give a shit about?"

Hadley considered. "Well, you might nose around and find out more about Dorington—"

"Jesus, Charlie. Dorington's not the first son of a bitch who figured the best way out was to put a gun to his head and pull the trigger. That's been going on pretty regularly. Why are you so interested? Just because he was loaded? Or because he was hated?"

"Both. The man shot to the top on the broken backs of his employees and went down in flames just as fast. If you don't think that makes good copy, kid, you ain't the Whit Stoddard I remember shaking the mayor's hand last year over that story on the hurricane. And folks still bring up that Rogers tribute. I know you've been in a bad way for a while, but you write something again, something good, and you'll be all right."

"I don't see what's left to write about Dorington," Whit said. "Every paper in town's vilified the guy, and probably deservedly—"

"Go for another angle. See if there was any good in the son of a bitch. Talk to his friends. He must've had one or two. Maybe they'll be at this party. Talk to his kid—"

"His kid?" Whit grimaced. "Some gradeschooler—"

"Nah, Dorington got hitched and divorced early on. The kid's grown. Worked in the business alongside his dad. Patrick, I think." Hadley frowned. "Peter, maybe? Peter Dorington. Second son. First died at birth."

Startled into silence, Whit retreated from the notion that had immediately come to mind. There were hundreds of guys named Peter in the world. Hell, even in New York. Didn't mean a damned thing. "Peter Dorington. Where's he live?"

Hadley shrugged. "I guess the Gramercy Park house is in the bank's hands by now. The kid's probably camped with relatives somewhere, if he's got any."

Gramercy Park. Whit tried to suck a breath into unreceptive lungs. "I'll give the story some thought, all right? I've got to go." He pushed himself up and staggered to the door.

"Don't forget the monkey suit," Hadley called after him.

It felt like a longer walk back to Lexington, and he'd kicked himself black and blue by the time the park came into view. He hadn't figured he was *that* rusty—as a reporter or a human being. Sure, he'd let endless bad news turn him a little cynical. But who didn't? He'd been so wrapped up in feeling normal again, he hadn't stopped to piece together any of the puzzle Peter

had handed him. Peter had all but cried on his shoulder and Whit had tried to buck him up without ever thinking maybe it was something more than a failed business or a foreclosed house that brought on the waterworks.

"Damn it."

The house was still a regal portrait of brick, stone, and iron wrought in fanciful design, but now it stood tainted by its history. Whit stomped up to the door and rang the bell. First names had been more than appropriate for his purposes and Peter's. He'd bedded the guy after finding out more about him than he'd really expected to know. So why did he feel like such a goddamned jerk?

He rang again when there was no answer, then a third time, just to be sure. He couldn't wait around. He'd just waste the day beating himself up some more. Instead, he threw himself into research, following the same route he'd taken to write the piece on Will Rogers the year before. He wanted to know something more about Dorington before he talked to Peter again.

By the afternoon's end, he wished he hadn't bothered. None of what he unearthed was good. Former employees he talked to had only added to the grim chorus who remembered financier Gerald Dorington as hard-driving and heartless. Illegal practices committed in an attempt to save the business had not prevented its demise, but had assured Dorington some prison time—if he'd been around to serve it. Whit suspected if there was anything favorable to be said about the man, it would come from his son. But another visit to Gramercy Park proved useless and Whit resigned himself to a miserable hour wandering around Edmund Chesterfield's little corner of Park Avenue, all for the sake of a paycheck.

Observing, from the alcove where he'd dropped his coat off ten minutes earlier, the shimmer and slink of the crowd as they moved from one chandeliered hall to the next, Whit began to wonder if it was worth it. He'd never understood the appeal in reading about folks whose greatest worry was what to wear to the evening's house party. To drool over stories about the wealthy when one had nothing seemed only a practical application of salt to the wound.

Thinking of Peter, Whit supposed not *all* denizens of that class were prattling nincompoops—but he was seeing little further evidence of it at Chesterfield's. Uncomfortable in an ill-fitting tux, he decided the only way to make an early escape would be to narrow down the field of loose-tongued souls to the one most handy with the gossip. Once he had enough to fill Michaels' column, he could hoof it back to Lexington and, with any luck, spend the rest of the night with Peter.

Steeling himself for the first foray, he focused on the grandes dames, confident one or another of them was in a chatty mood. But it was Mrs. Chesterfield, herself, who collared him, instead. "You're from the Times, I think."

"The tux give it away?"

Mrs. Chesterfield looked mildly amused, Whit sensed, only because she deemed it appropriate. "Henry informed me," she said with a dismissive wag of satiny fingers toward the

door where the butler passed his own judgment on the continuing influx of guests. "I understand Mr. Michaels is under the weather. So sorry to hear it."

She wasn't the only one. "He's down with the flu, so the paper passed this privilege on to me." He applauded himself silently for the lack of sarcasm. "But I'm at your mercy, Mrs. Chesterfield. I don't know anyone here..." No sooner had the statement left his lips than it became a lie. He had a sudden, desperate wish for a glass of champagne. Maybe two. "Peter."

Mrs. Chesterfield glanced around, then back at Whit with an arch, but still politely amused smile. "I'd wondered why the Times was so determined to send just anyone tonight. If you plan to talk to Mr. Dorington, please be so good as to not cause a scene. This may be difficult for you to fathom in your single-minded zeal to sell papers, but he's been through quite enough—don't you think?"

Whit wanted to laugh; he was apparently the prattling nincompoop, in her eyes. "Peter's a friend of mine, ma'am. If you'll pardon me."

He supposed "friend" was putting it strongly, but he didn't care. Her condescension rankled. And it seemed his did, as well; for Mrs. Chesterfield followed him, clearly set on making sure no tension or trace of grief laid a shadow over her orchestrated fairytale. Whit did his best to ignore her, quickening his step as Peter glanced his way. Blue eyes widened and a smile of delight broke out, transforming Peter's somber expression in a way that surely had more than one onlooker curious. Even so, Whit was glad for it. Maybe more than glad—just judging by the peculiar thump in his chest at the sight of that smile. He answered with a grin. "Didn't expect to see me here, did you?"

Peter, altogether something to look at in his smartly tailored tux, held out a hand and clasped Whit's warmly. "Not following me around, are you?" he tossed back cheerfully.

Mrs. Chesterfield swept up a little breathlessly and laid a hand on Peter's arm as if she could shield him from the evils of the press. "Peter, I do apologize. I had no idea the gentlemen of the Times would be so persistent."

