

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



INDISCRETIONS

ELAYNE S. VENTON

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Indiscretions

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INDISCRETIONS

Elayne S. Vantor

Dedication

To Dad: For all the support you gave my inner muse throughout the years. I wish you were still here to share my accomplishments. I miss you.

Love,

E

A big thank you to my critique partners in "The Corner" for your encouragement, motivation, and sage advice.

Chapter One

London, 1802

Meet me in my library at midnight. R.B.

William Hall checked the watch fob hanging at his waist and frowned at the passing hour. "Damnation," he muttered to himself. "Why are you late? Dallying with your mistress again?" He crumpled the boldly scratched note in his hand and tossed it into the low flames flickering in the ornate marble fireplace.

Although he'd spent many a late night here playing cards with Viscount Trent, tonight was not a social call. Rumors of the smugglers' delivery had already reached Will's ears. The viscount had summoned Will not as one friend invites another, in which case the missive would've been signed *Trent*, but as Will's superior. Trent's alter ego, Captain Randolph Burgh, military officer turned Bow Street supervisor, had signed the terse note.

Duty, however, was not why Will wished to meet *him* in the privacy of his townhouse at this hour. He paced restlessly across the room from the long windows' drawn drapes to the filled bookcases on the opposite wall, passing the crackling fire without enjoying the warmth that dried his rain-dampened breeches. Will harbored a deep respect for his captain and enjoyed his friendship but given a choice, he would've preferred a much more intimate association with the man.

It would not happen tonight though. More than likely, never.

He yawned at the prospect of listening to a vast list of warnings concerning the smugglers along the River Thames. He'd rather spend the time in the library exploring Trent's body.

He'd start by skimming his hands over the muscular arms covered by Trent's billowy sleeves while he deliberated his next move. He imagined a haughty look in Trent's eye as he slowly unbuttoned Trent's vest, tugged his neckcloth free of its ornate knot and pulled the hem of the viscount's full white shirt from his breeches. With his gaze locked on Trent's stern expression, he'd slip his palms beneath the fine linen and glide his splayed fingers up over his hard belly to the crisp curls that covered Trent's chest.

The very manly lord would attempt to hide the surge of lust Will's wandering hands evoked. Trent might even voice his disapproval of such brash behavior but his accelerated pulse would tell another story. Then, just as Will's nimble fingers brushed over Trent's pebbled nipples, Trent's relaxed cock would shift, growing rigid within his pants, betraying his cool demeanor.

Will envisioned rubbing his throbbing erection over the bulge pushing against Trent's breeches. With a low growl, Trent would pull him into a fierce embrace, mashing hard cock against hard cock, demanding more.

Will snorted. He suspected Lord Trent, renowned ladies' man, would be horrified by his lustful daydreams.

The library doors slammed open, jarring him from his imaginary diversions with Lord Trent. His fantasy man strode in, filling the room with his presence, smelling of horseflesh, mud and brackish water, an earthy perfume that heightened Will's awareness of Trent's underlying masculine scent.

"I am certain you've heard the smugglers have circumvented Hastings and sailed up the Thames," Trent said in greeting. The filth on his normally impeccable buckskin breeches and informal cutaway coat attested to a long horseback ride. With the patch over his eye, his black hair damp and limp from the night mist and a pistol tucked into his waistband, he looked like a devilishly handsome highwayman. He headed straight for the fireplace, lifted the poker from its stand and wiped at the splattered mud on his Hessian boots.

Will's throat constricted. "Yes." Out of respect, he averted his gaze from the buttocks encased in tight-fitting breeches peeking between the tails of Trent's coat.

If they were lovers, would the viscount allow Will to sink his hard shaft between those firm cheeks? Probably not. No matter, he'd gladly bend over for Trent anytime. He moved behind a ladder-back reading chair and leaned both hands on the top rung, hoping the slight bend at his waist and the chair's slats hid the telltale crease at his crotch. "Rumor is they carry French liquor."

"Indeed. All of London watches the smugglers' activities with the delight of gossipy women," Trent said over his shoulder. "Secrecy has become a premium commodity for them. So being, their delivery place has changed."

"Sir Heighton's cellar again?"

"No, I'm afraid not." He straightened and faced Will, setting aside the poker he'd used on his boots. "Have you heard of Snake Cavern?"

Will blinked in shock. His favorite playground, Snake Cavern catered to men with unusual sensual tastes. Situated below one of London's infamous alehouses, its underground canal flowed into the River Thames, a perfect smugglers' lair.

"I see you know of it. I understand entry is by invitation only." Trent reached into his coat pocket and withdrew an unsealed letter. "We've been invited."

A legitimate invitation? Will doubted it. Even so, his heart thundered in his chest. Would Trent be forced to play a part? His neck heated at the thought of leading him through the crowd of half-naked, masked men into a semiprivate alcove for an evening of carnal pleasure.

