



LYNDI
LAMONT

FINDING
JASON

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...After he finished bathing and dressing, Jason rang for his servant. He'd been surprised by how quickly Threadgill had adapted to civilian life. It had taken him no time at all to learn the art of tying a cravat. Unfortunately, the ritual had become torture for Jason.

When his valet entered, Jason turned to him. "Ah, Threadgill, there you are. I am ready for my cravat."

Threadgill went to the chest of drawers and removed a length of linen.

Jason stood still as Threadgill wrapped the cloth around his neck and stood close to tie it. At this distance, Jason could study his new servant's handsome face. His beard was heavier than Jason's, adding a dark shadow to his jaw line. The man had beautiful eyes of bright blue framed by long, dark lashes. His skin was fair and tinged with pink. True English skin that flushed easily. His mouth, with that temptingly full lower lip, hovered just inches away from Jason's own. The longing to reach out and taste had Jason clenching his fists.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the temptation, but that only made him more aware of Threadgill's hands brushing his neck and chest as he tied the intricate pattern. He was almost painfully aware of the man's soft breathing, his clean scent...

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FINDING JASON

BY

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AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*Dedicated to the memory of Thomas White,
who was hanged at the age of sixteen for engaging in sodomy.*

CHAPTER 1

London, April 1815

Jason Huxley was a lucky man. He had health, good looks, an adequate income and a beautiful and enthusiastic mistress. There was no earthly reason why he was filled with ennui. Nevertheless, he found himself bored beyond belief by this year's season.

He stood by an open window and surveyed the fashionable crowd wedged into the Bothwick ballroom. Young ladies garbed in insipid white gowns chattered with each other, as skittish as prize mares awaiting the auction block at Tattersall's. Their matchmaking mamas kept an eagle eye out for eligible parties and bristled when the fortune hunters ventured nearby. Usually the farce amused him no end, but it was becoming tiresome.

At least Rosalind should be pleased by the crush. He sought her out in the crowd, finally spotting her tall, regal figure on the other side of

FINDING JASON

the ballroom. Roz looked especially beautiful tonight, in a gown of amber crêpe over white satin trimmed in blue, no doubt chosen to compliment her blue eyes and blond hair. On many a night, he and the lovely widow would depart a ball or soiree before midnight and rendezvous in her bedchamber upstairs for their own private celebration, but not tonight. It would be hours before he had an opportunity to get his hostess alone.

It was going to be a long night.

He glanced toward the doorway as some late arrivals appeared. He recognized Lord and Lady Penrose, who were accompanied by a dragoon officer resplendent in a blue jacket and white breeches. Jason froze when he realized who it was.

“Michael,” he whispered. Memories flooded through him as he stared at the face of his closest friend, confidant, and his partner in a youthful indiscretion.

Michael had been the center of his world for a number of years, since his first day of school. Jason had been a frightened, under-sized child, making him a natural target for the bullies. But Michael, a year older and inches taller, had taken Jason under his wing and protected him, until he grew big enough to take care of himself. Michael was a born leader and a natural athlete, traits that made him the most popular boy in school. That he’d chosen Jason as best friend was a singular honor.

Jason started weaving his way through the crowd. Eight years had left their mark on Michael Penrose. The once pale skin of his face was sun-browned with grooves carved into his cheeks, but he was still tall and broad-shouldered and handsome as sin.

“Michael,” Jason called out as he grew closer.

His friend’s face broke into a big grin when he recognized Jason. “Huxley, good to see you.”

Jason shook Michael’s hand. “By Jove, you’re the last person I

FINDING JASON

expected to see here. Have you been called up now that Napoleon's on the loose again?"

Michael nodded. "Expect we'll ship out soon."

"Will you be in London long?"

"No, just for a short visit. Shall we adjourn to a tavern?"

"What? And disappoint every lady in the room. I heard them all sigh when you walked in wearing that uniform."

Michael grimaced. "You know I've never cut much of a dash with the ladies."

Jason grinned. "That is only because you have not tried."

"Not good with small talk. Ladies don't like to hear about battles and such."

"Then let them do the talking," Jason said, taking his friend by the arm. "All you have to do is dance with them."

"All of them?" grumbled Michael.

Jason laughed. "As many as possible. But first allow me to introduce you to our hostess."

As he led the way across the ballroom, Jason noticed more than one lady eyeing Michael hopefully. His friend's lack of success with the ladies had nothing to do with his looks. With his dark hair and eyes and strong physique, he cut a fine figure in his dress uniform. Always a tall boy, he had filled out now into an imposing man, the very picture of a dashing officer.

Jason introduced Michael to Roz, who greeted him with an appreciative look in her eye. Michael's response was all that was proper, but he seemed unmoved by her beauty, a most unusual reaction for a man when meeting Lady Bothwick for the first time.

As the evening wore on, Jason danced with the usual young ladies, answering their queries about his friend, but always aware of Michael. Where he was in the ballroom, with whom he danced.

At midnight Michael approached him to complain about sore feet.

FINDING JASON

Jason grinned. "We've done the pretty with the ladies, so there's no need to linger. Unless you wish to?"

Michael barked a laugh. "Hardly."

"Shall we adjourn to my rooms for a drink?"

"Capital idea," Michael agreed.

"First allow me to make my apologies to Lady Bothwick."

Michael arched one brow. "There's something between the two of you, is there not?"

"We are good friends," Jason said simply. His understanding with Roz was no one else's business.

"You make a striking couple," Michael said. "Both of you so blond and elegant and beautiful."

"Roz is a beauty, isn't she?" Jason agreed. "If you'll excuse me."

He made his way to where she was speaking to the Honorable Sidney Luscombe and his wife, a couple in their fifties, known to have an unusually affectionate marriage. After exchanging pleasantries with them, he drew Roz aside and apologized for leaving early. She was gracious and understanding, as he'd known she would be. Though they were lovers, there was no jealousy or possessiveness between them. Sometimes he wondered if he were her only lover, for Roz was full of fire and passion, and their trysts irregular at best.

Jason took her hand and promised to call soon.

"Please do," she replied.

"Soon," he agreed.

* * *

As the night wore on and the brandy disappeared, Jason realized how much he'd missed Michael. They'd been chums at school, then at Cambridge, until Michael's father purchased his first commission. Michael had left for the peninsula shortly afterward. Pity Michael was a younger son, else he'd be Lord Penrose instead of an army captain risking his life in a brutal war.

FINDING JASON

“I’m proud of you, Jason.”

Jason raised both brows. “The war hero is proud of the dandy?”

Michael chuckled. “You have become quite the dandy, but you are still kind-hearted. I noticed that you danced or spoke with every wallflower at the ball.”

“I’ve found it helps to spread my attentions to as many ladies as possible. It keeps the matchmaking mamas at bay.”

“Your parents must be proud of you.”

Jason laughed. “On the contrary, I am the despair of the pater and mater. They won’t be happy until I marry and retire to the country to set up my nursery and learn to manage the estate.”

Michael drained his glass, then refilled it. “Still, a lesser fellow would hide in the card room and avoid the ladies entirely. It’s what I would have done if you hadn’t pushed me into dancing.”

“Was it so awful?”

Michael shuddered dramatically. “All those females! How do you stand it?”

Jason laughed. “As you may recall, I grew up with a passel of sisters, all now married and producing the next generation. Do you really find women so terrifying?”

“I’d rather face the French again.”

Jason paused. Could it be that Michael still preferred his own sex? But that was a subject he did not want to face right now.

“Must you go?” Jason asked. “You have done more than your share.” The very idea plunged him into a morose mood. Or was that the effect of the brandy?

“Of coursh,” Michael replied stoutly. “Mus’ do my duty. Stop that Corsican monster.” He was quite drunk now and beginning to slur his words.

Jason fought a yawn, but lost the battle. “Sleepy,” he murmured.

Michael stood, swaying like a sapling in a strong breeze. “Better

FINDING JASON

go.” He grabbed his jacket and tried to don it, but kept missing the armhole. He cursed, threw the jacket over his arm and staggered for the door. He almost fell, catching his balance on a chest of drawers.

Jason pulled himself to his feet and carefully walked toward his friend. “No, no, stay here. No shape to be walking around at this hour.”

Michael grinned and fingered his saber. “Army officer, don’t you know? Fight off any footpad foolish enough to challenge me.”

Jason laughed. “Not worried about footpads, you dolt. Afraid you’ll fall asleep in the gutter.” He pulled Michael’s arm around his shoulders, got his arm around his friend’s waist and steered him toward the bedroom. “Jus’ go sleep it off, like a good fellow.”

“Can’t,” Michael protested. “Alfred’ll worry.”

“Who?”

“Alfred. My batman.”

“Who is no doubt sound asleep by now.”

Jason walked Michael to the bed, then pushed him down and lifted his feet up. Michael fell asleep the minute his head hit the pillow. Up close, Jason could see every line on his sun-browned face, making him seem older than his six-and-twenty years. Even in slumber Michael’s brows were knit in a frown, and Jason was flooded with guilt. He pushed a lock of dark hair off Michael’s forehead. His life was so easy compared to Michael’s.

Jason smiled, unaccountably happy to have Michael here with him, if only for a short while. Odd feeling that, but Jason had never been one to question what made him happy.

He picked up Michael’s coat, hung it on the back of a chair, and staggered to the other side of the bed.

* * *

It was peaceful and cool by the river. The water flowed softly downstream, birds sang in the trees and a dragonfly buzzed by. Jason stretched and turned to his companion.

