

Butterflies in a
Gilded Cage
by F.V. Everleigh

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CHAPTER ONE

Thomas

Washburn, the butler, did not announce every guest who came to the Everleigh Club. Many were distinguished enough, but few wanted the attention. Thomas relished it. To have a king's status in the city's most opulent bordello might be the only thing he did that made his father proud. It also kept those pesky whispers about him to a dull roar, which didn't hurt.

"Master Thomas Evan Harrison, the third."

Thomas erupted through the great ballroom's mahogany door with a motley assortment of impeccably tuxedoed young men in tow. The band switched seamlessly

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to a jauntier tune. Their new maestro had only sat at the club's gold-encased piano for a month, but the Everleigh Sisters had briefed him on such protocols. Madame Minna affably crossed the floor to greet Thomas as the band launched into *If Money Talks, It Ain't On Speaking Terms With Me*. The barb against privilege pinched Thomas a bit, but he appreciated the piano player's daring and instantly liked the man. Madame Minna embraced Thomas as she shot the band-leader a stern look which he coyly winked away.

Thomas didn't count the snub against him. He couldn't imagine a man like that would risk losing a job like this. In 1903, there weren't many positions for such men. Sure, he could work at any other brothel in Chicago's Levee District. All their band leaders were Black. But it was only within the velvet splendor of the Everleigh Club where he could truly be respected. And safe. Giving all their employees ample freedom to be human was Minna and Ada's trademark.

Besides, the man was stunning.

"Master Harrison, you are a confection and my sweet tooth has missed you,"

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Madame Minna purred in Thomas' ear.

"How is merry England?"

"It suffers from a distinct lack of Everleigh, Madame," he oozed. He twirled her, admiring the silhouette of her gown.

"Sensational! No more corsets?" He fingered the hem of her sleeve, the tiny buttons. Silk.

"Too prohibitive, dear. I've forbidden them for all the girls."

"Always ahead of your time, Minna," he said, smothering her in a generous embrace.

"This is Geoffrey Lambert of Rhode Island."

"Delighted."

"And you know Oscar?"

"Mathers? Of course. Your reputation precedes you." She raised an eyebrow.

"Please keep in mind this is an elegant establishment."

"And these are Harry, Chauncey and William. They're nobody," he chided, receiving pokes in his ribs for the teasing.

"They just like me because I pick up the check."

Madame Minna offered her hand to each of them to kiss. "Your friends are our friends. As always, they must remain on the

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first floor. Boys, don't worry. There's plenty to do down here. Champagne?" She raised a hand and the butler appeared.

"I'd prefer beer, if it's no problem," interjected Geoffrey.

"Indeed it is," Minna said, waving him off. As she escorted Thomas to the dance floor, he mouthed the words *elegant establishment* to Geoffrey. The two danced to *Come Down, Ma Ev'ning Star*, their gaiety silently signaling permission throughout the ballroom for all the guests to ratchet up the revelry. Drinks were poured and downed. Elegant women danced with appreciative men. Private arrangements were discreetly negotiated.

Washburn held a tally in his head of everyone's expenditures along with their secrets. A night at the Everleigh never cost less than two weeks income, even for well-heeled patrons. And that wouldn't even buy a trip up the stairs.

"We have a new butterfly," Minna cooed in Thomas' ear as they danced. That's what she called her ladies. They were all delicate and beautiful, something Madame Minna had been years ago. She loved them dearly. "She's just perfect for you."

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"Where is she? I don't see anyone new besides the piano player. He's terrific, by the way."

Thomas knew that Minna took great pride in her hiring abilities. *Curating*, she called it. She was fond of making sure every element of the club worked together in perfect concert.

"Yes, he's delicious. Stole him from House of All Nations. Alabama Bette is not happy."

"I suppose not. What's his name?"

"Ernest Hargrove. I call him the Professor. When he's not playing, his nose is in a book."

"And the new butterfly?"

"Bernadette."

"Bernadette, huh? French?" He spun Minna.

"Quite. These days our guests tend to want things to be more French."

"Especially the fucking."

"Thomas! The language!" She shoved away, but did not let him go.