She'd overheard Peter's remark, Whit realized. Puzzlement doused Peter's smile and a bewildered gaze sought his. "The Times?" His voice dropped low, the lone note disbelief. "You're a newspaper reporter?"

Whit wanted to glare at Mrs. Chesterfield. He'd meant to break that a little more gently. "I am. But I didn't know—"

"Of course." The smile flared back to life with a bitter twist. "You're a reporter. It makes perfect sense. I was an idiot not to see it."

Mrs. Chesterfield look alarmed. "Peter—"

"It's quite all right." Peter glanced into his champagne glass as if he'd forgotten it. He drained the glass and set it on a passing tray. "Forgive me, won't you? I'm not fit company for anyone right now." He brushed past Whit with barely a glance and kept walking. Whit turned to go after him, to be stayed by Mrs. Chesterfield's grip on his sleeve.

"I won't ask Henry to show you out," she said. "I think you know the way." She let go of him. "Be wise about what you print tomorrow, Mr. Stoddard. I will not tolerate stories engineered merely to stir people against us."

Whit snorted. "Beg your pardon, ma'am, but I still don't know why anyone would care."

Obliging her with a beeline for the door, he wandered the sidewalk until he spotted Peter flagging down a taxi. Then he ran, nearly beating the cab to the curb. "Peter, don't go. I want to talk to you."

"I've no doubt." Peter signalled the driver to wait. "What specifically did you want to discuss?" Flush-cheeked, he faced Whit. "I think your paper's related every detail of my father's life for the entertainment of New York—hell, the whole country. Every mistake he made from the moment he was born, to the night he..." Peter broke from his gaze and drew a quavering breath. "Here's a story for your paper." The eyes he turned back to Whit did not—could not, Whit sensed—hide his grief. "Why don't you write about the way he took care of me, all on his own, after my mother died? How he moved his favorite chair into my room and held me till I fell asleep—and most of the time, he stayed there all night, in case I woke from a nightmare. Why don't you tell everyone how he made Christmas bearable again by taking me out to toy shops where we'd buy gifts, then wrap them after supper and take them 'round to orphanages? I guess it isn't as entertaining a tale as the one where he fired a man who fell asleep on the job? Or when he cut wages to keep the business afloat?"

Lost for words, Whit stared at him. Peter stared back contemptuously. "Everyone liked to accuse him of being too cheap to hand out much in bonuses. He spent the money on books for the libraries in the neighborhoods where he grew up. Maybe he was a hard man to know—a hard man altogether, sometimes—but he was honest. He wanted to do good things. He made mistakes, that's all." Peter's eyes brightened. "Why don't you..." He sucked in another shaking breath. "Why don't you just go to hell."

"Peter, for God's sake, I didn't *know*—"

But Peter was in the cab and, as it sped away, Whit's heartfelt protest fell, unheard. If things could have gone more hopelessly wrong, he didn't know how. Worry and exasperation took turns dominating his racing thoughts as he walked to Gramercy Park, only to find a dark house. When a knock brought no response, he made a few circuits of the square; but wherever Peter'd gone, it involved a warm bed somewhere else. Whit tried the bell again, in vain. He didn't know why he was hanging around. What did he owe a guy he'd known barely a day? Not a whole hell of a lot.

It was a weary walk back to a more familiar neighborhood; not until he dropped onto a flophouse bunk and won a measure of comfort from the lone blanket did he remember the story he'd been assigned to write. Only trouble was, he had no story. Forget the nose; he didn't have the heart for it. He burrowed beneath the blanket and listened to the growing chorus of snores as the exhausted sought sweet oblivion. He had to be the only one still awake. What did he owe a guy he'd known barely a day? A whole lot of unshakable concern, apparently.

He woke to a gentle hand on his shoulder and, hoping it was Peter, opened his eyes. Sunlight filtering through the dirty window fell on Jimmy Westbrook's brown thatch and the sandstorm of freckles that made him look younger than his twenty-five years. He sat on the opposite bunk, thin arms propped on thin knees, and studied Whit curiously. "Never seen you sleep in. You okay?"

Whit pushed away the blanket and sat up, certain he'd slept all of five minutes the whole night. It would explain why his eyes wanted desperately to remain closed. He tried to shake off the feeling, turning his attention to his rumpled suit. "Damn. Guess I should've taken it off." He combed fingers through his hair, instead. "Your interview's today?"

Jimmy grimaced. "For what it's worth." He combed fingers through his own hair, messing it further. "I tried to clean up, but that washroom's dirtier than I am. You think all the other guys will look like bums? I keep hoping. It won't seem so bad. Not getting the job, I mean."

"You'll get the job." Though he hadn't needed an excuse to go back to Gramercy Park, he was glad to have one. It might mean Peter was less likely to slam the door in his face. "Want to take a little walk?"

Jimmy resisted the idea of asking a stranger for help, but Whit set a record for white lies, assuring him Peter was a friend who owed Whit a favor. They reached Gramercy with an uneasy Jimmy trailing a little behind. Whit, determined not to reconsider the wisdom of the decision, ran up the house steps and rang the bell. A sleepy-eyed Peter came to the door, frowned at him, and started to close it.

"Peter, wait. Don't talk to me if you don't want to, but—you said you'd do a good turn for Jimmy and..." Whit glanced around as Jimmy came hesitantly up the steps behind him. Jimmy seemed to sense the less than welcoming air about Peter and he stopped midway and looked to Whit. But it was Peter who spoke.

"Of course. I'm sorry. I'd forgotten that was today." He drew the door wide. "Please come in."

Whit hesitated, then. "If you've got company—"

Peter was back to being inscrutable. "No company. Just a little trouble, sleeping."

"I had some, myself," Jimmy said with a nervous laugh. He twisted his already battered hat in his hands. "I sure do thank you for this..."

"Peter," Whit supplied.

"Peter Dorington." Peter held out a hand to shake Jimmy's, but his glance went to Whit, a trace of regret breaking through the deliberate reserve. "If you gentlemen will follow me, we'll make neat work of this and finish in time for lunch. I've got a dozen dishes still crowding the ice box and I wouldn't mind some help cleaning it out." His smile was one Whit recognized. Peter was glad for their company—even if he still harbored some hurt over the night before. It gave Whit hope.

When Peter went ahead into the corridor, Jimmy caught Whit's arm. "Dorington? Ain't he—"

"Yeah. It hit him pretty hard. I think that's part of why he wants to do this," Whit said, realizing it was true. "He's carrying on a tradition, in his own way."