"Fear not, William. I will keep the lusty men away from that virile young body of yours. One glare from this mangled eye of mine and they will leave you be. However, we may be forced to undertake *unconventional* measures in order to infiltrate the

smuggling activities.” Trent tilted his head, a small smile playing around his mouth. “Don’t worry, my man, no one is going to bugger you.”

Too bad. He was ready for it. He could almost feel Trent smoothing his hand up Will’s bent back before he pushed his cock into Will’s buttocks. *Mmmph!* He squeezed his butt muscles. His rod hardened into a stiff pike. Damn, he needed a good fuck. He turned away, skimming a hand over a row of books on the Roman Empire. “I do whatever is necessary to get the job done.”

“I’m counting on it.”

The odd lilt in Trent’s voice made Will turn back to him. Was it possible the captain knew his secret? He’d attempted to be circumspect but after two years working side by side, Trent must wonder why Will had few lady friends. And why he never bragged about bedding any of them as other friends were wont to do.

Trent dug through a drawer in his secretary, retrieved two black domino masks and held one out to Will. “This is a requirement for entry.”

It struck him odd that Trent kept two eye masks in his desk but, on second thought, the captain’s desk probably contained a treasure trove of unusual yet useful items. Will donned the half-mask, adjusting its center bump over his nose.

Trent turned his back, slipped off his eye patch and replaced it with a mask having only one eyehole cut out. Will swallowed an impatient remark. He didn’t give a damn about Trent’s imperfection but the proud viscount lamented over the scarred eye, damaged during his brief stint in the British army. Although Trent joked about “his pirate patch”, he atoned for what he considered poor judgment by practicing his sword-fighting skills daily. Sessions with the piratical Trent had become one of Will’s favorite pastimes, especially when they shed their shirts. Nothing enthralled him more than watching Trent’s muscles ripple when he swung his sword in deadly arcs, lustrous sweat beading on his skin and dripping down his sculpted torso.

Lud! Surrounded by the sights, sounds and smells of male carnality, how was he going to hide his obvious desire from Trent all night? He retrieved his greatcoat from a hook by the door and swirled the dark gray cape over his shoulders, safe from embarrassing himself for the moment. “Let’s go.”

Outside, rain drizzled from the black sky. Will followed Trent into the rented coach, settling on the opposite, worn velvet seat. The interior smelled of the horsehair stuffed in the seats and the stench of its previous occupants. Vile but better than walking.

The coach lurched forward with a jingle of the harnesses. Mud thrown from the horses’ hooves slapped the undercarriage with each turn of the coach wheels. It was going to be a rough ride.

When they passed a knot of mounted soldiers congregating at the crossroad, Trent untied the rolled-up window covers. The leather shades flapped down over the open windows in the carriage doors, creating an intimate interior space lit solely by a small hanging lantern. If Will didn’t know better, he’d think Trent purposely enveloped them in a snug cocoon, hiding from prying eyes.

Oh, the things he could do in a coach! Aroused by his wayward thoughts, Will discreetly bunched his greatcoat over his erection.

Trent tilted his head back at the soldiers. "The drawn shade is a signal for the soldiers to keep an eye out for our return. If we find the smugglers, we will send the troops to cut off their escape. If we do not, well, it will be an interesting night."

Lord, save him from jumping Trent right now!

The coach rocked through a rut in the muddy road and his knee bumped Trent's. The brief contact tightened every muscle in his body.

Dispel the lewd thoughts and concentrate on the task!

As they neared the tavern entrance, Trent leaned across the seat and gripped his thigh. "Relax. Your face is as pinched as a censorious Society hostess."

Will laughed but the heat of Trent's hand increased his acute sensual awareness of the man. His friend socially outranked him, was eight years his senior and scarred but he didn't care. At their first meeting, Trent's fearsome visage, at odds with his elegant demeanor, the premature gray at his temples, his brawny frame and his tough stance on crime blended into a potent package that charged Will's libido. The thrill he experienced while in Trent's presence had never faded.

Tonight, Trent's closeness piqued his excitement more than ever. Maybe it was their destination. Or the confinement in the coach. Or Trent's unwavering gaze.

The coach slowed. Peeking beneath the window covering, Will spotted candlelight flickering in the windows of the pub that secreted the illicit club. Before the coach rolled to a complete stop, he gripped the door handle with a sweaty hand, jerked the door open and leapt out into the mud. He never thought he'd accompany Trent to Snake Cavern and the fact that he did so for Bow Street business frustrated him beyond measure.

Trent stepped down when the carriage halted a few feet away. He walked back to join him, circumventing the rain-filled ruts. His hand on Will's coat sleeve caused the muscles in his arm to jump. "You seem out of sorts, William. Is there a problem?"

"No. I'm fine." He looked Trent in the eye. "Are *you* going to be able to pull off this ruse?"

"Of course. I've seen and done it all."

Will didn't doubt that for a minute and wondered at its implication. Had Trent visited Snake Cavern or another like place during an investigation? What had he done to accomplish his mission?

Will gnashed his teeth. It was bad enough thinking of Trent having sex with a woman. Picturing Trent with another man burned a hole in his gut. Then again, it proved difficult envisioning the formidable viscount embracing another man. Except him, of course.