"Madame Minna, you're adorable. You act like you don't know what goes on up there."

"I know perfectly well. I train each

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butterfly myself.”

“I’d love to see that,” he said, his eyes focusing on nothing as he lost himself in the fantasy.

“That particular delight is too expensive. Even for you.”

“I can afford a gold piano.”

“Yes, and thank you again for the lovely gift. We used it to seal the deal with our Professor. House of All Nation’s piano was...”

“Shit. Everything at All Nations is shit. Why would anyone go there?”

“They used to go there for the Professor. And the fact that the *fucking*, as you so eloquently put it, is only fifty cents.”

“Minna! The language!” Thomas turned her again, planting a kiss on her cheek.

“Fifty cents!”

“Shall I introduce you?”

The dance ended and they walked to the piano. “Professor, this is...”

“Thomas Evan Harrison III. Heir to the Harrison Department Store empire,” the Professor offered. “I know you from the paper. You look even younger in person. Too young to be running for mayor.”

“Too smart.”

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“Come again?”

“I’m not running for mayor. That story was woven from the misguided hopes of men other than myself. I couldn’t want it less.” Thomas waved a hand toward the piano bench. “May I?”

“Do you play?” the Professor asked, scooting over to accommodate Thomas’ impressive frame.

“Some say playing is all I do.” He placed his hands on the keys and improvised with the band. He wanted the Professor to like him and had meant to be charming, but feared his response had been clumsy. Cloying.

Thomas was aware of his reputation, privileged and flippant, and hoped the Professor wouldn’t hold it against him. Had the piano player heard the rumors that Thomas may, perhaps, be queer? Thomas never understood why anyone would say such things about him. With how many women had he ably exchanged pleasure? Two dozen of them in this house alone. Why wasn’t *that* the prevailing gossip? Jealousy. Plain and simple. A city full of non-Harrisons hoping he would choke on his silver spoon.

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But he was different, dammit. Sure, he was as arrogant as one would assume, but also unexpectedly kind. Sensitive. If he did say so, himself.

Sitting thigh to thigh with the Professor, he felt a resonant heat.

“You’re not half bad,” said the Professor.

“I’m *exactly* half bad.” They were in the middle of a four-hand rendition of *Bird in a Gilded Cage* when a finespun hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“Monsieur Harrison.” The voice was melodic, if not very French. The practiced sweetness of a skilled courtesan. Thomas detected colorful notes of deep wildness within it.

He turned and looked into green eyes that drained him of his usual bombast. He swallowed, trying to blink himself back to life, but lost himself instead, ruined by a tiny freckle on an unfamiliar chin. “You must be Bernadette.”

She nodded once and pushed a lock of black hair behind an ear. A grace that crackled with electricity.

Thomas stopped playing, took Bernadette’s hand and kissed it. Her wrist was blotched with violet and pale blue, like

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an aster flower had been crushed into her skin. It was mottled with a sickly green that told Thomas the bruise was going on a week now. A previous suitor must have liked it rough. Still, imagining her forearm being crushed broke his heart a little.

The bordello's new gown design clung to her. Modest, yet aflame with revelation. Though he had always reveled in the painful anticipation of unlacing corsets, his thirst for this woman made him want to drink her immediately.

The Professor continued the song, singing a few of its words. *"She's only a bird in a gilded cage, a beautiful sight to see. You think she's happy and free from care. She's not, just seems to be."* Neither Thomas nor Bernadette paid any mind. Nor did they speak. the Professor tapped Thomas on the thigh. "Care to take the reprise?" The spell lifted slightly as Thomas said to Bernadette, "I'll be right with you," and took up playing again. He rather enjoyed the thought of making her wait. Whetting her appetite.

The melody climbed up the scale. Thomas leaned toward his right, pressing his weight into the Professor. They played hand over hand, finishing each other's musical phrases

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as if they had grown up at the piano together. the Professor beamed. Thomas laughed.

“You’re not half bad yourself,” he poured into the Professor’s ear when the song had finished. The gathered guests erupted in applause and Thomas rose, dismissing it with a wave. “Let’s hear it for the new kid.” He took Bernadette by the hand. “May I have this dance?”