"Can't I do something for him?" Jimmy whispered as they started up the grand staircase.

Whit shook his head. "You already are."

Peter had laid out a suit by the time they reached the bedroom and he briskly ushered Jimmy into the bath, closing the doors after him. "We'll go downstairs, to give him some privacy."

"Peter—"

"Downstairs."

In the kitchen, Peter went to work pulling dishes from the ice box. Whit realized the place was spotless. "Your housekeeper still around?"

"No. And I did just fine without her."

"Yeah?" Whit suppressed a smile. "What did you have for supper?"

Peter laid down a platter bearing a shriveled joint surrounded by carrots and turnips in not much better shape. A wry laugh escaped him and he raised rueful eyes to Whit's. "Hard-boiled eggs and coffee."

"You hard boil the eggs?"

Peter shook his head. "But I made the coffee."

Whit laughed. "That's a start."

"Not going to write about it, are you?"

There was something direct and expectant in his manner, despite the sardonic note. Whit returned the favor, minus the sarcasm. "I don't blame you for telling me off. But I didn't know who you were. I swear to God, Peter. If I had—"

"Would you still have wanted to come home with me?"

The question surprised him. "I wanted to last night."

Peter looked dubious. "Really? As angry as I was?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd stay sore once you let me explain." He took a stool and leaned over the bowl of oranges, breathing in their summer sweetness. "Anyway..." He glanced at Peter and made a face. "I'm not a reporter now. I haven't been one for months and I don't know if I'll ever be again." He reached for an orange, hesitated, then drew back his hand. Glancing up again, he grinned carelessly. "I won't write about you. I promise."

Peter's smile got a slow start, but had its way with Whit so easily, he thought he might be falling—and a little too hard and quick. But, really, maybe there was no other way. "I think we should start over." Whit extended a hand. "Whit Stoddard—"

Peter sucked in a breath. "W.L. Stoddard?"

"So you've seen the byline."

"Not in the paper I bought last night. But plenty of other times." Peter dropped onto a stool across from him to sit in silent fascination. Whit hissed, exasperated.

"It's nothing much, all right? In fact, it hasn't been anything at all, lately. I only went to Chesterfield's last night because my boss is hoping I'll write something worth printing." Whit stopped there. It would do no good to tell Peter that Charlie wanted a story about him. The story wasn't his to tell, anyway. It wasn't anyone's but Peter's, if he ever decided to share it. With that

understood, another realization crept up on him. "You bought a copy of the Times last night? Though you were mad at me?"

Peter colored, glancing away. "I was curious." He plucked an orange from the bowl and gave it a push across the table toward Whit. "After I bought the paper I realized I only knew you by your given name." An impish light brightened his eyes. "Whitman?"

Whit snorted. "Just Whit." Peter'd read the paper through, to find out more about him. Whit marvelled at the thought. "That was the whole of your evening?"

"Not at all. I rode around in the cab for a while. The cabbie probably had enough to pay his rent by the end of it." Peter slumped down, chin on his folded arms. "My good deed for the day, I suppose."

"You're two for two."

Jimmy came in, scrubbed clean and decently decked out, his slicked hair finding its curl again despite his best effort. If the suit was a little large, Whit figured no one would notice; Jimmy wore it like it was purely bespoke. The damp lashes and shaky smile, however—those had to go. "Hell of a feeling, isn't it?" Whit shook his hand. "That's for luck. Now sit down and eat something."

Steadier, Jimmy sat, but he ate little. At one-thirty, he left, refusing the cab fare Peter offered, and Whit knew it was not just pride but a need to burn away his simmering anxiety by covering the six blocks on foot. The lunch chatter gave way to quiet as Whit helped Peter clear away the mess. Whit washed dishes with all deliberate speed, hoping for an invitation to stay a while. It came unexpectedly, in the form of arms slipping around him from behind and lips tender on the nape of his neck. He set down a soapy butter dish and turned, sliding damp arms around Peter. "Want to show me the rest of the house?"

"All right. We'll start in the kitchen." Peter leaned in, lashes drifting to his cheeks, and touched his lips to Whit's. It was a gentle press, a brush, a taste, as if Whit were the unexplored territory. The slow kindling maddened, but Whit, absorbed in the feel of Peter's mouth crushed to his, could not yield soft kisses to hard. When the caress of lips turned all the more purposeful, he gave in as readily as Peter, who pushed him against the sink and cradled his head with both hands, all the while kissing him with increasingly breathless abandon.

Whit at last pulled back, gasping. "Here?"

"Upstairs."

Peter's room was the spare, comfortable oasis Whit remembered, now warmed by the afternoon sun sneaking under half-drawn shades. He barely took it in before the world narrowed to a solemn kiss and an even more solemn blue gaze set fast upon him. "W.L. Stoddard," Peter said and laughed softly. "I gave you hell, didn't I? I just..."

"I know." Whit drew him near. "I like you, too."

The kiss was familiar and aching new, and Whit was loathe to let it go, even when Peter's fingers worked past his trouser buttons with a caress full of promise. Whit groaned against the lips plumbing his and put up no resistance when Peter pushed him to the bed and fell on top of

him. Fleeting concern over work left undone gave Whit pause, but stood no chance of distracting him. Only when evening shadows had grown thick enough to impress him with the lateness of the hour did the world regain his attention. Peter was a dark, warm shape pressed close, still catching his breath after Whit's last successful effort to steal it, and Whit, drifting on the serene awareness that something wonderful had begun, wondered just how long the average miracle could last.

When he woke, it was to a roomful of moonlight and Peter's even breaths warming his shoulder. Intending to go back to sleep, Whit lay awake a while, taking in the quiet of a house undisturbed by the distant traffic's rumble. His wandering attention fell on a wingback chair he'd barely noticed before, and he pictured a man slumped drowsily against its cushioned back, a small boy curled in his arms. Gerald Dorington—who never smiled, one former employee had asserted. But he'd surely smiled upon the small soul seeking comfort on those pitch-dark nights. Whit didn't believe Peter's memories of a kind and compassionate father were all born of grief. He hadn't known his own father, but the grandfather who'd raised him had loved him—though people had often wondered how a quick-tempered old widower could successfully bring up a rowdy, sometimes too inquisitive boy.

Pondering the vagaries of parenthood, Whit fell asleep, to rouse with the doorbell's chime. Peter, damp-haired but dressed, came out of the bathroom in the midst of buttoning his vest. "Not expecting anyone, are you?"