FINDING JASON

Michael lay sprawled on the bank, his nude body white in the dappled shade. His eyes were closed and his breath even as he napped.

Jason lay on his side, head propped on one hand and studied his friend's body. He'd grown again this summer and was all long limbs and broad shoulders. A thin trail of dark hair made its way from his chest to his groin. His shaft lay limp against the nest of hair.

Jason nudged Michael's arm. "Are you awake?"

Michael opened one eye and glared at him. "I am now. What do you want?"

"Nothing. It's just..."

Michael sat and cupped Jason's face with one hand. "What is it, my dear?"

"I cannot bear that you leave tomorrow."

Michael dropped his hand. "Now that I have my commission, I must go where I'm sent. You know it is the life I have chosen, not that I had much choice."

"No, but it suits you, I think." Pain welled in Jason's heart. "I shall miss you desperately. I wish you could stay." He cringed at the whiny tone of his voice.

"I can't," Michael said slowly, "but you could come with me."

Jason sat up. "How? My father would never purchase a commission for me, and I haven't enough of the ready to do so myself."

"No, but you could join up as a gentleman volunteer. Sometimes an opening occurs...a battlefield commission, as it were."

For a few moments Jason was tempted to agree. Truth was, army life had no real appeal for him. He liked his comforts too much, and as the only son, he had a duty to continue the family name. But for a chance to be with Michael...

"Father would be furious, and Mama—"

"Forgive me," Michael said, running his hands through his dark curls, still damp from their swim. "It was beastly unfair of me to ask."

FINDING JASON

Jason smiled sadly. "It is time we acted like men, is it not?"

Michael stared at him, pain in his dark eyes. "Yes."

Jason sighed. "But we do not have to like it."

"Come here." Michael pulled Jason into his arms, cradling his head on his shoulder.

Jason wrapped his arms around Michael's torso and pressed his groin against Michael's hip as their legs entwined. His shaft hardened at the contact. He lifted his head as Michael's mouth closed over his, their lips meeting, their tongues fencing in an erotic duel.

Michael lay back on the bank, pulling Jason with him. Jason straddled him, trapping their hardened cocks between their bodies. Mouths still locked together, their bodies writhed and thrust until they lay spent.

Jason rose, pulled Michael up and led him into the cold water. One last dip to wash off the evidence of their love, and then good-bye. Perhaps forever.

* * *

Jason awoke to find himself cocooned in a warm embrace and with an ache in his groin. A soft murmur alerted him that his bed partner was awake. He turned into the welcoming arms. Soft lips engulfed his own and a questing tongue entered his mouth.

Gentle hands caressed his body, divesting him of his clothing. He sat up long enough to help pull his shirt over his head before falling back on the pillow. When someone tugged at his breeches, he lifted his hips to help. Warm hands and lips roamed over his body, coaxing a response from him. His own hands found smooth skin and a firm bottom.

He moaned aloud when those clever hands wrapped around his erect cock, stroking and tugging until he spilled his seed. Sated, he dropped back to sleep.

FINDING JASON

* * *

Alfred Threadgill stared out the window of his master's chamber at Penrose House, his eyes gritty from lack of sleep. Outside, Grosvenor Square was barely visible in the early morning light. His captain hadn't come home last night and Alfred was worried.

It seemed silly after all they'd been through in Spain and Portugal. London was relatively safe, though the nighttime streets sheltered pickpockets, footpads and loose women. His captain could handle the criminals, and he had no interest in the whores, but Alfred knew not all prostitutes were of the female persuasion. Had Michael wandered into a Molly-house?

Alfred clenched his fists and tried to tamp down the jealousy eating away at his innards. Though he had no evidence his captain was cheating on him, he also knew he hadn't been Michael's first love. There was someone else, and Alfred suspected he lived here in London. Michael had looked forward to this visit for weeks now.

His captain deserved better than one such as he. Alfred understood that, just as he knew it would be much harder for Michael if he found someone of his own station. A good servant was invisible, or nearly so. No one questioned what went on between master and servant behind closed doors. They assumed what they wanted to assume, if they thought about it at all. That fact gave him the freedom to love his captain. But was his love enough?

Alfred sighed and rubbed his right shoulder. The London damp had the old wound aching tonight. Whatever had kept his captain out all night, there was naught he could do but accept it. He would be glad when they left the city and all its distractions. He just wished they were not headed back to the war. He had a feeling something terrible was about happen, something he was powerless to prevent.

* * *

FINDING JASON

When Jason next awoke, he opened his eyes and immediately regretted it as a shaft of morning light pierced his eyeballs, intensifying his hangover. Lord, how much had he drunk last night? He groaned and closed his eyes, hoping to quiet the pounding in his head.

"Do you feel as bad as I do?" a deep voice rasped in his ear.

What the devil? He opened his eyes and came face to face with Michael Penrose.

"Michael?" he asked as hazy memories teased his muddled mind. Warm lips caressing his mouth, expert hands touching his shaft, pumping him to climax. That had been a dream, had it not?

He glanced down to see he was naked, his cock again at attention. "Oh, good God, what did we do?"

Michael reached out to hold him, but Jason resisted.

"Don't push me away, Jason. I've loved you for years. I thought you loved me, too."

"I did, but that was years ago. A youthful indiscretion."

Michael looked hurt. "Is that all it meant to you?"

Jason groaned and fell back on the pillow. "We're no longer frustrated school boys with no acceptable outlet for our urges. Everything has changed. I have changed."

"So now you prefer women."

Jason turned to look at him. "And you do not?"

Michael grinned ruefully. "Some things never change."

Dread crept icy fingers up Jason's spine. "Be careful, Michael. Be very, very careful. Even your commission will not protect you if you're caught."

"I know." Michael glanced at Jason's groin and chuckled. "I see you still wake with your pistol primed and ready to fire. Let me relieve that ache for you. 'Tis the least I can do."

Jason's cock sprang to attention when Michael touched it, untroubled by the fact it was a man's hand that caressed it. Jason

FINDING JASON

groaned from the pleasurable sensation, but pushed Michael's hand away. "My turn."

Jason trailed his hands over Michael's strong body. In the morning light, he noticed a number of scars—on his arm, his side, his thigh. "You have been ill-used."

Michael grunted. "All superficial. I'm one of the lucky ones."

Jason reached for Michael's erect shaft just as the door opened, admitting Jason's servant Furbur.

"Good morn—" Furbur broke off with a gasp, his mouth hanging open. "I b-beg your p-p-pardon..."

Jason grabbed the sheet and covered their nakedness, cursing under his breath. Damn, he should have locked the door last night. But why? He hadn't planned on this happening. *Damn Michael and his unnatural temptations.*

"Stop stammering, Furbur, and fix us some coffee," Jason ordered, fixing a stern look on his servant.

"Y-yes, sir." Furbur backed out of the room, eyes wide and mouth open, looking for all the world like a salmon gasping for its last breath.

Jason collapsed on the bed and groaned. "How will I ever explain this?"

"Don't," Michael advised, climbing out of bed and pulling on his trousers. "Just tell him to mind his own business."

"If word of this gets out, my reputation will be ruined."

Michael ran a hand through his dark hair and swore as only an army man could. "I am sorry, Jason. I never meant to hurt you. Please believe me."

Jason just stared at him, unsure of what to believe. How had he let another man touch him like that? He must still be drunk. Yes, that was it. Not accountable for his actions.

Michael finished dressing. "I'll leave now."

"Yes, I think that best. And do not return."

FINDING JASON

Michael held out one hand toward him. "Jason—"

"Why?" Jason asked. "Why could you not leave me alone?"

Michael ran a hand through his hair. "I needed to see you again. I hope you can forgive me."

Jason stared at his friend sadly. "I do not know."

With a last pleading look, Michael exited, leaving Jason angry and confused.

Sober now, he got up and paced his room. How could Michael have done that to him? More importantly, how could he have let it happen? It wasn't as if he had unnatural urges any more. That was all in the past. After all, he was having an affair with Lady Roz, was he not?

Yes, Lady Roz. That's the answer. It had been too long since he'd made love to her. A man had needs and he'd neglected to indulge his. Tonight he'd take care of that and put this unfortunate incident behind him.

* * *

That night Jason escorted Lady Roz to a soiree.

It had been a difficult day. Furbur had refused to work for him any longer, saying he would not stay in the same lodgings as a sodomite. Jason had told him he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion, but Furbur was adamant. Using the lure of a large bonus and a glowing letter of recommendation, Jason had finally bribed him into silence. Or so he hoped. What a coil Michael had got him into.

Though still upset by the day's events, Jason managed to behave normally at the soiree, though he drank less than usual. He discussed politics and sport with the men and flirted with the ladies, but he was infernally glad when it was over.

After bidding Lady Roz goodnight at her door, he dismissed his hired carriage, claiming he preferred to walk home. After the coachman drove off, Jason walked around the corner into the mews behind her townhouse and slipped through the back gate.

FINDING JASON

A tall, strapping footman, with a sullen look on his face, waited at the back door. Jason slipped him a coin and made his way up the back stairs, as he had so many times before. Discretion had always been his watchword.

Until today.

Roz was waiting for him in her bedchamber. He paused a moment to enjoy the picture she presented. Tall, blonde and slender, with a generous bosom, Lady Roz was accounted a diamond of the first water. Her robe was of the sheerest muslin, leaving little to the imagination. His gaze feasted on her generous breasts, straining against the sheer fabric, the dark aureoles visible, then dropped to the triangle of hair at the junction of her legs.