She put her hand on the back of his neck and whispered into his ear. “You may have anything you can afford.”

“I have a feeling I’ll die penniless trying to get enough of you.”

She stiffened and pulled away.

“You alright?” he asked.

Her gaze shifted, focusing just beyond him. Thomas noticed teensy tears forming in her eyes just before she closed them. He could feel the heat of her anxiety.

Inhaling deeply and opening her eyes, she seemed to reset from whatever had caused it. “There will be no dying on my watch.” A strange thing to say in the midst of such a flirtation.

Thomas turned, hoping to catch a glimpse of what had shaken her. Glaring at them

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from the bar was Alderman Hinky Dink Kenna. He cracked the knuckles of a fist and downed what Thomas guessed was his seventh shot of whiskey.

Quickly waltzing Bernadette to the other end of the ballroom, Thomas took her arm from around his neck, gently held her wrist and kissed the bruise.

CHAPTER TWO

Bernadette

The words still echoed painfully in Bernadette's head. They were rough, even for Hinky Dink Kenna.

Don't forget what I told you, bitch. Get dirt on this kid. Dirt we can use. This city has plenty of alleys for a nameless whore to bleed out in. Nobody would fucking miss you.

She preferred what he called "the charm approach", slipping crisp bills into every hand from which he needed, or might later need, something. But he had already paid her nicely for services rendered. Now, he wanted *this*. Dirt. Something surefire that would emasculate Thomas Evan Harrison

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III, turning him into a compliant lapdog for the foreseeable future. He wasn't offering to pay her. He was offering not to kill her.

In Detroit, Bernadette had become acquainted with the charm of mobsters, usually with much more menacing names than *Hinky Dink*. Before dubbing her Bernadette and pronouncing her as *French*, Madame Minna had promised that Chicago would be different.

"If anyone asks, you're from a little place near Par-ee called *Duh-Twah*." Detroit. Minna's little joke.

Chicago *was* different. There were no mobsters, per se. There were politicians. A distinction without a difference. And there was money here. Loads of the stuff. Since 1893, when the city had produced a fine coming-out party called the Columbian Exposition, the streets had been paved with gold. Especially in the Levee District, where the lines between saloon keeper, murderer and politician were smudged.

Or erased.

Bernadette's first week at the Everleigh Club had made her more money than the last year in Duh-Twah. She didn't mind being French in Chicago. French whores

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fucked with their mouths and Bernadette enjoyed that. During her interview, she had revealed this to the sisters.

“I don’t know. Really keeps me engaged. Much harder for my brain to wander,” she had confessed.

Madame Ada considered the words thoughtfully before responding. “Most girls in our line of work prefer to, shall we say, disappear.”

“Most girls don’t make the kind of money I’m looking for. I’ve found that men pay more if they sense you might be enjoying it.”

“What do you want the money for, dear?” Minna was very particular about the motivations of her butterflies. Feeding a drug habit or paying off a bookie would lose you the job fast. That type of angle was poison here.

“Independence,” said Bernadette. “I’ve been on my own for a while now and I’m certainly not, you know, the *marrying* kind.”

“Sapphic?” Minna was direct. “You’ll need to keep me abreast of any romantic relationships that form with the other girls. On the one hand, such things can be very profitable. On the other, distracted

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courtesans are bad business. I'll decide which it is on a case by case basis."

"No, no. I prefer men. Not that I'm opposed to enjoying the softer cakes on occasion. For fun or profit."

"I see. When you say that you prefer men..."

"Men, yes. Plural. I've never understood the idea of tying myself down to just one. So many of them are delicious."

"We have the tastiest, dear. You'll be able to savor a new one each night. Which reminds me. We only allow one suitor per evening. One fifty-dollar man is better than five at ten dollars. Less wear and tear."

"What if I can make a hundred, hundred-fifty at the same time?" Bernadette enjoyed being delightfully filthy.

"You'll fit right in, dear."

Thomas smelled of affluence. He held her hand with the confidence of his privilege. His air said *nothing can touch me* which made her want to do so all the more. Kenna's description had been accurate and yet entirely wrong. Immature aesthetic observations. Height, weight, eye color. He hadn't told her that Thomas' cobalt eyes

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were the sort of masculine that was not afraid of its femininity, but it was true. She found them unsettling and lost herself in their electricity.