Whit snorted. "No one knows I'm here—"

"Jimmy."

Whit grabbed a dressing gown and dashed for the stairs, Peter right behind. The bell rang again as Whit reached the door. He'd barely cracked it open before Jimmy, on the stoop, sprang in as if he couldn't bear to wait any longer. Gasping for breath, he seized Whit's shoulders and struggled visibly to speak. But Whit didn't need to hear. "You got it?"

Jimmy laughed aloud. "I'm working. I'm working!"

"Well, goddamn," Whit said, and pulled him into a hug. Peter hung back, but Whit caught a glimpse of his shining face. The news might've been for any of them—hell, it felt as good.

One arm still wrapped around Whit, Jimmy stretched a hand to Peter. "God bless you, Mr. Dorington. I mean to pay you back for the suit—but if it's all right, I want to lend it to a pal who's going to see about a job at the Edison. There's some kind of luck in this, I think." He smoothed the lapels almost reverently.

Peter looked elated. "Pass it along, by all means. If your friend would like to come by for a meal and a bath, he's welcome."

"Really?" Jimmy stared at him wonderingly before pulling himself together to shake Peter's hand. Whit took in Peter's quiet pleasure and thought Gerald Dorington had gotten one thing right, anyway.

But Harold Morton, considerably more broad-shouldered than Peter, had no hope of borrowing his suit. "Damned shame," Whit said, as the blushing shy Harold came up the stoop behind Jimmy. "Maybe we can give his a good cleaning."

Peter, lost in thought, greeted the men absently, until Whit's concerned glance seemed to wake him. "I think there may be something we can do." He led them not to his own room, but further on, to a chamber shrouded by heavy drapes and a heavier silence. In the dressing room, a row of expensively tailored wool and linen gathered dust. Peter took the lone empty hanger from the row and laid it on a shelf, then pulled out a charcoal gray suit and draped it gently over his arm. "This should fit."

Harold looked miserable. "Beg your pardon, but—I'm not sure this is right. I mean, I don't think I can—" He glanced helplessly at Jimmy, who turned to Whit.

Peter noticed the exchange not at all. He stood absently tugging at a stray thread, his thoughts clearly elsewhere. Whit laid a hand on Jimmy's shoulder and Harold's, turning the men toward the bedroom. "You know where the bath is—" He cast a critical eye on Harold's rumpled coat. "Don't worry. We'll give your suit a brush. It'll be good as new."

"I didn't mean to be ungrateful," Harold whispered, with a glance back at Peter.

"Never mind," Whit said. "He'll understand."

As soon as they'd gone, Peter raised his head and met Whit's sympathetic gaze with a half-hearted smile. "Better to give these to people who won't know their history, I suppose." As he hung the suit, Whit came up behind him and slipped both arms around him. Peter turned and buried his face in Whit's shoulder. "I should've realized—" His voice broke.

Peter didn't mean the suit. Worried, Whit held on all the tighter. Shame wasn't the only thing that drove men to bad decisions, and he didn't like the way Peter piled guilt on top of a heart already burdened. "You know, I forgot to tell you—there's a guy down at the flop, been running his mouth off, all excited, Jimmy says, about some teaching job that just opened up. But his coat's coming apart and his dress shirt's more gray than white. Jimmy told me he's too ashamed to set foot in the superintendent's office."

Peter drew back and wiped his face on his sleeve. "A teacher?"

"Guess so. He's smart enough—though he did a hell of a job trying to mend his coat." Whit grinned. "You'll have to lend him something. Or find him a wife."

The old, wistful smile showed itself. "I don't think we have time for that. He'll have to settle for a change of clothes."

It proved an easy habit to fall into, bringing fellows by for a chance at a fresh start. As much as Whit enjoyed it, the true pleasure came from watching its effect on Peter. He only looked the more content with each handshake, crushing hug, and eager offer of favors done in return. Declining the offers, he opened his larder and his closets day after day to the men Jimmy and Whit discreetly singled out and invited over. All were sworn to secrecy; Peter might not have minded a line out the door, but his neighbors would. Whit had no intention of making things more difficult for him, when he was holding out his hand to fellows in need.

And it was a need that never slacked. In a week, the ice box stood nearly as empty as Peter's closet. Peter replenished both, a sign that the failed business had not left him without some funds—even if the house would not much longer be home. Whit did not like to ask, for as close as they were becoming, some subjects were too sensitive to be broached.

For the moment, he was happy to be the one Peter looked to for advice, affection, and comfort. Each afternoon, when another job seeker, slick and polished, had been sent off, Whit lured Peter out of the house and back into the world. They undertook every frivolous pursuit that came to mind, from evenings at the picture show to bicycling around the park in the ever-deepening autumn cold.

Whit even coaxed him to come along in search of stories; but the story Whit was most interested in remained untold. Hadley, steamed about the society column Whit had never turned in, persisted in asking for a piece on Dorington. Whit had a feeling he and the paper might soon be parting ways if he didn't give in, but with each day that passed, he was more certain he would prefer to lose his job than Peter's trust.

It wasn't until the first of November that Peter gave him reason to wonder if he'd ever had that trust, to begin with. Walking back to the house with Hadley's sentiments on his latest effort ringing in his ears, he found the front door locked and the key Peter had given him useless. He was about to ring the bell when a stout, ruddy-faced man bundled in a too-small overcoat stepped out. Not recognizing him, Whit let him pass on the stoop—then hurried down after him. "You from the hotel?"

The man turned, eyebrows raised. "I beg your pardon?"

"The hotel—" Whit frowned. "Is Peter here?"

"Ah." The man seemed to comprehend his confusion. "No, the bank has taken over the property."

As he started to turn, Whit caught his arm. "You kicked him out?"

"Mr. Dorington vacated the house." He shook off Whit's hand and fixed him with a thin smile. "No kicking required."

"Vacated? Where's he gone?"

"I couldn't say." The man resumed walking and Whit followed.

"Why? Because you don't know or you don't know me?"

"Both."

Huffing and puffing, the man continued on. Whit stared after him, frustrated. "Who does know?"

"Talk to the bank."

Whit didn't want to talk to the bank. He wanted to talk to Peter. With no notion where Peter might have gone, he had no place to go, himself—apart from the flophouse. He worried all the way back, until he reached the Bowery and the first pricklings of anger and hurt shunted aside a big portion of his concern. It had never bothered him that Peter tended to be close-mouthed; but

eviction was rather a significant thing to be kept to oneself. If Peter had intended it to be interpreted as good-bye—well, there were certainly kinder ways to push a fellow off.