His hand trembled as he reached out to touch her face, reveling in the smooth, fine skin. "You are a goddess, Roz," he whispered.

She chuckled and turned her head to kiss his palm. "Flattery will get you everywhere. I am glad you came, Jason. I have missed you."

He lowered his head and kissed her, lightly at first, then more intensely. Her lips parted and he delved deeper, using his lips and tongue to taste and suckle. She responded with mews of pleasure.

He broke the kiss and guided her to her bed. Untying her robe, he pushed it off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

"So lovely," he murmured, trailing his hands down her arms, then up her torso to cup her luscious breasts, hefting their weight in his hands.

When his thumbs flicked over her nipples, she closed her eyes and swayed slightly. He smiled and kept stroking her breasts, teasing the nipples into pebbled hardness.

He knelt, trailing his hands down her body, and reached around to cup her bottom. He rested his face against her soft belly and breathed in the sweet musk of her sex. "You smell so good. Good and sweet."

"Stop teasing me," she said, urging him up. "I want to see you,

FINDING JASON

touch you.”

She tugged at his clothes, untied his cravat, unbuttoned his shirt, pressed her lips to his neck. He pressed her closer, let her feel his hard cock. She writhed against him. His need for her more urgent now, he toed off his shoes and ripped off his shirt and breeches.

She lay down, her legs spread for him. “Love me now, Jason,” she ordered.

“As my lady wishes,” he replied, joining her on the bed. He kissed her again, then trailed his hands and lips down her neck and bosom. Finding her hardened nipples, he stopped to feast on first one, then the other. She was so feminine—soft, warm, and yielding.

He worshiped her body, kissing and caressing every inch from her breasts to her toes, then started the return journey. When he reached the top of her thighs, he parted the blond curls and stroked her nether lips. Her hips bucked and she grunted her approval. She was hot, wet and ready. He tongued her slit until her breathing grew labored and her muscles clenched. She cried out her climax as her body spasmed.

“God, Jason,” she panted.

He was hard as a rock and not sure he could last much longer when he finally entered her. Clenching his teeth, he slowly thrust in, then out, again and again, holding off his own climax until her arousal started to build again. She wrapped her legs around him, pulling him farther into her hot, tight channel. He thrust faster until he climaxed, spewing his seed into her.

He collapsed beside her on the bed, eyes closed, until his breathing calmed. This was right, he assured himself, and yet, he’d been curiously detached, focused more on giving her pleasure than on receiving it. Unlike last night, when he’d been so caught up in his own pleasure, he hadn’t even realized who was loving him. Of course, he’d been drunk as a lord, but...

After a few moments, he opened his eyes and stared at Roz, who

FINDING JASON

was practically purring with satisfaction.

She lay on one side, head propped on one hand, and trailed the other across his chest. "My, but you were passionate tonight."

Jason grinned at her. "You appeared to enjoy it."

"Twice," she agreed. "You may visit any time."

Jason caught her hand and held it. "Just visit? Why should we not make this permanent?"

She raised both eyebrows. "Are you asking me to marry you, Jason?"

"Yes. Why not?"

She sat up, hands on her hips, the picture of feminine indignation. "That is the shabbiest proposal I've ever received."

"I beg your pardon. Shall I drop to one knee and do it properly?"

"I hope you shall do no such thing." She got out of bed, donned her robe and moved to sit at her dressing table. Picking up her brush, she pulled it savagely through her tangled locks.

"I say, I did not mean to upset you."

She stopped and sighed. "I know you did not. It is just that I have no wish to marry again."

"Very well," Jason said, disappointed and relieved at the same time. In truth, he was not sure it was what he wanted either. "Just do not forget I offered to make an honest woman of you."

Roz laughed. "I have been an honest woman, and this is better."

"What do you mean, better?"

"Marriage is a trap, for women if not for men. As a widow, I am free to do as I please, so long as I am discreet. If I wish to take lovers, there is no one to gainsay me."

"Lovers?" Jason asked, stung.

She tossed him an apologetic look over her shoulder. "Sorry, darling, but you have been... less reliable than I prefer. I have needs."

Jason sat up. "Who is it, Roz?"

FINDING JASON

“One of my footmen,” she acknowledged.

He gaped at her. “A footman? Not that young Viking who glowered at me when I arrived?”

“Yes, that is the one. His name is Will, and he adores me.”

“I adore you, too.”

She turned to face him, expression serious. “No, Jason, you do not. If you did, you would not have gone off with your military friend last night. You are fond of me, as I am of you, but that is all.”

“Am I not manly enough for you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course you are, silly. You and Will are just different. You are intelligent, sophisticated, and witty. Experienced. Will is a simple fellow, and right now, his universe revolves around me. That is enormously appealing. What he lacks in experience, he more than makes up for in enthusiasm.”

“And his shaft is as large as he is,” Jason concluded. He stood and pulled on his breeches.

Her eyes grew flinty. “That comment was completely beyond the pale.”

“You know,” he said deliberately, as he buttoned his shirt, “I have always despised men who take advantage of their female servants.”

She flinched as his dart hit home. “I doubt Will feels I have taken advantage of him. Perhaps it is time you leave.”

“Past time, perhaps.”

Jason finished dressing and left her bedchamber, probably for the last time. How galling that she preferred the attentions of her footman to his own person. Could this day get any worse?

* * *

The next morning, Jason paid all his bills, declined all new invitations and penned his apologies to the hostesses whose invitations he'd already accepted. He also sent flowers to Lady Roz with an apology. Though still annoyed, he had no wish to alienate her. He had

FINDING JASON

been wrong to question her choice of lover, however much it distressed him.

In the afternoon, he packed and arranged to have his curricule brought 'round in the morning. He'd had enough of London for the nonce. Perhaps a stay in the country would help get him back on track.

That night he dined alone at his club, brooding over the events of the past day. In one twenty-four hour period, he'd lost his best friend, his servant and his mistress.

How dare Michael suddenly show up like that and turn his world upside down? Claiming to love him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Love him? Hate would have been easier to bear.

He reached for the decanter to pour himself another glass of port, but thought better of it. Overindulgence was what had brought him to this sorry state. Had he not been drunk, he'd never have fallen asleep in the same bed with Michael and not awakened in his arms. Not to mention having his mind so muddled he'd allowed Michael to touch him intimately.

Worst of all, he'd enjoyed it.

And if none of that had happened, he would not have been so vulnerable as to offer for Lady Roz. Thinking of her made his heart ache. He'd thought she cared about him, but apparently not enough.

He scowled at the dregs of wine in his glass. He was glad she'd refused his suit. He knew he'd have to do his duty to the family and marry one day. But when he did, he'd expect his wife to be faithful to him, not cavorting with footmen, no matter how big their cocks might be.

The next day he drove to his father's estate in Cheshire, surprising his parents, who were accustomed to seeing him only during the winter. He was relieved when they greeted him warmly and refrained from asking why he'd come to visit during the season. How could he possibly explain what had happened to him? It would shock and disgust

FINDING JASON

them no end.

On his first day there, Jason decided to work in the fields, hoping hard physical labor would exhaust him. It seemed like a splendid idea, until he found himself admiring a sturdy farm lad. To his dismay, he realized his encounter with Michael had opened some kind of sensual Pandora's Box and the old awareness and desires would not readily be put back inside.

That night he rode into the village, where he found himself charmed by a pert tavern wench. After sampling her charms, he returned home to toss and turn in his own bed. If he were normal, he would not be attracted to men. But if he were truly a sodomite, how could he still desire women? It was all devilish confusing.

After that his days fell into a pattern, beginning with a bruising ride around the countryside, then a hearty breakfast while perusing the newspapers, searching for news about the army. He spent the rest of the day in the office with the land steward, learning estate management, much to his father's delight. After dinner he retired to the library to re-read the classics, comforting himself with the knowledge that the ancient Greeks and Romans had been capable of loving both men and women. Perhaps he was not so strange after all.

CHAPTER 2

Belgium, June 1815

Alfred slipped into his captain's room after the inn settled down. Ever since they'd arrived in Brussels, all had been frantic activity and fevered anticipation. A battle was coming soon, though no one knew exactly when. He rubbed his shoulder, wishing he could take part, but knowing he would be of no use to the regiment. His captain was waiting for him, just visible in the dim glow of a shuttered lantern.

"Come to bed, love," Michael whispered.

Alfred removed his clothing, picked up the bottle of mineral oil, and sat on the edge of the bed. "There is something I need to ask you."

Michael ran his hand up Alfred's chest, brushing one sensitive nipple. "What is it, love?"

Alfred took his hand and moved it aside. "What happened in London?" His captain had come home in the morning looking like he'd

FINDING JASON

been dragged through hell, but refused to say a word about it.

Michael sighed and sat up, rubbing his hand over his eyes. "I made a mistake that night. A terrible mistake."

"It cannot be that bad, can it?"

"I seduced a friend against his will."

Alfred frowned, not entirely sure how that might have happened. "Did he protest?"

"No, not at the time. We were drunk and fell asleep on the same bed. I awoke in the middle of the night and seduced him. I do not think he even knew what was happening. Not until morning when he sobered up. Now he hates me."

Alfred's heart sank. He'd known there was someone else. "Who was it?"

"An old friend, from school. Someone I've cared about for a very long time."

"You love him," Alfred whispered.

"Yes. He was my first love. I never meant to hurt him. Or you."

"Did you mount him?"

"No, oh, God, no," Michael denied. "I'd never do that to a man without his consent. "'Twas naught but a rub-up."