As soon as they presented their invitation and descended into the cellar, Trent leaned over and whispered, "Follow my lead."

Will choked back a snort.

At the bottom of the stairs, a very proper butler took their capes, coats, waistcoats and shirts. Watch fobs, rings, anything that could identify one were confiscated, boxed, numbered and stored in a safe.

In typical fashion, Will's pulse raced when Trent revealed his contoured torso and muscular arms. Swordplay and chasing after criminals toned Trent's body well. He especially liked the smattering of dark hair that spanned Trent's chest, tapering down his belly. The patch of curls in the middle of his chest seemed adolescent in comparison, even though he'd passed puberty over ten years ago.

Trent turned to him, glancing over his bare chest and smiled. Thankfully, the dim light hid Will's flustered reaction.

The two men walked through the torch-lit, rock-hewn passageway side by side. Water dripped down the cavern walls, chilling the air, yet heat suffused Will's body. They turned a tight corner and his shoulder smacked into the sinuous mass of Trent's upper arm. Without breaking his stride, Trent shoved back playfully. Playfully? No, he likely misread him. His captain ambled onward, the exposed lower half of his face expressing no emotion at all.

A handholding male couple squeezed ahead of them. Trent slowed and stared at their retreating backs. Cocking his head, he hooked his hand around Will's biceps. "Best look the part."

As they moved deeper into the labyrinth of rock, Will contemplated shaking off Trent's sham grip at the same time he considered slamming Trent against the wall and kissing him senseless. He did neither.

Trent made no other remark until they reached The Ballroom, an open expanse crowded with groping men. "Hmm. No inhibitions here." His hand skimmed down and gripped Will's forearm. He tilted his head toward Will and spoke softly. "Let's work our way toward the passageway on the far side."

Scanning the room, Will was hard-pressed to put one foot in front of the other. Had he known Snake Cavern was their destination, he would've relieved his lust before he met Trent tonight. Now all the husky whispers reverberating off the rock walls shot straight to his loins. The sea of locked lips and grinding pelvises didn't help matters either. He needed to rut!

"Stop ogling," Trent snapped quietly. He dragged Will through the crowd in his wake, keeping to the edge of the room as much as possible. What an inexperienced buck Trent must think he was!

"Jesus, it's Bromley."

Before Will could ask who Bromley was, Trent flattened him against the cavern wall, thigh to thigh, his mouth scant centimeters from his neck while the stranger walked past. *Fuck!* Too late to fight down his raging erection.

"This one-eyed mask makes me easily recognizable," Trent whispered, his moist breath teasing Will's ear.

Involuntarily, Will's cock twitched hard against his breech flap. Had Trent noticed? The tense silence sucked the breath from his lungs.

Oh, God.

Trent dropped his hands to his sides and eased away, not enough to cool the body heat shimmering between them but so their bodies no longer touched. "Stop acting so edgy."

"We don't fit in here."

A pair of lovers stumbled by too intent on kissing each other to watch where they were going.

In the smoky torchlight, Trent's eye danced with merriment. "Is that so? Why not?"

Will scowled at him. "What do you mean, why not?" What had gotten into Trent?

A grin played at Trent's lips. "I've always wanted to explore the underground activities here. Haven't you?"

"As a lawman," Will whispered cautiously.

Trent's crooked smile grew, taunting him. "Oh, I don't know."

Will's mouth moved but no words came forth. Trent must be joking. The captain had insinuated he'd tasted this lifestyle before but Will assumed he'd meant in the course of solving a crime. Now he wasn't sure. "You're a ladies' man."

"Yes, well. I have spent many a night beneath a lady's skirts. It is an enjoyable diversion, don't you think?"

"I suppose."

Trent chuckled. "You don't sound convinced. Tell me, my friend, have you ever bedded a woman?"

Will's neck flamed. "Yes."

"Not as inspiring as you expected, eh?" His teasing smile turned compassionate. "No need to be embarrassed, my man. I understand completely."

Did he? Will narrowed his eyes at him. Where was Trent going with this conversation?

"Your reactions here prove what I've suspected for a long time."

Shit.

"Relax, William. Be yourself so we can cast off this awkwardness and complete this assignment efficiently."

Now that sounded like his pragmatic boss. Still, unease bit into his shoulders. What did Trent think of him now that he knew of Will's proclivity for males? Did he have any idea how much Will yearned to embrace *him*?

"Oh, you splendid man," a voice declared from within a nearby alcove. "Yes, suck it. Yeeessss."

Will's pulse leapt in response. The ensuing long, pleasurable groans roused his imagination. He slid a glance at Trent, checking for his reaction and their gazes collided.

Will looked away first, afraid his friend would be uncomfortable with the yearning in his eyes.

"Come on." Trent pivoted on his boot heel and turned down a darkened passageway. "I believe this is the correct route." Torches burned outside unoccupied alcoves. From within dark, hand-carved recesses stemmed the slap of flesh against flesh and hearty groans. Only a few open spots remained. Trent threw an arm around his shoulder and spoke barely above a murmur. "My informant suggested the path lay along a row of darkened alcoves."