“Bernie, I see you’ve met our boy, Thomas.” Kenna had come from nowhere and was now so close she could smell a belch of rye. He had spat slightly while announcing the T as if there was a vestigial D in there somewhere. Very Chicago. She felt Thomas’ hand recoil at the intrusion. “Too bad she’s already met her quota for the night.” The one-fifty-dollar-man-rule was well known.

“Minna’s rule is one *man*, Hink. I don’t think you qualify,” he said without releasing the gaze with Bernadette. The risk weakened her knees. A bravado rarely shown to thugs.

“They don’t call me alder-boy, kiddo. I’m your alder-*man*. Bernie here can attest to my qualifications in that regard, can’t you hon’?” Bernadette said nothing, but squeezed Thomas’ hand to convey her annoyance.

Without wasting a beat, Thomas heckled, “The First Ward is the only one in Chicago with two aldermen. I guess that makes you

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each only half a man?"

Kenna expelled a spittly sigh and worked his mouth, inching closer to Thomas' face.

"Now why do you have to be so nasty? Have we not put enough in your little campaign war chest?"

"I'm not running for mayor, Hink. I like myself too much. Besides, why would I take a pay cut?"

"Apparently, you know nothing about being mayor. There's a salary. And then there's, you know, perks."

"All the same, Hink, I'm good where I'm at. I'm holding the hand of an exquisite woman, this piano player ain't half bad, and the champagne is kicking in. I'm in heaven." Thomas turned Bernadette away from Kenna and pulled her toward the dance floor. He took out a few bills and stuffed them in the the Professor's jacket pocket, giving his breast a pat as he did so. Turning to Bernadette, he said, "Shall we?"

Kenna lurched toward them as they made for the dance floor. Thomas stopped, turned, and put his hand on Kenna's chest as if to say *I am finished with this discussion*.

As Bernadette and Thomas made their way into the throng of revelers, she could

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not defy the temptation to look back at Kenna. He pulled a threatening forefinger across his throat and sat back down at the bar. Before she could turn away, he had already downed another glass of whiskey.

Thomas seemed to have taken Kenna in stride. He had a parry for every lunge, waving off every attack like a gnat and nothing more.

The two danced and whirled like they had been doing this all their lives. Bernadette felt relief that the pace of the music made conversation impossible to hold. She was rarely at a loss for words. Even less so when employing full seduction. But Thomas and Kenna had each rattled her in their own, very different, way. Thomas was butterflies in her chest. Kenna was a dagger sunk into it.

A half dozen songs later, Thomas motioned toward an empty sofa near the bar. "I'd love some champagne. Can I get you a glass?" Thankfully, Kenna was nowhere to be found. Bernadette nodded.

She melted into the sumptuous cushions and rehearsed the first lines of a few conversations in her head. When Thomas returned with two coupes of Mumm's she

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offered, "That guy is subtle."

"Who's that?" Thomas licked a little champagne off a knuckle and settled in beside her.

"Kenna."

"He's Chicago. Subtle as a bull. Wait until you meet Bathhouse."

"Bathhouse?"

"John Coughlin. Kenna's circus clown sidekick. Where Hink is ruthless, Bathhouse is pompous. And vile."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Gonna cost you," Thomas charmed.

Bernadette parried. "I'll take it off your bill." In these situations, she could fence with the best. When Thomas raised an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth curled into half a wicked smile, she knew he was mulling the possibility of racking up a tremendous bill with her. "What is the deal with this city and the ridiculous nicknames? Hinky Dink. Bathhouse. What's your nickname? Periwinkle?"

"Pamplemousse," Thomas kidded without missing a beat.

"What?"

"Grapefruit. I guess you're not really French."

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"All zee way from Duh-Twah, near Pah-ree," she exaggerated, suspecting that she might be losing this bout and not being sure she cared. The more time she spent with Thomas, the more delightful it was to be the vanquished, for once.