"He could do that himself," Alfred grumbled. "What if he had wanted more? Would you still want me?"

Michael cupped his hand around Alfred's neck and pulled him close for a kiss. "Yes," he whispered. "You're the best thing that has happened to me in years. I'll not let you go."

It was as close to a declaration of love as he was likely to get. Alfred relaxed and leaned into the kiss. Michael's kiss was tender at first, seductive and reassuring. Alfred responded with all the repressed love and passion in his soul. Each open-mouth kiss led to another as tongues delved and explored, first leisurely, then with increasing urgency. Alfred straddled Michael's hips so they were pressed together

FINDING JASON

belly to belly, groin to groin, until Michael's rigid erection matched his own.

He tore his mouth from Michael's and rubbed his face against the stubbled masculine jaw. *So strong, so masculine.* Moving down, he alternately kissed and nipped at the strong tendons of Michael's neck. He let his hands rove over strong shoulders and chest muscles, pausing to caress and kiss every scar, and there were many. A saber cut here, a bullet graze there. All honorable wounds suffered in the defense of a country that would happily hang them both were they discovered together like this.

Alfred lingered at a spot just above Michael's left nipple, laving the scar with his tongue, then moving to suckle the flat nipple. His captain had been wounded more than most, though never badly. Alfred just prayed his luck would hold for one more battle. Just one more.

Michael tangled one hand in Alfred's hair, while the other hand squeezed Alfred's arse, then teased the sensitive skin above his anus. Alfred grunted his pleasure and spread his legs farther, giving Michael greater access to the sensitive area.

Alfred reached between them to stroke Michael's cock.

Michael tensed. "Enough, or this will be over before it has begun," he ordered.

Alfred grinned and moved his hands up Michael's chest, kneading the steely muscles. "Yes, sir," he said, mockingly.

Michael reached up to gently cup his lover's face and rubbed his thumb across Alfred's lips. "There'll be none of the 'sir' nonsense tonight. Do you understand, love?"

"Yes. Fuck me, Michael," Alfred whispered, staring at the man he loved.

Michael's expression was both tender and troubled. He tugged Alfred's head down for another passionate kiss. Lips engaged and retreated as tongues dueled for dominance.

FINDING JASON

Breathless, Alfred broke it off and sucked in a breath of air, aware that Michael's breathing was labored, too. It was time. He rolled onto his back, bringing Michael with him. The larger man loomed over him, a virile, fully aroused male animal. The muscles in Alfred's arse tightened in anticipation.

"Ready, love?"

Alfred smiled and sat up. He reached for the mineral oil, poured a liberal quantity into one palm, then handed the bottle to Michael. After rubbing his hands together to warm them, Alfred took Michael's cock in his hand and applied the oil.

Alfred lay back and spread his upraised legs. His hands and rod now slick with oil, Michael inserted one slick finger into Alfred's anus and waited for the muscles to relax. Slowly he moved his finger in and out, going deeper and deeper. When Alfred was ready, Michael entered him, his thrusts slow and even.

Alfred closed his eyes and palmed his own cock, rubbing faster as Michael increased the pace. He came in a rush of sensation right before Michael shouted his climax and collapsed onto Alfred's chest, his breathing ragged.

Alfred wrapped his arms around him. "I love you, Michael," he whispered. "You know that, do you not?"

"Yes, I know."

Alfred waited for Michael to say more, but he was silent. He thought his heart might break. For once he had hoped to hear Michael say the words, I love you. How bloody hard could that be?

But Michael said nothing more, just kissed him thoroughly, as if for the last time.

* * *

London, August 1815

Alfred gazed at the figure in the bed and blinked back tears. His captain was dying and there was naught he could do to prevent it.

FINDING JASON

Waterloo. It was a name no one who'd been there would ever forget.

Memories of the battle haunted him. Thousands of men dead, lying in their own blood, sightless eyes staring at the sky. Searching through the smoke and debris for his wounded lover. Finding him lying half under his dead horse, his leg crushed by the animal's fall. Then the horror of seeing Michael's leg chopped off, followed by relief he would live. That they could go home to England, far from the pain and carnage of Belgium.

If only the wound had healed cleanly. A man could live with one leg, but the infection rampaging through Michael's body was killing him.

Alfred dipped a cloth in the basin of water beside the bed and sponged Michael's face and neck. He was burning up with fever. "Easy, sir. Would you like a drink?"

Michael struggled to sit and Alfred piled pillows behind him. "Did you send that note to Jason Huxley?"

"Yes, sir. We have had no answer yet," Alfred replied.

Michael fell back on the pillows. "Let me know when you hear something."

Alfred wondered why he was so intent on seeing the fellow. Was Huxley the reason his captain had been so blue deviled when they left England last April? Alfred had forgiven Michael's unfaithfulness a long time ago, but Michael had never uttered the name of the man he had wronged.

When someone knocked on the door, Alfred answered the knock to find Oates, the Penrose butler, and a fair-haired man in the hallway.

"Mr. Jason Huxley to see Captain Penrose," said the butler.

Alfred eyed Huxley. He was a fine-looking man of better than medium height with fair hair and green eyes. His expression was grave and troubled.

FINDING JASON

“Forgive me for not coming sooner. I was in the country, near Cheshire, and your note was not forwarded until a few days ago. I got here as fast as I could. How is he?”

Alfred shook his head and stood back to let Huxley enter. To judge by his expression, he cared for Michael, enough to drive all the way from Cheshire.

Alfred moved to stand beside his captain. “Sir, Mr. Huxley is here to see you.”

“Huxley, good of you to come. Need to talk to you.” He turned to Alfred. “I would like to speak to my guest privately. I will call you when I need you.”

“Yes, sir,” Alfred replied and left the room. Michael’s cavalier dismissal stung, but perhaps there was a good reason. He was a fool to love Michael so, for they would never be equals, but the heart never concerned itself with practical matters. Love Michael he did and shortly he must face that loss.

Numb with pain and exhaustion, Alfred returned to his room to await Michael’s next summons.

* * *

Jason watched as Michael’s batman left the room. Threadgill stood an inch or two taller than Jason, though he was not as tall as Michael. Jason could not help noting he was a handsome, sturdy fellow with dark brown curls and vivid blue eyes. It was also clear that he cared deeply for Michael. Perhaps more than might be expected between master and servant. Or perhaps not, given Michael’s taste in lovers.

After the man left, Jason stepped forward until he was beside Michael’s bed and clasped his hand. “You look like hell,” he said softly.

Michael grimaced. “Feel like it, too. Need to talk to you, Jason.” His voice was weak and breathless.

“I’m here, Michael. I came as soon as I could.” Jason tried to keep

FINDING JASON

his alarm out of his voice and expression, and his gaze off the place where Michael's leg had been. The note from his batman had said he'd lost a leg at Waterloo and was now suffering from an infection. Seeing his condition now, Jason feared his friend might not pull through this time. "What is it, old friend? What is so important you dragged me all this way?"

"Had to apologize for what happened. You must hate me."

"No, though you did cost me a good valet," Jason said with an attempt at a smile. "I'm not angry with you." Had it been anyone else, he'd be furious. But this was Michael, his oldest and dearest friend, a man he loved like a brother.

"Still, dashed unfair to you. I had a bad feeling...needed to see you before I left."

Jason let go of Michael's hand and turned to hide the tears welling in his eyes. The last thing Michael needed to see was his grief...his pity. "Think no more of it."

"You need to know, Jason. It was always you I loved. You I wanted."

Jason clenched his fists, feeling his nails biting into his palm. Slowly he turned and looked at his friend. "I loved you, too. You were the brother I never had."

"No more than that?"

Jason ran a hand through his hair. "Yes, once, but that was a long time ago. When we were young and foolish."

Michael was silent for a few minutes. "Will you do something for me?"

"Anything. You have only to ask."

"Take care of my batman, Alfred. Alfred Threadgill. This will be hard on him."

"I am not sure I understand."

"He is not just my servant," Michael said. "We have been together,

FINDING JASON

you know.”

“You mean you were lovers,” Jason said slowly.

“Yes,” Michael admitted.

“You know how I feel about intercourse between servant and master.”

Michael sighed. “Yes, but this is not the same thing as your father seducing the governess.”

“How is it different?” Jason asked sharply.

“For one thing, I am not married. Look at it from my perspective, Jason. I could hardly pursue another man openly. You know the penalty for that.”

“Yes,” Jason murmured. The pillory if one were lucky, the gallows if not.

“In our circumstances, it was an ideal situation, as it gave us privacy we’d not otherwise have. And I didn’t have to worry about impregnating him, no matter how hard I tried.”

Jason had to laugh at the very notion. “I suppose there is something to that.”

“Have you still not forgiven your father?”

Jason sighed. “I have learned to be civil to the man, but it is hard to forget he ruined a young woman’s life with his lusts, and hurt my mama into the bargain.”

“How do you know it was not mutual?”

“What do you mean?”

“Perhaps Miss Keaton welcomed his advances. The life of a governess is a lonely one, and women have needs, too.”

“You sound like Roz, Lady Bothwick, that is,” Jason said. “I found out she is lying with one of her footmen.”

Michael smiled wanly. “She sounds like quite a woman. Sometimes I think the French have the right of it with all their talk of equality. Everyone should be free to love whomever his heart desires.”

FINDING JASON

“As you love Alfred.”

“Yes. Will you help him, Jason?”

“I will, of course, be glad to help him find a position,” Jason replied.

“Perhaps you can hire him yourself. Now that Furbur is gone.”