Preoccupied, Whit made it all the way to his usual bunk before he noticed the bed beside his had been claimed, too. "Son of a—" It came out, exasperation and relief, in a burst that startled Peter and several others just settling in. Whit dropped onto the bunk and leaned across to where Peter sat, still in coat and hat, clasping and unclasping his hands in his lap. "What the hell happened?"

Peter's brows knit. "You didn't get my note."

"Note?"

The frown deepened. "Mr. Smithson must have taken it."

"He's the one who booted you out?"

"No, that would be the gentlemen from the bank. Mr. Smithson is from the brokerage. I left a note for you to meet me here."

"You didn't know they were evicting you today?"

Peter's gaze dropped. "I've known for a while."

Bewildered but calmer, Whit moved over to sit beside him. "You didn't want to let me in on it?" he asked in a quieter voice.

Peter was silent for the longest minute. Finally he turned tense features to Whit. "I meant to. I kept deciding I would, but then—"

"You weren't sure about me?"

Peter stared at him. "What? No. Oh no," he said, shaking his head. "It was just that you were having so much fun. And so was I. Everything was so good—for a while. I couldn't stand to ruin it. To disappoint you," he added softly.

"Jesus." Whit exhaled an exhausted laugh. "You scared the shit out of me, Peter."

Peter looked only more troubled. "I didn't mean for you to think—what you thought. It never even occurred to me you might."

"A little disappointment won't hurt me." Whit leaned against Peter's shoulder. "As long as you're around, that's all they can be—little disappointments. I guess it only takes a small miracle to help a fellow keep things in perspective."

Peter studied him as if not quite convinced. "You don't mind that it's over?"

"Our grand scheme to clean up Manhattan, one grubby mug at a time?" Whit snorted, then grinned. "We did all right. Maybe not everyone found work—but even the fellows who haven't, they're sure and certain a job's just around the corner. You gave them that boost." With a little help from the man who'd set him a good example. The story reasserted itself, wanting to be told, almost begging him, and Whit's resistance weakened. He tried to shake off the prose already shaping itself in his head. "How about some supper? I've still got a dollar in my pocket. We can splurge at the automat."

Peter smiled. "I've got enough for a proper meal at Child's, I believe."

"You're kidding. You're really broke?"

"The creditors and Mr. Roosevelt spared me a few dollars." Peter lowered his voice. "We can take a private room down the street. Someplace with fewer bedbugs."

The gathering dusk brought more men seeking shelter. If he and Peter stayed, Whit realized, it would be their first night apart in more than a month. Still grappling with Peter's revelation, he reluctantly agreed. He could not be the voice of common sense, not when Peter wanted it as much as he did.

The room they took was a narrow corner on the top floor of a small hotel, with barely space for bedbugs, let alone a bed. But the door had a lock, the window, shades—all Whit needed to take Peter in his arms and find the comfort he'd ached for the whole day. The hands moving tenderly up and down his back, the cheek resting against his hair, Peter's low, confiding tone—it wasn't a fleeting pleasure like so many others. It stayed with him. Perhaps that was why his need for Peter was so sharp when they were apart.

"It's funny," Peter whispered.

Whit just nodded. Then thought to ask, "What?"

"The power you have, to cure me of all other wants."

Whit snorted. "I was just thinking that."

Peter drew back, smiling. "Really?"

"Why do you think I drag you around every place I go?"

"You like me?"

Whit grinned. "You catch on quick."

"Not always." Peter's eyes brightened. "But I'm working on it."

Whit took his hands and backed toward the bed. Dropping on it, he pulled Peter with him and buried him between a faded blanket and shielding arms. "Don't cry," he whispered. "I don't have a hanky."

Peter closed his eyes, then breathed a gasp that was half laugh. "I don't either." Tears came, a necessary release, and Whit's kisses on his damp cheeks served almost as well. Only when Peter turned to capture Whit's mouth did the need for a handkerchief pass, forgotten. Whit wanted to melt into him and warm that lonely, wounded place that seemed too deep to reach. Trying to express it, he was gentle—until Peter pushed him flat on his back and climbed on him, eyes darkly alight. "I'm not made of glass."

The hoarse exasperation made Whit laugh, and all at once, he understood. Awake and alive—with someone to be awake and alive for; that was all Peter wanted. Whit kissed him with bruising strength, a kiss fervently returned. The hunger he'd sparked in Peter spread a heat as unmanageable through him and drove the hard kisses and the hands ranging roughshod over Peter's skin. A low sound, guttural in force but buoyant with astonished pleasure, broke from Peter and he thrust bodily against Whit, with enough friction, despite their clothes, to set Whit's blood on fire. Hands working under Whit's shirt and tugging at his trousers fanned the flames and he stripped Peter down to bare skin as swiftly. When Peter fell, naked, upon him, it was nearly enough to finish him.

If this was awake and alive, he wanted to live forever.

Only a little while ago—was it just eight weeks?—the hours had been too plentiful. Now they were in short supply. By the time he lay, sore, perspiring, and blissfully tired, beside a flush-cheeked, sleepy-eyed Peter, his thoughts already roamed with anticipation to the days ahead. "I'm going to help you find work. Maybe not in management, like you were—but you're good with numbers, right?"

"Not particularly," Peter confessed. "I liked the managing part, making sure everyone was doing well and helping them out if they weren't. But there's little else I know how to do."

"You couldn't light the stove a couple of months ago and now you make a hell of a breakfast. You've got a real knack—" Whit yawned. "For sunny side up."

Peter kissed his shoulder. "It's not so tough, with someone to show you how."

Whit shifted nearer, a teasing retort on his lips. It seemed moments later he opened his eyes to find the sun streaming in and Peter already up. Below the bare light bulb overhead, something fluttered, startling him. Bleary-eyed, he realized it was a large sheet of artists' paper hung from the pull chain. A note from Peter, left where it would not be missed. Whit rose, laughing, and snatched the paper out of the air. The message was short. Peter had gone to meet with Smithson and retrieve a few things he'd left behind.

Remembering his own clothes still stored in a flophouse locker, Whit grabbed the pencil Peter had discarded; but what started as a note to Peter took a new direction. Along with the rest of Manhattan, Whit had disliked Gerald Dorington—until he'd seen the man through Peter's eyes. In his grief, Peter may have elevated his father's character. But it was Peter's character that led Whit to believe Dorington must have been a good guy—at least for the benefit of the son who idolized him.