"I know there's a Paris near White Rock, Michigan. I sail by it every summer in a regatta around the point into Saginaw Bay. But that's more than a hundred miles from, how did you say it, Duh-Twah? I mean, around here, we say Detroit." Bernadette did not know if this was a parry or a lunge. She'd lost track and finished her champagne rather than replying. Thomas took her coupe and offered her what was left in his. "You look thirsty."

The two laughed and leaned against each other for the better part of an hour. Bernadette felt magnificent. The stress of Kenna's menacing assignment faded, vaporized by Thomas' electricity. One hour ago, he had been a mark. But that was before she met him. That was before she let him in.

CHAPTER THREE

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The Professor

I'm so stupid, the Professor thought as he watched the couple cuddle into a lengthy conversation. The sudden entrance of Thomas Evan Harrison III into his life was overwhelming. The devil-may-care swagger. The intoxicating peacock, whose confident flourishes confessed mischievous sensitivity. Thomas carried his world with him, but generously allowed others to play in it.

The Professor tried to shake the sparks out of his head. He was smarter than to think Thomas felt them too. Why did he find the boy so arousing? Of all men, why this one? It could never be requited. Thomas was too rich and too white to reciprocate. Even if the whispers were true, he would never risk being disinherited.

Ernest loved himself, but sometimes thought it would be easier if he was...

Normal was not a word with which he resonated. Since boyhood, Ernest Hargrove had always been the odd one. Brighter than the others in his neighborhood, darker than the affluent boys uptown. His musical gifts

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had been the only thing that kept him safe. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of popular songs and a natural empathy that made people smile. They called him *special* as if he was supposed to like it.

His mother had been a harlot in Memphis. His father, at least the man he had thought was his father, played piano in the brothel where she worked. Pap would play half the night with Ernest in his lap, even letting him plink noisily at the keys.

Pap also served at the church on the corner. He had installed Ernest behind the piano there the moment he had begun to show promise. Every Sunday, little Ernie would be called upon to open Heaven's gates with song.

While others were praising God, Ernie would sit through every church service with the dread of a man on death row. Except on death row, you could go to Heaven if you repented. Ernest never felt he had anything to confess, yet the Bible was clear. Boys who like boys were not the kind to end up in a place like Heaven. Especially when their mothers fucked for money.

As he watched Thomas offer Bernadette another glass of champagne, the Professor

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wondered if rich boys went to Heaven. There was something about a camel and the eye of a needle, but it had never been relevant enough to commit to memory. A far-off thought that he might see Thomas in Hell was a little comforting. He touched his right hand to the top of his forehead and the band went back to the beginning of *I'm Thinking of You All the While* before "bringing it home" as Minna liked to say.

When the song was finished, Thomas nodded at the Professor, rose, took Bernadette's hand and led her to the gold piano. "You really make this thing sing, Ernest," he said, cavalierly strumming his fingers across the bridge and tapping his toe against the leg.

"My friends call me the Professor, sir."

The Professor loved to maintain impeccable manners. Using "sir" and "ma'am" never made him feel inferior, so long as the sirs and ma'ams never treated him as such. It was his first month at The Everleigh Club, but he was already being respected with an even hand by everyone there. As if hearing him play was a privilege. In other houses, he was made to feel like a necessary nuisance. Just

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something to cover up the sounds of women being stripped of their humanity. Few people wanted to hear him. Fewer wanted to see him. None wanted to be his friend.

"We're friends, right?" Thomas slid a bill into the Professor's chest pocket.

"If you like, sir."

"I do like, Mister the Professor!" Thomas clapped him on the back. "Do you know *Tell Me Pretty Maiden?*"

In reply, the Professor walloped two keys on the left end of the piano and low bellowing notes rang out. Hand over hand, he ran his fingers to the right in an impossibly intricate pattern that ended in a set of delicate plinks. He paused, closed his eyes, took in a deep breath and began to sing a full-throated rendition of the tune.

"Tell me, pretty maiden, are there more at home like you?"