Jason paced the room. He needed to replace Furbur, but not with Alfred Threadgill. Dear God, that was all he needed—Michael’s former lover waiting on him. Shaving him. Helping him with his bath. Helping him dress. Tying his cravat, his handsome face only inches away.

Jason groaned and ran his hand through his hair. A valet’s service was very intimate and personal. It was one thing to be waited on by a dried-up, old stick like Furbur. Quite another to have a good-looking fellow like Threadgill underfoot and within reach. Was this the kind of temptation his father had fought while Miss Keaton was in his employ?

Jason stopped walking and faced Michael. “Please, Michael, do not ask this of me.”

Michael looked at him, brown eyes ringed by dark shadows. “You are the only one I trust.”

“Why me?”

“Because you will not be shocked by his...inclinations. With you, he will not have to fear the consequences of being found out.”

“Do not expect me to take your place in his bed.”

“Please, Jason, just give Threadgill a try. He served his country well, until he was injured too badly to wield a saber. There are hundreds of former soldiers looking for work. I’d hate to die knowing he may end up begging on the street.”

Jason knew he’d lost the battle. He had seen the poor wretches, dressed in their ragged uniforms, some with arms or legs missing. He’d wish that on no man. “Very well, Michael, I will give him a try.”

Michael sank back on the pillows, looking exhausted but satisfied.

“I will leave you now,” Jason said. He bent over and kissed his

FINDING JASON

friend's forehead, alarmed by the heat of his skin. "Take care, Michael."

"Good-bye, Jason," Michael murmured before closing his eyes.

Jason turned and rushed from the room, his emotions in a turmoil. As usual, he had been unable to deny Michael anything he wanted. A promise to a dying man was a serious matter, and this one had the potential to change Jason's life forever.

CHAPTER 3

September, 1815

Alfred cast another surreptitious glance at his new employer.

Jason Huxley was, perhaps, the most beautiful man he'd ever seen. Fine golden hair covered his head, one lock falling over his forehead. His features were finely chiseled and symmetrical, his skin a pale, golden beige. Though not overly tall, he was a fine figure of a man. No wonder his captain had been enthralled.

Alfred sighed, thinking he could easily fall in love with the man, but that would be as great a folly as loving his captain. His heart still ached whenever he thought of Michael.

He'd been working for Jason Huxley for a month now, since the day after his captain was laid to rest. Though he was glad to have a position, it was not the same as serving Michael. There was none of the easy camaraderie they'd had, or the passionate intimacies they'd shared

FINDING JASON

in the dark.

Alfred lifted the kettle off the hob and poured hot water into the bathtub seated before the hearth. He tested the temperature. "Your bath is ready, sir."

Jason Huxley set down the book he'd been reading and stood up. He was garbed in a silk banyan, a triangle of golden chest hair peeking through the opening at his neck.

"Thank you, Threadgill. I will call when I am finished."

Alfred suppressed a sigh and murmured, "Yes, sir."

He exited the bedchamber into the small dressing room next door where he slept. He knew why he was banished from the room during bath time. Jason Huxley didn't trust him enough to disrobe in his presence. And it was just as well, since the mere thought of his employer's naked body was enough to send Alfred's own into spasm.

Alfred flopped onto his sleeping cot. He should not be having lustful thoughts about another man so soon after his lover's death, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

As he unbuttoned his breeches, he pictured Jason in the tub, running a wet cloth over his broad shoulders and muscular arms. Alfred circled the base of his cock with one hand and used the other to stroke lightly from top to bottom and back up. As he did, he imagined how would it feel to wash Jason's strong, smooth back. His beautiful chest, covered by a mat of golden hair. Alfred would kneel at the side of the tub and kiss Jason as he washed Jason's groin, played with his cock.

Alfred gasped, his strokes coming faster now. Just the thought of his mouth on Jason's mouth, his hand on Jason's cock was enough to make him climax. He turned his head to muffle his cry against the pillow.

His contrary desire relieved for the moment, Alfred cleaned himself and waited to be summoned by the man who tempted him as no other but Michael ever had.

FINDING JASON

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After he finished bathing and dressing, Jason rang for his servant. He'd been surprised by how quickly Threadgill had adapted to civilian life. It had taken him no time at all to learn the art of tying a cravat. Unfortunately, the ritual had become torture for Jason.

When his valet entered, Jason turned to him. "Ah, Threadgill, there you are. I am ready for my cravat."

Threadgill went to the chest of drawers and removed a length of linen.

Jason stood still as Threadgill wrapped the cloth around his neck and stood close to tie it. At this distance, Jason could study his new servant's handsome face. His beard was heavier than Jason's, adding a dark shadow to his jaw line. The man had beautiful eyes of bright blue framed by long, dark lashes. His skin was fair and tinged with pink. True English skin that flushed easily. His mouth, with that temptingly full lower lip, hovered just inches away from Jason's own. The longing to reach out and taste had Jason clenching his fists.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the temptation, but that only made him more aware of Threadgill's hands brushing his neck and chest as he tied the intricate pattern. He was almost painfully aware of the man's soft breathing, his clean scent.

"Are you almost finished?" Jason cringed inwardly at the harsh tone of his voice. He opened his eyes to find Threadgill staring at him, hurt and bewilderment in those soulful eyes.

"I beg your pardon," Jason said. "I did not mean to be so impatient."

"Almost done," Alfred said, putting the finishing touches on the cravat. "Is that to your satisfaction, sir?"

Jason surveyed himself in the mirror. The cravat was arranged in a perfect Mathematical tie. "Yes, very much so."

"Thank you, sir."

FINDING JASON

Threadgill picked up Jason's blue superfine coat and helped him into it, smoothing the cloth over his shoulders. Jason imagined how those hands would feel brushing against his bare skin and heat rushed through him. He took a quick step away from temptation.

Thankful the ordeal of dressing was over, Jason strode toward the door. "Well, I am off to my club."

"Before you leave, sir..."

Jason turned to face his servant. "What is it, Threadgill?"

The man stood at attention, reminding Jason that he had once been in the army. "I was thinking you might be happier with another servant. I've been thinking of emigrating."

Guilt washed over Jason. He'd known Threadgill was unhappy, but had chalked it up to grief over losing his beloved captain. "Is that something you truly want to do?"

Threadgill shrugged. "Maybe."

Jason fought the impulse to pull the man into his arms and comfort him. It might be best if he just let Threadgill leave, but he had promised to watch over him.

Jason cleared his throat. "I would advise against making any hasty decisions. Give yourself time to adjust to your changed circumstances."

"I will think about that," was all Threadgill said.

As Jason walked toward his club, he pondered what to do about his attraction to his new man. Acting on his desires would be unconscionable. For years he had despised his father for what he did to Miss Keaton. Looking back as an adult, he realized what a temptation she must have been. An intelligent, pretty young woman living under the same roof. He'd developed a schoolboy *tendre* for her, himself, but had never dreamed of acting upon it. Had she, perhaps, encouraged his father? She must have been lonely and vulnerable.

As Threadgill was lonely and vulnerable. He might welcome Jason's advances, but Jason's head told him it would be unfair to take

FINDING JASON

advantage of that vulnerability. Other parts of his body urged him to act on his desires. He did not know how much longer reason would prevail over desire..

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Alfred stood alone in his employer's bedchamber. Jason Huxley had departed for his club a few minutes earlier, leaving Alfred to clean up after him. He didn't mind that, but he was just so bloody lonely he thought his heart would burst with the pain of it.

Alfred added more water to the bath. Mr. Huxley believed in bathing daily, and Alfred had gotten into the habit, too, slipping into the tub after his employer left. The water was only lukewarm, but after years of army life, Alfred wasn't picky. He grabbed the soap and brush and began to scrub his chest. No matter how often he bathed, he never quite felt clean. It was as if the mud and gore of battle still clung to him. So much blood and gore, so much pain and loss. A man could sink into it and never find his way out.

He blinked back tears. He never thought he'd admit it, but he missed the army. Missed the comradeship, the shared hardships and purpose. Together they had brought down the Corsican monster, not once but twice.

What had he to do now but take care of the frivolous needs of a society gent? A kind gentleman, but one who kept him at a distance. One who, unlike Michael, never forgot the enormous gulf that separated them.

He picked up a pitcher of cool water and poured it over his head and shoulders, gasping at the chill. Then he stood and rinsed off his legs. He was about to reach for a towel when the door banged open.

Alfred turned to find Jason Huxley framed in the doorway. Reflexively, he covered his privates with his hands. "Mr. Huxley," he stammered. "I...I wasn't expecting you so soon."

Huxley seemed frozen in place, his gaze intent. "That is obvious."

FINDING JASON

Alfred felt his face heat up and knew it must be bright red. Damn his fair skin. A man his age oughtn't to be able to blush. He grabbed for the towel with one hand and wrapped it around his hips. "Sorry, sir. It's just that in the army baths were few and far between. Did you forget something, sir? I'll get it for you."

He climbed out of the tub, sloshing water on the carpet. "Sorry, sir, I'll mop that up." He was babbling like an idiot. Why did this man overset him so? Kneeling, he grabbed another towel and started mopping at the wet carpet. He started when a warm hand came to rest on his shoulder. He looked up into Jason Huxley's concerned face.

"Easy, lad, I am not angry at you." Huxley stepped to the cupboard and pulled out a clean towel, then returned to pat Alfred's back. "You may bathe as often as you wish."

Alfred clenched his fists around the wet towel. The other man's touch had him instantly hard. He hunched his shoulders, hoping to hide his condition.