"I think you misunderstood." Privacy was at a premium here, so Will waved his captain to a shallow slot at the end of the walkway where a flame still burned. Trent slipped sideways into the tight space first. They stood face-to-face, their backs settled against opposite walls, standing a hairsbreadth away. The smell of Trent's natural musk spiked his lust. He held his breath as Trent reached out and doused the flame at the entrance, signifying the alcove's occupancy.

The sudden darkness coupled with Trent's nearness tripped his heartbeat. If the man meant to test him, he'd chosen his torture well. Will drew in a deep breath for composure. "There are several passageways with privacy alcoves," he said quickly. "Only one is consistently dark—a narrow tunnel, flooded in 1796, almost impassable now. It's used only when the crowd is so dense there is nowhere else to go. It leads to an underground inlet."

A few seconds of silence passed before Trent spoke. "So you know Snake Cavern better than I thought. It would've been helpful if you'd admitted it to me sooner."

"I didn't want my depravity wedged between our friendship."

His gaze hard, Trent slapped a hand on the rough wall beside Will's head.

Will's eyes had adjusted to the minimal light flickering in the tunnel, allowing him to see the tendons in the arm stretched out by his face. Jesus, even the sinuous curves of Trent's arm made him sweat. He was in so much trouble.

"Do you think of yourself in such low terms? I do not." The soft words had bite. "If I had my way—" He pressed his lips together and breathed deeply. "Do you fear I will release you from service based on your sexual persuasion? Think, man!" He leaned close and spoke in a hushed voice. "You are one of my best field agents."

Trent's easy acceptance lifted a great weight from Will's shoulders. "So our friendship remains intact?"

"Is that all you want?" Trent shifted, just slightly, until hip contacted hip. He dropped his hand from the wall and squeezed Will's shoulder.

Was he serious?

"I've seen you watching me, William. I've waited for you to make an overture. I'm tired of waiting." Trent's heavy cock slid over Will's pelvis with the finesse of a well-seasoned lover.

Bloody hell! It was all he could do not to drop to his knees in subjugation.

Shock robbed him of the ability to speak or move. Trent's actions were wholly unexpected and too good to be true. Dare he succumb to his baser instincts? What if the viscount's advances turned out to be a terrible prank?

"Deuce it, man! Say something. Do you find me appealing or not?" Trent didn't sound like the self-assured man Will thought he knew so well.

"I find you appealing." His voice cracked like a youth's, forcing him to clear his throat. "Very much so."

Trent released a pent-up breath. "I've wanted to touch you for so long. May I?" At Will's murmured assent, Trent ran his fingers through Will's hair, his deep voice as soft as his caress. His kneading fingers jacked Will's cock into a stiff pole. "You have glorious hair, William. Thick and wavy. The color of sun-streaked honey. It's one of the many things I find attractive about you."

The compliment stroked Will's ego and fueled the fire down below. Yet, he was still not convinced of Trent's sincerity. If the debonair viscount desired Will so much, why did he retain a mistress? Anna Shaw wasn't a casual love affair. Trent had claimed he cherished her.

Prodded by the need to understand, he blurted out his greatest concern. "What about Anna?"

Trent's gaze slipped away for a moment and he inhaled a deep breath. Finally, he turned back and looked Will in the eye. "Anna is sweet and kind and unbelievably compliant in bed. And yet, I would set her aside if you... Well, perhaps that is too much to suggest too soon but I am a blunt man who is eager to bed you."

Will swallowed hard. "You're serious?"

"Very serious, my friend."

How much time had they wasted privately fighting their attraction? Stupid! He wanted Trent to fuck him right here, right now. "Prove it. Kiss me." Many men didn't mind another man sucking his tool but the prospect of an intimate kiss on the mouth sent them running.

"That's the least I wish you to ask of me, William."

The implication of Trent's words set Will on fire. Then all thought fled as Trent slipped his tongue into Will's mouth, sliding it around the lush interior and then thrusting deep while his fingers flexed on Will's biceps.

Will slapped his hands on Trent's backside, returning his kiss with all the pent-up desire he'd been harboring. Their bare chests rubbed together sensually, nipples sliding one over the other. Will couldn't stop the moan that rumbled up from his chest.

Twisting his mouth for deeper penetration, he stroked Trent's tongue like he wanted to stroke his cock, licking and sucking until Trent groaned under the onslaught.

Minutes later, Will broke away, panting. "Trent," he exclaimed softly. "I desperately want to suck you off."

Trent smiled, his breathing uneven. "And I want to plow your ass. Later. First, we have a job to complete."

Fuck!

Chapter Two

Turning down William's offer was the hardest thing Trent had ever done. He abhorred the delay in exploring William's body but it couldn't be helped. If they missed the smugglers tonight, someone other than the King of England would be making a profit from the stolen goods and King George would not be happy with Bow Street. Now that he'd succeeded in drawing William out of his shell, Trent's personal needs must wait.