Before he could croon the next line, Thomas leaned in and sang it in a high-pitched voice, *"There are a few, kind sir. But lovely ones and proper too."* When the room erupted with laughter, the two realized the crowd had become absorbed in their exchange. Ever the center of attention, Thomas turned away from the Professor,

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spread his arms wide and wiggled his fingers as if to say, *applause, please*. The crowd replied with raucous wolf whistles. Thomas curtsied, pulled a kerchief from his pocket and dabbed his brow.

The Professor continued as the band picked up the arrangement. *"Then tell me, pretty maiden, what these lovely ladies do."*

Thomas crouched, hiding behind Bernadette. The band paused as he peeked shyly around her waist. Almost whispering, he sang, *"First, tell me gentle stranger, are there more at home like you?"*

The Professor shook his head and silently mouthed *just me*.

Nodding at the band, they began again. the Professor's baritone filled the room. *"There are a few, sweet maiden, and better boys you'll never know. So tell me, pretty maiden, what these ladies do. And take a walk with me, so I can see what a most peculiar girl should be."*

Thomas looked flustered. *"Peculiar? I believe the word is particular, isn't it?"*

"You're a maiden with a mustache," the Professor shot back. *"I'd say that's peculiar."*

Several guests had gathered around the piano. Bernadette held her stomach from the

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pain of laughing. She sat on the bench next to the Professor and took the next verse.

"Tell me, gentle sir, the things these very rakish fellows do." She took his hand and set it daringly on her own thigh.

"You're making it hard to play," he joked, pulling it away.

She placed her hand between his legs.

"I'm making it hard, alright!"

She was.

"Hey! She's mine," shouted Thomas with a wink.

From the crowd, someone yelled, "Mine next!" Thomas shook his fists comically at no one.

The Professor tried his best to maintain control of the mayhem. "You want to know what these rakes do?"

"Quite," answered Bernadette.

"I'll take you round and let them show you for an hour or so, just how far such chaps can really go."

"Only an hour?" Bernadette pouted and crossed her arms.

Thomas butted his head between them.

"Dear maiden, they flirt too freely and it is never the same girl twice."

The Professor cocked his head back. "I

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thought *you* were the maiden."

"And I thought we were friends."

Thomas was near enough to kiss.

An elastic moment pulled like taffy in the Professor's mind. Did he dare? Certainly, the moment called for, and would forgive, such an act. On the other hand, Madame Minna had been clear about boundaries. But everyone was having silly fun. To button it up with a ridiculous kiss would seal the folly. That had to count for something.

Thomas stared into the Professor's eyes, their mouths bare inches apart. Without looking, he raised his hand toward the band and they quieted. Sweetly, he sang, "*If I loved you, would it be a silly thing to do? For I must love someone... "*

The Professor finished the line. "*Then why not me?*"

Thomas turned to Bernadette and the potential kiss evaporated. Bernadette took his chin and sang, "*Yes, I must love someone really... "*

"Not a good idea!" came a tease from the crowd.

Bernadette rolled her eyes and continued singing, her face inching toward Thomas'. "*Yes, I must love someone really. And it might*

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as well be you."

Like magnets placed too near each other, their lips leapt together.

The Professor circled his hand in the air and the band "brought it home". Thomas took Bernadette's hand, knelt and sang up to her, *"On bended knee, if I loved you, would you tell me what I ought to do?"*

As the final notes tumbled from the piano, Bernadette and the Professor sang in delicious harmony, *"To keep you all mine alone, to always be true to me."* The last strain vanished, lilting into the far corners of the room. There was a momentary silence before the crowd exploded in applause. A dozen guests slipped coins into the Professor's chest pocket. It felt heavy.

Above the din came a gaseous bellow. "My boy!" A swine of a man dressed in a purple suit with a yellow shirt and magenta vest held a hand out to Thomas. He looked like penny candy that had melted in the sun. His kaleidoscopic costume was incoherently vivid and he more or less swayed as if constantly unsteadied by an unseen wind. Every tobacco laden breath was a chore. Waves of sweaty flesh swung from his whiskey jowls with each ridiculous word

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that escaped between his pale, green teeth.

"Hink told me I'd find you here."

"John," was all Thomas said. He interlaced his fingers with Bernadette's.

"Bernadette, this is Bathhouse. The other half a man."