"Your skin is chafed in spots. I have some cream that will soothe that."

"Th-thank you, sir," Alfred stammered. "I'll take care of it later."

"Nonsense. You cannot reach the spots on your back."

As soon as Huxley moved away, Alfred stood, but didn't turn around. He didn't want the other man to see the effect he had on Alfred's wayward cock.

"Do I make you uncomfortable, Threadgill?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir."

There was an amused chuckle behind him as Huxley began to smooth ointment onto Alfred's back. "Which is it?"

Alfred was confused. "I thought I made you uncomfortable, sir. Otherwise, you'd let me help you with your bath, like any other valet."

The hand rubbing his back hesitated for a second. "Yes, I can see how you would think that." Huxley sighed. "I was not pleased when

FINDING JASON

Michael insisted I take you on.”

“If my service has been unsatisfactory—”

“It has not,” Huxley interrupted. “If I have not told you that I am pleased by your work, I apologize. That is not where the problem lies and you know it.”

“It’s because of my inclinations.”

“And mine,” Huxley said softly.

Alfred spun to face him, forgetting his state of arousal. “Sir?”

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Jason knew the battle had been lost. He could no longer ignore his desire for Threadgill. *No, Alfred*. It seemed odd to think of a man he desired by his last name. He reached up to touch Alfred’s face, running the tip of one finger along the man’s cheek. When Alfred licked his lips, Jason’s gaze was drawn to his mouth, to that full lower lip he’d longed to taste.

“Sir?”

Jason sighed and stepped back, his hand falling to his side. “I beg your pardon. I do not know what came over me. You must think I have lost my mind.”

“No, sir. I want the same thing.”

He dropped his gaze to his groin, and Jason looked down to see the tent pole under Alfred’s towel.

Jason smiled ruefully. “I can see you do.”

Alfred laughed and broke into a smile, revealing deep dimples on each side of his mouth.

“You should smile more often,” Jason remarked. “Show off your dimples.”

Alfred grimaced. “Good reason not to smile. My mum always said those dimples was too pretty for a man.”

“Not at all,” Jason said. “I find you intriguingly masculine.” He stepped closer and traced the groove in Alfred’s cheek, savoring the

FINDING JASON

slight stubble. "Definitely masculine," he whispered. "After all, you bear the mark of war on your body."

He moved his hand to the ugly scar on Alfred's shoulder. "You were grievously wounded, were you not?"

Alfred nodded. "Saber wound. Never got the strength back in that arm."

"Yes, Michael told me."

"That's when I became his batman. Not fit for duty."

Jason glanced down before saying, "You look fit enough for what I have in mind."

Alfred laughed again and Jason darted in to press a kiss to one of Alfred's dimples before it disappeared.

Alfred grabbed Jason's shoulders and pulled him closer, kissing him back with fervor. Jason opened his mouth to taste the questing tongue. He wrapped his arms around Alfred's middle, pulling him closer.

Jason ran his hands over the strong, smooth muscles of Alfred's back, still cool and slightly damp from his bath. When he felt cloth, he tugged at it until the towel fell to the floor. Jason cupped the firm muscles of Alfred's arse and rubbed against him. They were both hard as pikestaffs now.

Gasping for air, Jason broke the kiss and sank to his knees, pulling Alfred with him. He reached between them to encircle Alfred's cock with his fingers. Alfred moaned and thrust into his hand.

"Easy, lad." Jason scooted back a few inches to savor the sight of Alfred's nude body. Except for the ugly scar on his shoulder, he had a beautiful body, leanly muscled and manly, with broad shoulders, narrow hips and strong thighs. Jason trailed one hand over Alfred's chest, grazing the erect nipples, while the other continued to caress his hardened shaft. Alfred sucked in a breath, the muscles of his belly tensing.

FINDING JASON

Jason smiled at the effect his touch had. He moved his hand slowly down the smooth skin of Alfred's cock, then back up to the base of the head.

Alfred cupped the back of Jason's head and pulled him close for another kiss. Their tongues dueled as Jason increased both pressure and rhythm. He lengthened the strokes to cover the head and felt beads of moisture on the tip. When Alfred thrust again, Jason increased the pressure, while using his free hand to caress his sac. Alfred gripped Jason's shoulders as he climaxed, spurting his seed into Jason's hand.

When his breathing slowed, Alfred pulled Jason closer for another kiss, more tender and less urgent this time. Jason held him close, feeling the beating of their hearts.

When Alfred reached for the buttons on his waistcoat, Jason stayed his hand. "What are you about?"

Alfred looked him in the eye and said, "I would see you naked."

The demand was not as shocking as the fact Alfred had made it. He was bolder than Jason had anticipated.

"I'd never hurt you," Alfred assured him.

"I believe that," Jason said. "I saw how tenderly you cared for Michael toward the end. I know you are capable of great loyalty." The question was whether he was deserving of Alfred's trust. But his erection was nearly unbearable now and he ached for release. He shrugged out of his waistcoat and pulled his shirt over his head.

Alfred pushed Jason back, until he was reclining on his lower arms. He watched as Alfred expertly unbuttoned his pantaloons and tugged them down and off. Alfred took Jason's shaft and stroked it with one hand, making Jason's balls tighten. With the other hand, Alfred eased back the foreskin and caressed the head with one finger. Pure need shot through Jason and he trembled.

Then, to Jason's shock, Alfred lowered his head and took Jason's cock in his mouth, sucking on the tip.

FINDING JASON

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Alfred marveled at the sight of Jason Huxley, sprawled naked on the floor, eyes closed in the throes of arousal. It was what he'd wanted for so long now and he trembled with need. Jason's cock was as beautiful as he was, long and slender and perfect for fucking. Alfred wanted it inside him, but not today. If he pushed Jason too hard...

Alfred wrapped his hand around the base of Jason's shaft as he took more of it into his mouth. He used his free hand to fondle Jason's thighs, then his stones. When Jason's hips twitched, Alfred broke off to smile at Jason. "You taste so good."

Jason stared back at him, his eyes slightly unfocused. "That *feels* so good. Don't stop."

Alfred's smile broadened. For once, Jason was in his power and he intended to see they both enjoyed it. He returned his attention to Jason's cock, alternately kissing, licking and nibbling on it as Jason squirmed with pleasure. A long lick up the lower side of the shaft to the sensitive area under the head elicited a groan, much to Alfred's satisfaction. His only focus was to please this man he desired. Please him so much, he'd never want another man, or woman, ever again.

When drops of fluid appeared at the top of Jason's cock, Alfred took it into his mouth, savoring the salty taste. He lavished attention on the head with his tongue, while moving his hands up and down the shaft until Jason groaned and thrust upward. Alfred increased the pressure and Jason came, spurting fluid into Alfred's welcoming mouth.

When Jason finished climaxing, Alfred sat up and enjoyed the sated smile on Jason's lips. It was something he'd longed for, but never expected to see.

Jason opened his eyes and smiled. "That was amazing."

Alfred murmured his agreement. The question was whether it was amazing enough for Jason to want to do it again.

FINDING JASON

"No one has ever done that to me, unless I paid for it," Jason said.

"You *are* paying me," Alfred joked.

The smile on Jason's face disappeared and he scrambled to his feet. "I am not paying you for sexual favors," he said, his tone chilly.

"It was but a jest," Alfred protested, wondering what had set Jason's back up so.

"But it was not amusing." Jason rose and went to the armoire, returning with two of his robes. He handed one to Alfred and donned the other.

Suddenly uncomfortable with his nakedness, Alfred rose and put on the robe, tying it tightly around his waist.

Jason disappeared into the drawing room and returned with two glasses of brandy, handing one to Alfred.

Alfred sipped the fiery liquid, wondering what was coming now. "What is wrong, Jason?"

"A number of things." Jason wandered to the window and stared down at the street. "How much did Michael tell you about me?"

"Not much, just that you were friends from school. Good friends."

"Then he did not mention that we were lovers once, a long time ago."

"And last April," Alfred whispered, now certain who Michael had been with that night.

Jason turned to face him. "Yes," he said, his expression regretful.

"I knew there was someone, but he never said who."

"At the time, I had no idea you and he..."

Alfred heaved a sigh. "I knew he never loved me, not like I loved him. He never said he did."

"You still miss him, do you not?"

Alfred blinked furiously when his eyes filled with tears. His throat was too choked to reply. He turned away to hide his distress.

"I am sorry, Alfred."

FINDING JASON

He nodded, put down the drink and reached for his clothes. "I'll clean up later. After you leave."

"Yes. I must be on my way. I only returned for my walking stick. Do not wait up."

Alfred helped Jason dress again, this time with more intimate touches than before. Jason seemed more relaxed as well, even stealing a kiss as Alfred tied his cravat.

After Jason left, Alfred threw on his clothes, then moved to the window and watched him until he walked out of sight. He leaned his forehead against a pane of glass and groaned. What had he done? He was very much afraid he was losing his heart to Jason Huxley, a man who would surely break it. If not now, then later.

* * *

Jason dined at his club, then sat reading the newspaper until late that evening. Actually, he sat staring at the pages, occasionally turning one, though he had no notion of what it said. All he could think about was what had happened earlier.

This afternoon he'd taken a step down a road he wasn't sure he wished to travel. One he hadn't intended to travel.

The sight of a naked Alfred Threadgill had caused his control to snap at once. Perhaps it had been inevitable. How could two men who were so attracted to each other live together in close proximity and not expect something like this to happen? Surely it was what Michael had intended when he'd asked Jason to take care of Threadgill.