"You're a fucking tease," William rasped sharply.

Leaning out of William's embrace, he kept a firm hand on the compact curve between William's shoulder and neck. "You asked for a kiss. What did you expect? A chaste brush of my lips?"

"I didn't expect you to forge my rod into an iron spike and then shelve me."

His heartbeat tripped. "I apologize. It is only for a brief time." He stroked his thumb over the rapid pulse in William's neck. "I want to be with you but the smugglers must take precedence. We can explore each other afterward."

Brushing a hand through his wild mop of hair, William nodded. The simple gesture drew Trent's eye to the sinewy curves of William's arm and shoulder. Oh, how he wanted to taste his skin's texture, take a close whiff of his musky scent, rub his palms down William's back to his firm ass. *Soon. Very soon.*

A few hours' postponement wouldn't kill him—he hoped. And then he'd see to William's bodily surrender.

A surge of excitement made him grin. He'd achieved more in the last hour than in weeks of subtle hints. He'd tried leaning closer during private discussions, admiring the fit of William's clothes, wrapping a friendly arm around his shoulder whenever he deemed the situation the least bit appropriate and inviting him to his home more frequently. The man had acted oblivious.

Yes, a few more hours and he'd claim William as his own.

"Onward." His hushed voice rang with authority. "The loot is being hidden in an annex past a place called The Gates of Hell. How do we reach it?"

William stiffened. A breath later, he drew himself up. "I'll lead the way."

"William."

Since he'd already slipped out of the alcove, William turned around and braced his hands on either side of the entry, blocking Trent inside. "Yes?"

"This isn't the right place for our first assignation..."

William nodded, breathing a shallow sigh. "Let's do what we came here to do and get out."

"The sooner, the better," he mumbled. He thought he saw a small smile lift William's lips before his friend turned back to the dark tunnel.

They retraced their steps to the main corridor and then forged deeper into the cavern. The short hairs on the back of Trent's neck rose with the distant crack of a whip followed by a muffled howl.

"The passageway to The Gates of Hell is off to the left." William tipped a finger toward an approaching cutoff.

As they drew closer, grunts of agony lurched toward them. Soft commands and desperate whispers hissed into the air. The acrid smell of fear overpowered the cloying odor of sweat. Cries rolled through the rocky tunnels, a mixture of pain and pleasure.

The stiff set of William's shoulders drew his curiosity. "Have you experienced The Gates of Hell, William?"

His friend continued walking as if he hadn't heard. William's past was none of his concern, he supposed. Still, he wanted to know everything about him, particularly about the life he'd kept so carefully hidden from Trent.

A softly spoken "Yes" filtered back to Trent. "A long time ago."

The torment in William's tone twisted his gut. What had he been forced to bear? "Behaving in a brutal manner is repulsive." Trent set his hand on his friend's shoulder, slowing him down. "I have the utmost respect and honor for you. I would never harm you, William. I sincerely hope you harbor the same esteem for me."

William stopped dead. Trent locked his heels in place right behind him. When William turned around to face him, Trent's heart clenched at the searing emotion in his friend's gaze.

"I think we both harbor a strong resentment toward those who take advantage of the naïve." He stared at him steadily. "You are a fine example of manhood and I do my best to emulate you. I pray I do not disappoint you, Trent. Professionally or—personally."

Trent couldn't help himself. He yanked William into a bear hug. Then clutching the soft waves hanging at the nape of William's neck, he pulled his friend's head backward so he could see him eye to eye. Wonderment filled William's gaze. Trent's heart expanded and he kissed him full on the mouth. He loved the taste of him, delighted in the feel of his solid body braced against his own, enjoyed the way William's fists dug into his back. His cock surged against his breeches.

Deuce it! He had to control himself. He broke off the kiss but continued to hold William close. "When we are finished here, would you honor me with your presence in my bedroom?"

William squeezed Trent hard. "I'd like nothing more."

"Then let's get this done."

William filled his lungs with air and slowly exhaled. "This way."

Thankfully, the terrifying sounds and stench of The Gates of Hell diminished behind them. They picked their way through the rubble of the abandoned alcove passage until the sounds of rolling barrels, the grunts of hardworking men and sloshing water announced they'd reached the right place.

A foul-smelling, burly man shouldering a blunderbuss stopped them far from the glow of torchlight at the end of the tunnel. "No merrymaking down 'ere, gents."

"In for a penny, in for a pound," Trent said, praying his agent at the dock had given him the right password.

The guard eyed him suspiciously. "Stand apart from each other, yer hands high." When Trent stepped aside from William, the guard pounded the butt of his old gun on the rock floor and two ragged men loped toward them.

The one with a black bandana tied over his head and a scraggly beard hanging down to his chest patted his dirty hands down Trent's breeches, searching for hidden weapons. He dug his fingers inside the cuffs of Trent's high boots where a dagger usually hung on a leather loop and found nothing. Standing straight, the top of his head no higher than Trent's chest, the smuggler reached up and lifted Trent's mask. He wrinkled his nose at the scar he saw there. Trent narrowed his good eye at him. With a grunt, the smuggler flipped down the patch and stepped back.