Barely begun, Whit hesitated with the pencil on the page. Peter might think he was breaking his promise. The story was still Peter's to tell; one by one, Peter had shared the memories he'd held safe, keepsakes of the heart. Whit treasured that trust—and yet it didn't feel like a betrayal, to tell the story pulling and tugging at his own heart.

Well past noon, he put down the pencil and stretched stiff fingers. He was better with a typewriter, especially when the words poured from his head faster than he could write. He contemplated showing the story to Peter, but Peter hadn't come back and he had no idea how long Smithson would keep him.

Hadley's approval would have to do. With the paper, filled front and back, stuffed in his coat pocket, he left the hotel. The rain and wind conspired to stir up a hint of winter, but it didn't slow him down. He wove his way along the slick, busy sidewalks and refused to consider that more than the weather might turn stormy by nightfall.

Second thoughts became third when he was settled, damp and breathless, in the chair across from Hadley, staring at the back of his own copy and the curl of cigarette smoke rising above it. "Well?"

Hadley exhaled, irritated. "Let me finish it, will you?"

Whit slid down in the chair. One more minute and he'd be begging a Camel, despite his empty stomach. Hadley read placidly on and, an eternity later, laid down the paper and leaned back. His smile, slow and creaking from lack of use, formed and Whit's gut unknotted. "Yeah?"

Hadley chuckled. "Welcome back."

The knot formed again, this time in his throat. "Pulitzer?" he joked.

"We'll see what folks think in the morning."

Whit sat up. "You're getting it in tomorrow?"

Hadley rose and left the office, taking the story with him. Whit waited ten long minutes and finally pinched a Camel. He'd nearly finished it when Hadley came back and dropped himself into the cracked leather, rocking forward toward the desk. "Tomorrow," he grunted, and tossed a slip of paper Whit's way; a check, hastily scrawled.

Hadley must have sworn a blue streak at the poor clerk. Whit marvelled at the row of numbers—short, but the most beautiful he'd seen since that first check, long ago. "So...definitely tomorrow?"

Hadley sighed. "You mind? I've got work to do. And so do you. I'll let you ride on that story till Sunday—then I want to see more of the same." He tossed the pack of Camels at Whit. "But get your damned apartment back first, for Christ's sake."

Steadier, Whit left the cigarettes with Hadley and deposited the check. He paid a visit to his old landlord, to learn, after a forlorn digression regarding unpaid rents, that his apartment had stood empty since his eviction. Grudgingly agreeing to a reduced rate, the man turned the key back over to Whit, who raced up to find the furniture blanketed and the parlor window still cracked, but nothing else changed. A little dusting and it would be home again—this time, he hoped, for two.

Wild to tell Peter about it, he went on another dash through the rain, reaching the hotel, to burst into an empty room. Too restless to wait, he walked to Lexington and met Peter coming in the opposite direction. Suitcase in one hand, umbrella in the other, Peter wore a decidedly glum expression until his gaze fell upon Whit. "Still following me around?"

Whit matched his grin. "You mind?"

"How can I?" Peter extended a hand past the umbrella's rim. "You chased away the rain. Like always." Closing the umbrella, he fell into step beside Whit. "You did get my note?"

"I did. And put it to good use. How's Smithson?"

"Officious as ever. He doesn't suppose the house will sell. Truthfully, I don't care if it doesn't. I won't pass through its door again."

"Happy in the Bowery?"

Peter took the teasing in a straightforward fashion. "As long as you're there."

"What if I'm somewhere else? Say, not too far from Times Square?"

Peter stopped walking to stare at him. "You aren't trying to tell me you let a place?"

Whit held up the key. "Come and see it?"

Peter asked not another question until they'd reached the apartment and he'd walked from parlor to bedroom and back. He stood in the center of the room, gazing around at furniture that hadn't been replaced in thirty years. "This is where you lived?"

"Since the spring of '26. Too cold in winter and too warm in summer. The bath on the third floor leaks down. People are up the stairs all the time like thundering elephants. Mrs. Stewart in the front hall apartment plays Caruso albums incessantly and Tillie Dorman in the apartment across the way is forever asking me in to fix things. The plumbing rattles, the radiator clanks, the windows stick, and there's a mouse making occasional forays into the pantry." Whit couldn't repress a smile. "It's a hell of a place."

"But how..." Peter swung around, wide-eyed. "You wrote a story?"

"You could say that."

Whit had no chance to plunge into details before Peter hugged him. "I knew you would. I'm so glad." He drew back, beaming. "Mr. Hadley loved it?"

"He seemed to—"

"What's it about?"

"Well..." Whit cleared his throat. "You."

"Me?" Peter's smile faded. "Just me?"

"Peter, listen—"

"You said you wouldn't write about my father. You gave me your word." Retreating, Peter bumped into a chair. He steadied himself but stared around as if the apartment was suddenly unfriendly territory. His gaze, bright with hurt, shot back to Whit. "Why? You've got the whole world to write about. Did Hadley demand it?"

"He asked—"

"So you felt you had no choice?"

"I had a choice." If Peter could only read the story... "You've trusted me. Can't you go on trusting me till tomorrow?"

Peter's brow furrowed. "You can list a man's best qualities, but if people want to think ill of him, they'll twist the good or ignore it. My father can't defend himself. It's up to me. I'm the only one left who will."

"You aren't," Whit said gently. "Truth is, I didn't write about Gerald Dorington. The world's met him. I thought it was time to introduce everyone to Peter Dorington's father." He smiled wryly. "I've only just gotten to know the man, myself. But I realize I should've let you read it first. Can you forgive me?"

Peter blew out a breath and broke from Whit's gaze. "I want to."

And he might in time; but Whit couldn't leave the gulf between them. "It's not too late. Let's go."

Peter raised a dubious glance. "Where?"

"To the paper. I want you to read the story. If you don't like it, I'll do my best to have it pulled. You can keep the suitcase here—" He met the troubled blue eyes. "All right?"

Peter frowned, but left it. Buoyed, Whit hurried him out and set a mad pace along the rain-soaked blocks to 43rd Street, through the revolving door and up to the editorial offices. With no sign of Hadley, Whit pounced on Barbara, who lingered at her desk, an auburn spit curl twisted around a manicured finger as she fed the latest gossip to whomever she had on the other end of the line.

"Where's the story I turned in?" he asked.