But it was wrong. Not just illegal, but morally wrong. He'd sworn never to take advantage of an employee. Threadgill was not his social equal and never would be.

Jason tossed the paper aside and scowled at it. Whatever happened from this point on was up to him. No matter what he decided, he knew Alfred would come out the loser. It was so bloody unfair.

FINDING JASON

* * *

The next day, Alfred helped Jason with his bath, though there was no repeat of their sexual encounter of the day before. Alfred had to be content with the opportunity to admire his new love's masculine beauty, to touch him in more mundane ways. He scrubbed the strong muscles of Jason's shoulders and back, trying not to think of how it had felt to be held by him, kissed by him. How it felt to take Jason's cock into his mouth. Alfred's shaft hardened with need.

When Jason was finished washing, he stood to let Alfred pour rinse water over him. Though not overly tall, Jason was long-limbed and well-proportioned. Alfred had grown accustomed to seeing men with scars covering their bodies, but Jason's skin was unmarred. His chest, arms and legs were covered with a mat of golden hair. He reminded Alfred of the stories of the Greek gods, for if ever there was a beautiful man, Jason Huxley was it.

Alfred handed him a towel, which Jason knotted around his slim hips. To Alfred's disappointment, he seemed preoccupied and unaware of Alfred's desire. With a sigh, Alfred picked up another towel to dry Jason's back and arms.

Alfred had laid out Jason's evening clothes earlier. "Will you be late, sir?"

"Perhaps," he replied. "I am escorting Lady Bothwick to the theater tonight."

Alfred's heart sank. *Lady Bothwick. His mistress.* "Yes, sir."

Alfred managed to contain his hurt as he helped Jason into his evening clothes. Snow- white ruffled shirt, black breeches and black coat. The severe style and stark colors should not have complimented him, but they did.

"Do not wait up for me," Jason said.

Alfred watched him as he walked out the door. The hollow feeling in the vicinity of his heart nearly overwhelmed him. He had no claim

FINDING JASON

on the man, but knew Jason Huxley had branded his soul, perhaps forever.

* * *

Jason handed Lady Bothwick into the carriage, then climbed in and closed the door. He settled back in the seat across from her and signaled the coachman to start.

“Did you enjoy the play?” he asked.

“Yes,” Roz said with a warm smile. “It has been far too long, Jason.”

“Yes, it has. I have missed you, Roz.”

“That is not all you missed,” she replied. “It is not like you to stay so long in the country. Is everything all right?”

Jason stretched his leg and debated how much to tell her. He had not been sure their friendship would survive the argument last spring, but she had been glad to see him again and readily agreed to accompany him to the theater. “I had much on my mind, and the city is no place for quiet contemplation.”

She laughed. “Indeed it is not. Are you ready to jump back into the social whirl now? Not that there is much of that in the autumn.”

“I suppose so.”

She sat forward and took his hand in hers. “What is bothering you, Jason?”

He squeezed her hand. “Nothing that need concern you, my dear. I apologize if I have not been good company this evening.”

She withdrew her hand and relaxed back against the squabs. “No apology necessary.”

“How have you been, Roz? Are you still happy with your William?”

She raised one delicate brow. “Yes. Why do you ask? Were you hoping to resume our affair?”

Jason hesitated. That was the question he’d been asking himself

FINDING JASON

ever since he'd invited her to the theater. Did he really want to make love to Roz, or was he just fighting his attraction for Alfred? In that instant he knew the answer. "If you do not mind, I think I would prefer that we be good friends."

Roz smiled. "I would like nothing better, my dear."

Jason dropped Roz at her door with a chaste peck on the cheek and climbed back into the carriage. All was as it should be. Roz was happy with her footman, and he had his Alfred.

* * *

Jason stared absently out of the window as the coach wound its way through Mayfair en route to his lodgings. As the coach turned the final corner, he caught a glimpse of a man walking toward him, headed away from the house. His steps were unsteady and he appeared to be the worse for drink. When he wove his way past a gas lamp, Jason realized it was Alfred.

When the carriage stopped, Jason got out and dismissed the coachman, then hurried after Alfred's disappearing figure. Where on earth could he be going at this hour and in that kind of condition? Jason thought about calling out to him, but something held him back. He had no wish to create a scene at this hour.

Jason became increasingly concerned as Alfred led him out of the fashionable part of London. He appeared to be headed for the area around Covent Garden. Did he not know there were pickpockets and worse lurking in the dark to prey on the unwary?

At last Alfred stopped in front of a tavern, a disreputable establishment if Jason had ever seen one. A weather-beaten sign proclaimed it The Hole in the Wall. Alfred hesitated for a moment, then entered. Jason waited a few minutes, then followed him inside.

From the entryway, he peered into the tap room. Pairs of men sat around small tables, some drinking, heads bent close, but Alfred was nowhere in sight. A small door led deeper into the building, so Jason

FINDING JASON

headed in that direction. A large man stepped in front of Jason and eyed him suspiciously.

“I’ve not seen you here before.”

Jason eyed the hulking fellow. “I was following that man who just came in.”

“Ye’re not from one of them moral improvement societies, are you?”

Jason chuckled. “Do I look like a Puritan?”

The man stepped aside. “No, I reckon you don’t.”

Jason went through the door, stooping to avoid hitting his head, and found himself in a small hallway containing a narrow set of stairs. He climbed them to the next floor and entered the room to his right, where his worst fears were confirmed. The Hole in the Wall was a molly-house.

The room contained four beds, three of which were occupied by two men in various stages of sexual activity. On one bed a young lad in uniform straddled an older man, who was happily playing with the younger man’s cock. In a second, two men writhed, bodies and lips pressed together. The third bed contained two fellows stroking each other’s erect shafts.

Jason was both excited and appalled. Excited by what they were doing, and appalled by their lack of discretion. Did they not know the penalty for buggery?

One of the men in the third bed, a large, red-headed fellow, looked up and saw Jason. “Ho, ye’re a pretty one. Want ter join us?”

“No, thank you. I am looking for someone.”

The man grinned, revealing a mouth with missing teeth. “More’s the pity. Try the chapel across the hall. He’s likely here for the wedding.”

Wedding? Jason shook his head as he turned and walked to the “chapel.” This was a large room filled with men, some dressed in

FINDING JASON

female clothing and with rouged cheeks. A mock wedding was in progress, uniting a slight groom with an Amazon of a bride dressed in a pale blue evening gown, dark chest hair visible above the low bodice.

Jason scanned the room, hoping he would not have to venture upstairs into what were, undoubtedly, private rooms where male whores plied their trade. To his relief he spotted Alfred slumped in a corner, facing a white-haired man in fashionable clothing. The man's back was to Jason, but he seemed familiar.

When Alfred grabbed the man and kissed him, jealous rage exploded in Jason's heart and mind. He clenched his fists to keep from charging across the room, grabbing the man by the shoulder and shoving his fist down the man's throat. By Jove, Alfred was his, and he'd not let any other man touch him. Not in anger and not in lust.

Jason elbowed his way through the wedding guests, ignoring their muttered curses, until he reached the corner. He tapped the shoulder of the white-haired man, who whirled about. The angry words died as Jason realized who the man was. The Honorable Sidney Luscombe turned a sickly shade of white when he recognized Jason.

"I never expected to see you in a place like this," Jason said.

"Nor I you," Luscombe replied.

"I have come for my servant," Jason said, turning to Alfred, who turned beet red.

"Mr. Hu—"

"Hush, you fool," Luscombe hissed. "No names."

So he was not unaware of the consequences of being found in this place.

Jason gave Alfred a stern look. "Wait for me outside."

Alfred ducked his head and stumbled from the room.

Jason turned to Luscombe. "I will see you tomorrow, sir."

Luscombe nodded, his expression resigned.

* * *

FINDING JASON

Luck was with Jason and he was able to hail a cab a short distance from the molly-house. Alfred was in no shape to walk the distance home. Jason gave his direction to the driver, then pushed Alfred into the cab where he sprawled on the seat.

He beamed a smile at Jason. "You came looking for me."

Jason sank into the opposite seat and let out a breath. "I saw you leaving as I returned home."

Alfred swayed slightly with the motion of the vehicle. His eyes seemed to have trouble focusing.

When they arrived at his lodging house, Jason paid the driver, then helped Alfred out of the cab and up the stairs. He half-led, half-dragged Alfred to the dressing room, where he collapsed on his cot.

Jason stood above him, arms folded over his chest. "What were you thinking?" Worry and jealousy made his voice sharper than he'd intended. "How did you know about that place?"

"Found it one night, when I was out walking."

"Are you mad? Do you not know how dangerous places like that are?"

Alfred eyed him sadly. "I know. But I been so bloody lonely..."

Jason's anger left him in a rush. "I know you have," he said softly. "It will be better, Alfred. I promise."

"If you say so, sir," Alfred muttered before falling into a deep slumber.

* * *

The next morning Jason walked to Sidney Luscombe's townhouse in Mayfair. It was imperative that they reach some kind of understanding about what had happened last night.

He'd left Alfred to sleep off his inebriation. That was another discussion he was not looking forward to. He owed Alfred an apology after making love to the man, then acting as if nothing had changed in their relationship. Truth was, he'd been frightened by the intensity of

FINDING JASON

his desire, and his fears had driven Alfred into the arms of a stranger.

He should hate Michael for doing this to him. He must have known, or at least hoped, that Jason would fall for Alfred. It was wrong, for more than one reason, yet nothing had ever felt so right.