When Trent looked over at William, a lean smuggler with inked designs covering his arms and legs was wiggling William's raised boot heel, causing his friend to wobble. Before Trent reached out to lend support, William found his balance. He glared down at the sailor, a muscle ticcing in his jaw.

The guard dropped William's foot. His hands squeezed the soft boot leather and continued squeezing from William's knee up to the top of his thigh and then repeated the process on the other leg. "Spread 'em wider," he growled.

"You searched enough the first go-round. Go find your thrills elsewhere."

The man with the blunderbuss stepped forward and pressed the round muzzle to William's chest. "Do as 'e says."

With a heavy sigh, William spread his legs. Trent gritted his teeth as the man's bony fingers fondled William's privates through his breeches.

"Ye got a lot of eggs 'n sausage in there." The smuggler smirked. "Hafta make sure ye ain't hidin' a pistol in yer flap too." He slapped William on the back at the same time he drew his hand up William's butt crack, stuffing the seat of his pants between his cheeks. "Sweet ass," he huffed.

"You've done your job," Trent snarled, pushing the man away from William. "Now get out of our way."

The blunderbuss swung his way but Trent ignored the threat. He stepped beside William and nudged him forward with a bump of his shoulder. After a discreet tug at

the seat of his pants, William ambled down the roughly hewn path toward the sound of the surf.

Hanging back, his fist clenched at his side, Trent resisted the urge to ram the skinny smuggler's teeth down his throat. Instead, he clutched the man's frail wrist in a crushing grip. "Touch him again—ever—and you'll be fish food," he hissed. A menacing glare accompanied his proclamation.

The cocky gleam in the fellow's eyes died when Trent twisted his hold and the thin bones in the man's wrist snapped. At the man's muffled cry, his friend with the black kerchief tied around his head pulled a blade on Trent. Undaunted, Trent stomped on his bare toes and knocked the knife from his slackened grip. "Fool," he mumbled.

In his peripheral vision, he saw William snatch up the weapon as it skittered over the rocky trail. He hadn't even noticed his friend's turnabout. "Don't test my aim," William said to the guard with the gun, resting the blade's hilt on his shoulder, ready to throw.

In the long stretch of silence, Trent watched the smugglers for telltale twitches forewarning an attack.

"Go on," the armed guard barked. "All of you. The Steward is short-handed tonight."

The Steward? The reference piqued Trent's curiosity. Was that a nickname or a true vocation? Bow Street hadn't been able to determine who orchestrated the seizure of these stolen goods. So many smugglers and wreckers swarmed the English coast, it was impossible to monitor them all, especially without the help of the Royal Navy whose ships concentrated on Napoleon's defeat rather than waging war on those who bypassed taxes on imported goods through smuggling. He mentally filed the name reference for later deliberation.

The two smugglers elbowed past him and hurried back to work. The faster they moved the shipment, the faster they got paid.

When Trent joined the busy smugglers, he expected more resistance to their presence. William had a knack for blending in that he envied but even in his oldest breeches, Trent stood out among the ragtag crew. His deportment screamed aristocracy no matter how much he slumped or appeared dirty. Surprisingly though, few of the men scurrying about paid any mind to him or William.

"Be needin' help?" William asked in a gruff dockside voice.

"Get to the boat and grab a tub, mates," a grubby sailor told them. "Ten shillings a night. And there be plenty o' work."

Trent and William wasted no time unloading the casks of brandy from the rowboats hauled up on the rocky shore inside the cavern's mouth. They furtively took inventory, occasionally comparing counts as the empty boats pushed off the beach and returned with more casks. Trent searched for markings on the wooden barrels which might indicate where the booty came from or where it was going, without success.

Although there didn't seem to be a leader in evidence, one hefty older man kept a watchful eye on the proceedings as he helped load casks on a small wagon hitched to a work pony. He wore fine dark breeches, silk stockings, buckled shoes but nothing to hide his overblown belly and hairy chest. The tricorne hat seated on his straggly white hair kept his face in shadow. Whenever Trent tried to work his way closer, someone near the boats barked at him to stay with the boats.

Whoever he was, Trent didn't like the way his head kept turning to watch William. He wasn't sure if it was mistrust or attraction that drew the man's gaze but either way spelled trouble.

The flintlock pistol tucked into the waistband of the mysterious man's breeches caught Trent's attention. Gold filigree and ivory capped the butt of the gun. Surely, it was a custom piece. French by the look of it. Anna would probably know its origin on sight. Had the brigand stolen it, or ordered it made for himself?

A single crewman rowed the last full boat ashore but this time, the cargo consisted of several long crates. Instead of unloading it, the sailor in the boat pried the lids off.

"Lace for your Mollys," he announced in a scratchy voice, unrolling a yard from the bolt. The local workers who had wives and mistresses at home moved in to take a closer look. "Gloves and undergarments." The sailor tossed out a bone corset, which a lad standing near the bow caught without blinking. "Take yer pick. The cap'n is feeling generous tonight."