Barbara put a hand over the receiver and leaned elbows on her desk. "What, honey?"

"The Gerald Dorington piece. The handwritten copy Charlie gave you."

"Oh, that." Barbara's attention strayed to Peter and she flashed a personable grin. "You must be the cutie they just hired downstairs." She pressed the receiver against her ruffled blouse and held out a hand. "Barbara Elliott. But you can call me Baby."

Peter's smile was one of chivalrous good humor. "A pleasure, Baby."

Whit gave up and began to shuffle through the papers beside the typewriter. Barbara made an indignant noise and smacked his hand with the receiver. "Leave it, will you? I typed up your story ages ago. It's upstairs by now, honey. Say, about Dorington—" Barbara covered the telephone again and regarded Peter and Whit with round blue eyes. "What a good guy. Who'd have guessed, huh?"

Peter stared at Barbara as if she'd suddenly grown wings. Whit could have kissed her. "We'll chase it down. Thanks, Baby."

On the fourth floor, Whit, with Peter trailing, wove in and out amid the typesetters' chaos and clatter until he ran into Roy Bartlett speeding past with a stack of black-pencilled copy. Confiscating the pile against Roy's protests, Whit scoured it for the story.

Roy leaned over his shoulder. "You want to tell me what you're hunting for?"

"The Dorington piece. You seen it?"

Roy chuckled. "You kidding? That's been passed around every desk on the floor. Some folks were betting you made it all up."

"It's all true." Whit turned the pile of copy back over to him and looked around. "Who's got it? You know?"

"Last I heard, Ingram claimed it. He's probably already setting it."

Whit grimaced. "Thanks."

As he waved at Peter to follow him down the row of linotypes, Roy called after them. "Stoddard! Nice work."

Peter glanced sidelong at Whit. "What in the world did you write?"

"You'll know in a minute."

Ingram stood bent over a frame, proofreading. Whit leaned in to be heard above the mallets pounding down type all around him. "Dorington?"

Ingram's snow white brows lifted above a bespectacled but still sharp pair of green eyes. He reached down to the copy stacked on a stool beside him and shifted a sheet from under the others. "You're not pulling it?"

"That's up to Mr. Dorington." Whit turned the copy over to Peter.

Ingram's brows rose further, but he turned back to his work without a word. Peter stood silent in the far-reaching frenzy of activity around him, seeming aware of the power he'd been handed. He glanced at the copy, then lifted it to the light shining over Ingram's desk; but he'd barely begun to read when his eyes brightened. The headline—*A Father's Legacy*—hadn't been edited, Whit realized. Peter was going to need a private place to read the rest.

Whit steered him away from the machines and into the nearest elevator, pushing the button for the top floor. Before the doors had closed, Peter was reading again, with need so transparent, Whit wanted to slip an arm around him. Struck with the feeling that his words, for the moment, embraced Peter as comfortingly, he held back. He would not transgress the quiet place Peter had gone, that communion with memories, when they were all he had left of his father.

The elevator stopped and Whit got it moving again. Peter hardly seemed to notice. They'd nearly reached the bottom floor when the paper drifted downward in his grasp, his gaze following as if he could not let go of the words. A certain calm had come over him and the eyes he lifted to meet Whit's shone with more than tears. The seemingly depthless blue brimmed with the peace of a man no longer struggling alone.

When Peter turned to the row of buttons and pressed number four, Whit felt compelled to ask, "Are you sure?"

Peter couldn't seem to find words of his own. He slipped his arms around Whit, crushing him close, and pressed a damp cheek against his neck. Whit felt the rush of breath he let out and hoped it took a little of the grief with it. He was as comforted by Peter's absent caress, sensing forgiveness in it. "I just get so damned carried away," he whispered. "I thought you'd understand. You always seem to."

Peter snorted, then drew back to kiss him. "You'd better not get into the habit of using that to get around me."

"I can't help it. You make it easy."

"I'm not always so reasonable."

"No?" Whit couldn't suppress a grin. The elevator's soft bounce reminded him they were back in the public eye, and he automatically eased away, though he didn't want to.

The ache of letting go was in Peter's face, but he smiled and a wondering light swiftly surpassed it. "You believe this." He held out the copy. "Every word you wrote."

"I'm sentimental that way," Whit said with a laugh.

Peter paid not the slightest attention to the flippant response. "Can we still get the story into tomorrow's paper?"

"We will. Then I've got to run down and grab my things out of the flophouse locker before someone gives them away. That's all I have in the world."

"Not all." Peter gave his hand a quick squeeze as they left the elevator.

With the story back in Ingram's hands, Whit collected his possessions from the flophouse while Peter returned to the hotel down the street to settle the bill. Handing in his key, Whit threw

one last glance into the flop's stark, utilitarian interior and felt grateful to his very marrow that he was leaving at last. Though it was forever stamped as the place he'd met Peter, he knew it would be a long while before it lingered as a fond memory rather than a haunting one.

Stepping to the sidewalk, he met Jimmy coming in. "They haven't kicked you out of here yet?"

Jimmy gave him a good-natured punch in the arm. "You know what I've been saving for. Just got it today." He patted his coat pocket. "It's not much to look at—"

"She loves you, you dope. She won't care." Whit pulled him out of the way as others straggled in. "When are you getting your own place?"

"Next week, maybe. Say, how's Peter?"

"Better. How's Harold? Any luck?"

"No, but he's still pretty fired up for the possibilities." Jimmy laughed. "Says he wants to get his own place, just so's he can take another bubble bath."

"One of the finer things in life. Jim, can you do me a favor?"

Jimmy's eyes lit up, like he'd been waiting for just the opportunity. "Name it."

Whit did, without a lot of hope the deed could still be done; but having fallen in hopelessly with the notion that luck might well be made, he rose at first light and hunted up the Times to bring back to a sleeping Peter. They had drummed up something of a makeshift bed in Whit's parlor since their discovery that the mattress had been confiscated—sold by the landlord, Whit surmised.

That left sofa cushions and blankets pulled off the furniture and onto the floor; but Whit knew he and Peter might've slept on the sidewalk that night and thought it a little corner of heaven. Having stopped for eggs, bacon, coffee, and milk, he made breakfast while Peter sat cross-legged on the floor and read the paper. Whit noted the way he turned the pages with care. That was one edition that would not be going out the door with the eggshells and coffee grounds.