When he knocked at Luscombe's door, it was answered by the butler. "Jason Huxley to see Mr. Luscombe."

"He is expecting you, sir. Follow me."

The butler led him down the hall to a well-appointed library where Luscombe sat in a wing chair facing an Adam fireplace. He stood, dismissed the butler and faced Jason, a wary look on his face.

"Well, Huxley, what will it take to ensure your silence?"

Jason stiffened. "If you think I have come here to blackmail you—"

"Easy, lad. Have a seat. Brandy?"

"No, thank you." Jason sat while Luscombe poured himself a drink and downed it in one gulp.

Thus fortified, Luscombe sat and faced Jason. "How did you come to be at The Hole in the Wall last night?"

"I returned home from the theater to see my man servant leaving home. You know what kind of state he was in. I was worried, so I followed him, but never expected..."

"To find yourself in a molly-house."

"Exactly. I have heard about such places, but never thought to see one."

Luscombe chuckled. "I must admit I was stunned to see you there, my boy."

"As I was you," Jason replied. "I do not understand, Luscombe. I thought you a happily married man."

Luscombe sighed. "I know how it must seem, but I do love my wife and children."

"Then why risk your life and reputation? Think of what that would mean for them, if you do not care for yourself."

FINDING JASON

"I do," Luscombe replied wearily. "But some drives cannot be denied."

Jason lapsed into silence. *How true that was.* He had tried and failed at that.

"Can you not find a way to be more discreet?" he enquired.

Luscombe spread his hands. "How?"

"Find someone and set him up, as you would a female mistress."

"Ah, but first I must find him. I do not suppose your man would be interested? He is an attractive fellow, and a damned fine kisser."

"He would not!" Jason replied, his tone icy. "Alfred has too much self-respect for that. He's a veteran, badly wounded. You should see the awful scar on his shoulder."

Luscombe raised a brow. "I cannot help but wonder how you have come to see that scar."

Heat rushed to Jason's face at the memory of returning home to find Alfred in the tub and what they had done that day.

"So that's the way of it," Luscombe said with a smile. "I hoped so."

Jason did not try to deny it. "It appears we must trust each other to keep silent."

Luscombe nodded. "I envy you. Your situation is ideal."

Jason frowned. "So it would seem. But I cannot help wondering if I am taking unfair advantage of him."

Luscombe smiled. "If it helps, he told me he was enamored of his employer."

"Did he, by Jove?"

"I'd hold onto him," Luscombe advised. "The two of you can be together as long as you like, even if you marry. Much easier than conducting an affair with someone of your own station, if such a person could be found."

"Yes, I see your point. Thank you, Luscombe."

Jason stood and shook the other man's hand before heading home.

FINDING JASON

He had to talk to Alfred, beg his forgiveness. He just hoped it was not too late.

* * *

Alfred woke to a pounding headache and a sick stomach. He lay on his cot, dreading the day. How could he face Jason after last night's debacle?

He staggered to his feet, took a much-needed piss, then splashed water on his face. His visage in the small mirror on the wall was haggard. His bloodshot eyes had dark circles under them and he needed a shave. When he reached for the razor, his hand shook so badly he changed his mind. As miserable as he felt, he was still not ready to contemplate suicide.

He'd made a complete fool of himself last night. Worse, Jason Huxley had been seen at a molly-house by another gentleman. He'd not want Alfred around after that. There was only one thing to do. *Resign.*

Alfred washed up and changed into clean clothes. He opened his trunk and began packing. His old uniform went on the bottom. He'd not be wearing it again, but he couldn't part with it either. On top of that he added the new clothes he'd acquired since arriving in London, most of them courtesy of Michael, who'd left Alfred his personal effects, along with a monetary bequest. He'd meant to invest the money, but now he'd use it to emigrate.

A tear trickled down one cheek and he rubbed it away roughly. 'Twas his own fault for being such a fool. If he had normal urges, he'd have been happy to work for a fine gentleman like Jason Huxley without wanting more than a man had a right to ask. There were plenty of women in London, enough to keep any regular fellow happy. But no, that wouldn't do for a bugger like him.

He heard the front door open and steeled himself to face Jason Huxley one last time.

FINDING JASON

* * *

Jason burst through the door of his lodgings and looked for Alfred. Jason found him in his small room. He skidded to a halt when he saw the half-filled trunk.

“Are you going somewhere?”

Alfred squared his shoulders. “Yes. I wish to tender my resignation.”

Jason ran a hand through his hair. “Do you want to leave, Alfred?”

“I think it best, sir. I put you in danger last night. Forgive me.”

Jason stepped closer. “No, Alfred, you put yourself in danger. You had no way of knowing I had followed you.”

“Why did you follow me, sir?”

“I was worried. You are not familiar with the perils of London. And you were in no state to be out. I felt responsible. I know I hurt you.”

Alfred shrugged, but did not deny it.

“I saw Luscombe this morning,” Jason said. “He will say nothing of what happened last night. He has too much to lose if his presence there became known.”

Alfred seemed to relax a little. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Luscombe asked about you. It appears you made an impression on him last night. He is looking for a young man to take under his protection. Since you are now looking for a new position—”

“What?” Alfred shouted, his face beet red with outrage. “I would never... Where does he live? I’ll give him a piece of my mind.”

Jason smiled. “That is not necessary. I’ve already given him a dressing down about it. But I still do not understand why you were drawn to that place.”

Alfred hesitated a moment. “All my life I’ve been in service. To my country. To Michael. And now to you. But every once in a while, I like to be the one in charge, if only in bed. In a place like the Hole In The Wall, we are all equals. There are no masters and no servants, just men.

FINDING JASON

If there is something I want, I have only to ask.”

“And you do not feel you can do so here.”

“No,” Alfred replied softly.

“Then we seem to have a problem. What must I say to make you stay?”

Jason reached out to caress Alfred’s stubbled jaw. He hadn’t shaved and his face was haggard, but he’d never looked so dear to Jason.

Alfred’s jaw clenched and he stepped back. “I don’t think that wise. You know my nature.”

“Yes, and now I know mine. Stay with me, Alfred. Stay and be my love.”

Alfred’s eyes grew wide. “Are you certain? What about Lady Bothwick?”

“We agreed last night to end our affair. She has found someone else, and so have I. You were not jealous, were you?” The idea pleased Jason more than he’d have thought.

Alfred’s face reddened and he ducked his head. “I was. Jealous and hurt.”

Jason touched Alfred’s chin, turning his face up. “You do care, do you not? It isn’t just about the sex?”

“No,” Alfred denied. “I think I am falling in love with you. I thought it was too soon, after Michael, but—”

“But it is what he wanted,” Jason finished for him.

“Is it what you want?” Alfred asked softly, hope in his eyes.

“Yes. I need you.”

Jason leaned forward to touch his lips to Alfred’s in a kiss that started out tender but quickly took on an intensity that stole his breath away. Then he was in Alfred’s arms, bodies pressed together.

When the kiss ended, Jason tore off his clothes as Alfred did the same. Jason reached for Alfred’s cock, but a hand stopped him. He looked into intense blue eyes.

FINDING JASON

“I want you inside me,” Alfred said.

Jason’s eyes widened. He’d never done it that way before, but he wanted to. His shaft hardened even more at the thought of being inside Alfred. “I do not wish to hurt you. Are you certain?”

“Yes.” The word was little more than a whisper. Alfred reached into his trunk and removed a bottle, pulled out the cork and rubbed oil on his hands, then Jason’s. When he reached for Jason’s cock and smoothed the fragrant oil on it, shivers raced through Jason’s body.

Alfred handed him the bottle, then knelt down on his hands and knees. The sight of that muscular arse had Jason groaning with need. He knelt behind Alfred and rubbed oil on his hands.

Tentatively, Jason ran his hands over the round, firm flesh of Alfred’s bum, moving progressively closer to his asshole. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes.”

Jason traced the crack between Alfred’s cheeks, teasing the sensitive flesh.

“Use your finger to stretch my arsehole,” Alfred ordered.

Jason did so, using first one finger, then two, before easing his cock into the tight hole. He paused to let Alfred adjust to his girth. Jason leaned forward and wrapped one arm around Alfred’s middle. He used his other hand to caress the other man’s chest and belly, then grasped Alfred’s hard shaft. Alfred groaned his encouragement and thrust his hips backward, pulling more of Jason’s cock into his tight hole.

Jason alternately teased and stroked Alfred’s rod until his breathing grew rapid and a bead of moisture appeared on the tip. Jason began to thrust, slowly at first, then increasing the pace. Alfred climaxed mere seconds before Jason did. He gave a shout of triumph as he emptied his seed into the other man’s body.

Alfred collapsed in a heap on the floor, Jason lying on top of him. When Jason’s breathing returned to normal, he moved to the side and

FINDING JASON

flopped onto his back. “That was incredible. The only problem was I couldn’t kiss you.”

Alfred rested his head on Jason’s shoulder. “Next time we’ll try it face to face.”

Jason stroked his back. “On the bed next time. This floor is devilish hard.”

Alfred chuckled. “So it is, but ’tis clean. I keep forgetting I work for a civilized gentleman now. It appears I’ve fallen into the lap of luxury.”

Jason kissed Alfred’s curls. “And you deserve it.”

“Will you be going out tonight, Jason?” Alfred asked.

Jason surveyed the naked man in his arms. “No, I think not. Everything I could possibly want is right here.”

LYNDI LAMONT

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* * *

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