Trent glanced around. Who was the captain? His gaze settled on the man who lingered near the wagon, far from the crowd. For a brief moment, their gazes clashed. Trent feared the man recognized him. Did he know the stranger as well? Unfortunately, the shadows hid the details of the man's face. As the smuggler turned away though, torchlight glowed in the sweat across his lower back, illuminating a dark, irregular birthmark. Considering the location, it wasn't a mark he'd be able to identify in the normal course of a day but it was better than nothing.

William pressed his shoulder into Trent's biceps, following his gaze. "Something interesting about the pony cart?"

The man had disappeared into the dark recesses of the cavern.

"Just wondering where the path leads."

"To the cemetery at Fall's Church."

"Interesting." He turned and looked at William. "We're done here. Let's go."

The crooked smile that lit William's face shot bolts of desire to his groin.

As soon they collected their pay, they hurried past The Gates of Hell, walked over and around the fornicating couples in The Ballroom, gathered their belongings at the cavern entrance and hailed a hackney to take them home.

This time, Trent sat beside William. The instant the coach lurched forward, he turned to his handsome friend. "Well done. The information we gathered tonight is invaluable."

William pulled off his half-mask and stared at him, hunger swirling in the depths of his eyes.

Perdition! How could he resist?

The kiss was not gentle. When it came to William, Trent wanted to dive into his soul, merge his being into one. He pressed William into the corner where the seat met the side of the coach, seeking a deeper connection.

He imagined tackling William to the ground in a gentleman's wrestling match, skirmishing for a secure hold, tumbling about for supremacy, grunting and growling in a coarse display of manhood. Clothes would shred beneath grasping fists until no cover remained and their slick, straining muscles slid against each other. Then, both panting with exertion and lust, he'd pin William down, chest to chest, groin to groin. With a grin of triumph, he'd lower his head, press his lips to William's mouth and watch hunger flash in his friend's vibrant green eyes. The final victory would come when Trent demanded his prize and William raised his legs in surrender, exposing his tight hole for Trent's penetration.

His cock throbbed thinking about it.

In reality, the scenario had too much room for deviation. What if William pinned him? Jesus. He wasn't ready for the consequences.

His hands fisted in Trent's coat, dueling with his tongue, William slouched across the seat cushion, his legs spread to accommodate Trent's grinding pelvis. Oh, yes! Trent couldn't wait to fuck this man. His hands dug beneath William's waistcoat, searching for his nipples. In his vigorous exploration, a button popped free.

Trent pulled back. "Sorry," he mumbled, ever attentive of one's personal attire. He searched blindly for the wayward button.

"Jesus, Trent, who cares?" William clasped Trent's jaw in both hands and pulled his face down to resume the kiss.

A glow of satisfaction warmed Trent's soul. They were opposites in many ways, which drew them together more often than not. He liked William's simplistic view of the world. Good and evil. One preferred women or men. Trent entertained a broader view. When his friend had time to think upon it, William might not approve of Trent's fondness for both genders.

But right now, the hard body beneath him, the fierce kiss and William's passionate response invigorated his heartbeat. No one else had ever consumed his thoughts so greatly. Or aroused him to this fever pitch. Botheration! He was going to spot his breeches.

A shout sounded nearby. Both men jerked upright.

"The crossroad," Trent exclaimed, setting his clothing right. He lifted the curtain and saw a group of soldiers blocking the road.

"Stand down! There are navy deserters on the run," a soldier announced. "Your coach will be searched."

Trent jumped out of the carriage, grumbling about delays. William stepped down behind him. "There are no deserters here, sir," Trent said in his haughtiest tone. "However, I witnessed an unsavory gang at the cemetery of Fall's Church. I believe they came from a tavern on the waterfront."

Most of the mounted soldiers galloped away. To anyone watching it would appear they were chasing down a gentleman's lead. In reality, the troops eagerly set off to apprehend the fleeing smugglers and confiscate their booty. The few soldiers left behind put up a good show of harassment for the coach driver, to prevent Trent and William from being suspects in the orchestrated capture of the Snake Cavern smugglers.

Climbing back into the hired coach, Trent's heartbeat thumped in his chest. Tonight's work was done. Safely. Tidily. He sat down heavily on the padded seat. When his gaze met William's across the coach, they both began to smile.

Chapter Three

Will should've been exhausted. Emotionally drained. He wasn't. Stirring music hummed in his brain. He couldn't stop smiling. Trent wanted him. *Him*.

His happiness bulged at his seams. Literally.

Couldn't this old coach turn its creaking wheels any faster? He no longer thought about servicing Trent in a rocking coach. His courteous friend had offered his bed.

Lud! He was about to burst!

He still couldn't believe his fondest wish had come true.

"Have you ever buggered a man?" Will asked into the charged silence.

Trent lifted one brow. "Straight to the point, eh?" With pursed lips, he flicked at a spot of dried mud on his greatcoat.