After breakfast, they put away the blankets, then perused the scant job ads in vain. "You'll have to start up the old-fashioned way," Whit said. "I guess we can be glad it's not raining." A two-fold blessing, he realized, when the pounding of footsteps and rumble of excited voices filled the hall outside. "Jesus. They're going to wake Manhattan."

He pulled open the door in time to admit a breathless, laughing group; Jimmy, Harold, and two others Whit recognized, whose names he could not recall. The four carried a wingback chair on their shoulders in triumphant procession, depositing it in front of a startled Peter.

"That's the one, isn't it?" Jimmy asked, when Peter stood for the longest time just staring at the chair.

"That's the one." Whit shook Jimmy's hand, murmuring his thanks, and Jimmy waved that away.

"It was no trouble. George and Harold did most of the carrying. Me and Frankie, we did the negotiating." Jimmy's smile stretched. "Got a good deal, too. The broker just wanted us to get the hell out."

"We wouldn't go without the chair." George laughed, a thundering bass from his barrel chest. "I 'spect he thought maybe we'd just take it."

Peter seemed to wake at last. "You all—you bought this for me?"

"We pooled our funds," Whit said. "We wanted to grab it before Smithson could cart it away. Seems like we got it just in time." He didn't mention that he'd paid the better portion, though he had a feeling Peter would guess as much.

But Peter seemed too dazed to do more than sink into the chair. "I hardly know what to say. It's so kind—"

"It's fair," Jimmy said quietly and held out his hand. "I didn't ever meet your dad, Peter, but I figure that newspaper story's got something to it. I just want you to know. And if you ever need anything else, I'll be around."

Peter rose and shook his hand, then the others as, one by one, they were extended with gruff gratitude. Whit, in danger of needing a handkerchief, himself, changed the subject with an offer of breakfast. While they ate, the discussion swung back inevitably to jobs. The others seemed as upbeat as Jimmy'd said. What took Whit by surprise was how upbeat he felt, himself. Only two months ago, he had no faith he'd ever feel that way again.

And Peter—he was smiling as he rambled on about his own possibilities. Whit wanted to kiss him; and that opportunity came when the dishes were done, the guests gone, and the apartment put to rights. Peter found a sunny corner for the chair and settled in it, feet propped on Whit's wobbly footstool. Whit dropped beside him, sprawled half on his lap, and draped his legs over Peter's. "Maybe I can find you work at the paper."

"Better not. You might tire of having me around. Then where would I be?"

"Cod fishing?"

Peter seemed taken aback. Then a sheepish smile broke out. "I wouldn't want to. Not by myself, anyway."

Whit laughed. "Now who has expectations?"

"I don't. I just like you."

"Yeah? Hopelessly, madly, forever?"

"Quite possibly."

"Maybe I'm not out of luck after all."

There was a mischievous curl to Peter's mouth. "I feel as if I've got a little left, myself, thanks to one Whitby Lawrence Stoddard."

Whit grimaced. "Who spilled?"

"I telephoned the *Times* and asked."

"You didn't."

"Baby was very forthcoming."

Whit shook his head, amused. "Sure you don't want to work at the paper?"

"As editor-in-chief?"

"Copy boy."

"I can scramble eggs," Peter reminded him.

"Oh, of course. The first step in conquering Manhattan." There'd been a time when Whit would never have believed it could be done with just a willing hand and generous spirit. Now he wondered if there was any other way.

Peter leaned over him to run a finger down the brass lamp beside the chair, leaving a trail in the dust. "We haven't conquered this apartment yet."

"It's been on its own for a while, too." Whit took advantage of his position and pulled Peter closer, to kiss him. "For luck."

Peter's smile softened. "Between us, we may have luck enough to spread."

"Well, I was thinking..." Whit regarded him with all due seriousness. "We might want to make sure."

"Manhattan's waiting," Peter whispered teasingly.

Whit pressed a deepening kiss on him, to be kissed with warmth enough to comfort a man through a hundred winters. The rest of the world hadn't righted itself yet; but his own world was decidedly on the upswing. "Manhattan's waiting..." He snorted. "Let it wait."

Other titles by Tamara Allen

Downtime

FBI Agent Morgan Nash is on assignment in London when his case goes awry and he finds himself moments away from a bullet through the heart. But fate has other plans: Morgan gets knocked out pursuing a suspect... and wakes up in 1888.

While cataloging ancient manuscripts at the British Museum, Ezra Glacenie accidentally pulls Morgan out of the twenty-first century—an impromptu vacation that may become permanent for Morgan if they can't locate the spellbook Ezra used. Further hampering Morgan's quest to get home is the irresistible temptation to investigate history's most notorious serial killer: Jack the Ripper. But in repressive Victorian London, it's the unexpected romance blossoming between Morgan and Ezra that becomes the most dangerous complication of all.

Whistling in the Dark

New York City, 1919. His career as a concert pianist ended by a war injury, Sutton Albright returns to college, only to be expelled after a scandalous affair with a teacher. Unable to face his family, Sutton heads to Manhattan with no plans and little money in his pocket but with a desire to call his life his own. Jack Bailey lost his parents to influenza and now hopes to save the family novelty shop by advertising on the radio, a medium barely more than a novelty, itself. When these two men cross paths, despite a world of differences separating them, their attraction cannot be denied. Sutton finds himself drawn to the piano, playing for Jack. But can his music heal them both, or will sudden prosperity jeopardize their chance at love?

The Only Gold

Jonah Woolner's life is as prudently regulated as the bank where he works. It's a satisfying life until he's passed over for promotion in favor of newcomer Reid Hylliard. Brash and enterprising, Reid beguiles everyone except Jonah, who's convinced Reid's progressive ideas will be the bank's ruin. When Jonah begins to discover there's more to Reid than meets the eye, he risks succumbing to Reid's charms—but unlocking the vault to all of Reid's secrets could lead him down a dangerous path.

Losing his promotion—and perhaps his heart—is the least of Jonah's difficulties. When the vengeful son of a Union army vet descends upon the bank to steal a government deposit of half a million dollars during the deadliest blizzard to ever sweep New York, Jonah and Reid are trapped, at odds and fighting for their lives.

About the Author

Tamara lives in the piney woods north of Houston, Texas, where she spends her time on administrative work, taking care of her family, and writing when she gets the chance. She writes primarily historical romance, and the proceeds from the sale of her first two novels, *Whistling in the Dark* and *Downtime*, go to support The OHSU Foundation, on the cutting edge of cancer research.

Visit Tamara at <http://www.tamara-allen.net/>