

TUXEDOS AND CORSETS TRILLIUM

Spring rain streaked the granite office building. Maura shoved open its glass door as hoards of New Yorkers surged behind her on their morning commute.

Six months. That's all the time it would take.

Passing the newsstand, she scanned the headlines. "US Urges Castro to Cut His Ties with Communism," read the bold black print of the New York Times. She shook her head. If Kennedy didn't get the situation in Cuba to settle down, Florida would be nuked by the communists.

"You want?" A voice hitched a ride on the smoke wafting from behind the stacks of papers and magazines.

Maura peered over the counter and spotted a middle-aged woman on a stool. She had on blue rhinestone glasses graced by a glitzy chain that ran around her neck.

Maura considered a purchase.

"You're new." The woman stood.

"Yes, I'm working for Mike Drake."

"That's—" Abruptly the woman dashed out from behind the stand, stormed over to a young executive type and smacked him in the arm with a rolled up newspaper. "You are a thief!" she yelled.

"Ouch! Hey, lady, get off me."

She smacked him again. "You didn't pay for your gum yesterday. You put it in your pocket and you did not pay." She emphasized the last three words with the newspaper.

Maura chuckled. Revenge was like a sweet peach, as long as you avoided the pit.

The man stalked to the newsstand and emptied his pockets on the counter. Pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters and even a silver plated lighter tumbled out. He snatched up the lighter and glared at Maura. "That should do it, bitch."

"But I..." she protested to his retreating back. "...don't work here."

"Ach!" The woman scraped up the change and handed Maura the rolled-up newspaper. "It's used. Take it. Come back tomorrow and buy a fresh one."

Maura stared at the paper in her hand, shook her head and made her way to the brass-faced elevators. People thronged the small hallway between the banks, including the

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young executive from the newsstand. She smiled sweetly and shook out the paper to read more about the Cubans. Glancing over the top, she saw him scowl at her, take out a cigarette and light it with the click of the lighter.

I hate smoke.

The elevator door opened and she maneuvered herself in front of the man, jostling him enough to cause him to drop his cigarette.

“Watch where you’re going, lady!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she lied and stepped into the elevator, leaving the smoker behind. As the doors shut she waved.

She was the only one who got off on the twenty-fourth floor. After exiting the car, she dug her lipstick from her purse and turned back to primp using the shine of brass as a mirror. Her platinum blond hair was still coifed in the Marilyn Monroe style she’d opted for after surviving “the incident.” Her sky-blue outfit was perfectly matched to her eyes. Carefully, she reapplied her Bazooka-pink lipstick and snapped the case closed. With the newspaper tucked under her arm, she walked down the dim tiled hallway on her three-inch black heel to the wood and glass door that read “Mike Drake, Private Investigator, Discretion Guaranteed.”

“Glad to see you are here on time,” her new boss said when she entered. “As I said during the interview, promptness is mandatory. Offices run best when everything is done consistently.”

Oh brother. What a control freak.

“Yes, Mr. Drake,” she said as she put her purse on the desk she’d been told would be hers. She looked her boss over while she waited for his next instructions.

Mike Drake was impeccably dressed, white cuffs and collar so starched they could stand on their own. His dark brown hair was slightly longer than the buzz cut favored by many of the other Park Avenue denizens, and his pencil-thin mustache was right out of the thirties.

She hoped the rumors she’d heard weren’t true.

“I’ve finished this investigation.” Mike laid a folder on her desk. “Please type up the report and draft a cover letter. Here are the instructions.”

“Yes, Mr. Drake.” She was going to choke on that phrase.

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“I’m expecting a potential client in a few minutes. Mr. Kaul. Take his hat and coat, and escort him to my office.”

“Yes, Mr. Drake.” It was all she could do not to roll her eyes, but she remembered her plan.

Normal. I’m going to act like a normal person.

“One more thing.”

She looked at him expectantly. She’d be damned if she was going to say that phrase one more time.

Tension hung in the room. “Once Mr. Kaul has arrived, bring us tea and coffee.” Mike cleared his throat. “Remember you’re still on probation. If you can’t learn and obey the office rules quickly, I may need to rethink my hiring decision.” He turned, went to his office and closed the door.

“Yes, Mr. Drake,” she muttered, with all the sarcasm she possessed. Damn, she’d have to watch her tongue.

She opened the folder. For now, she was a glorified secretary. That needed to change quickly.

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Mike stared through his office window at the pouring rain while he waited for Kaul to arrive. Thrumming his fingers on the desk he watched each drop form a grimy streak and tried not to think about what would happen if Kaul didn’t hire him.

Whatever his potential client wanted, Mike was prepared to give him. He hadn’t had a substantial client in the years since his brother had been convicted of burglary. Only the sludge cases came to him now—adultery, missing husbands who turned out to be not so missing, wives who were attending secret feminist meetings.

Good thing I had some loyal clients or I would have gone bankrupt years ago.

Worse yet, Robert’s crime had made it impossible for Mike to attend the scene parties they’d enjoyed together. And Mike refused to go to the public dungeon in lower Manhattan. Too much risk of exposure.

If things didn’t improve soon, Mike didn’t know how he was going to pay the pretty secretary he’d just hired.