Will understood Trent's hesitation. Baring his soul risked dire consequences. Scandalous gossip could ruin his career, destroy his reputation as an honest, trustworthy lawman. He didn't think Trent trusted many men but if he wanted to forge a relationship with Will, he had to trust him.

"I began during my university days." Trent looked up and chuckled at Will's raised brows. "Finding a willing partner among the males in the dormitory proved much easier than locating a female in town interested in a romp with an impoverished young nobleman. Once I graduated, I pursued every female in London, let me assure you." He laughed and shook his head. "Then one night, the fellows met up for a reunion. We'd matured. Some had married. We drank too much and before we knew it, we were engaged in a group orgy the likes of which I'd never imagined."

Gut-wrenching jealousy spiked deep into Will's loins. The past didn't matter, yet...he felt left out.

Trent stared out into the night. Moonlight cut across the rugged planes of his face, highlighting his facial stubble. He swallowed hard before his gaze cut back to Will. "Truth be told, for years I suppressed the feelings that reunion evoked but the memory of all those cock-sucking men haunted me. I satisfied my urges with faceless encounters at masquerade balls or, on a rare occasion, in a dark alley. It wasn't until," he rubbed his jaw, "until you joined Bow Street that desire flared anew."

He seemed embarrassed by his admission.

This conversation wasn't helping Will's rock-hard erection. "If you wanted me, why did you take a mistress?" There. That would cool his ardor.

"I'd heard about Tom Watford and knew you were out of my reach."

Will grimaced at the memory of his last lover, a giant of a man who propositioned him in a wharf-side tavern during one of Will's lesser moments of clarity. While they were lovers, Tom would've killed anyone who approached Will and killed Will if he'd tried to leave him.

He regarded Trent with narrowed eyes. "Did you have something to do with Watford's death?"

"No but I can't say I'm sorry they found him floating in the river. I did not like the bruises he left on you."

Will had told his captain he'd earned the brutal marks during a series of dock raids. Interesting that Trent had seen through his lies. "So Anna..."

Trent hesitated, uncertainty clouding his eyes.

"She was your consolation prize," Will suggested.

Trent narrowed his eye. "A rather curt way of putting it but yes. Watford had dragged you off on one of your late-night trysts. Restless, I attended a soiree where I met Anna. She's a charming woman. Full of surprises. She possesses an extraordinary knowledge in antique weapons which I find fascinating." He looked away briefly. "Over time, she and I became very close. Still lives at home with her elderly father, you know. The title *Mistress* doesn't suit her. She asks nothing of me but my affection. Of course, her father has no idea she has taken a lover."

Will took a sudden interest in his gloves' fine leather. He didn't want to think about Trent and Anna in bed.

"She's a bit low on the social ladder for me but I'd offer for her if it wasn't for you."

Will glanced up at that. It was the second time Trent had inferred Will meant more to him than Anna.

Trent looked hard into Will's eyes. "If you find you are not interested in me after all, I *will* offer for Anna."

Eager to make his feelings clear, Will reached for Trent's gloved hand, sandwiching it lightly between his palms. "I've wanted you since the day I met you. I never thought that you'd want me, so I tried to be what you expected of me. A good Bow Street Runner. A friend."

Trent smiled. "You have excelled at both. But there is something more between us. There has been from the beginning." He gripped Will's hand hard and jerked him forward for a brief kiss. "We are almost home."

Will's heart jumped into his throat.

He could hear his blood pumping in his ears when Trent pushed open the hackney door, jumped down and waited for Will to alight. Sweat dampened his palms as they walked through the front door. The house lay quiet in the middle of the night.

"I told the servants not to wait up for me," Trent said in a hushed tone.

They snuck up the stairs from the main floor to the first floor like two mischievous boys coming in past curfew. In the salon at the back of the townhouse, Will watched Trent unbutton his tailcoat by firelight, both too inflamed to bother lighting an oil lamp.

After shrugging out of the coat sleeves, Trent regarded the muddy smears on the fabric with disdain before he dropped it to the hardwood floor. The waistcoat beneath quickly followed. Off came his sweat-stained neckcloth. The long length of dusty linen swished past Trent's neck and draped over his broad hands before he dropped it onto his pile of clothes.

Eyeing the cloth, naughty ideas rambled through Will's brain. Perhaps they could find an interesting use for the neckcloth later. "Would you care for a bath? I'm not above heating water."

Trent's head shot up. "I will not treat you like a servant in my home."

"I could use a bit of the sponge myself," Will admitted. He reeked.

"Fine, then. I have a hip tub in my dressing room but a large copper pot of hot water would serve us both at once, no? My manservant keeps one for my morning ablutions. I will search out the pot and stoke the fire. You draw the water. The well bucket is outside the back door." Trent pulled off his shirt and subtly flexed his muscles.

Dear God. Trent knew exactly how to arouse him. Portraying indifference, Will walked out, pretending not to notice the hard contours of Trent's body. Outside, he gulped in the cool night air. Never had an assignation been so important to him. His new lover was not only a friend but also his captain. A lot was at stake.

When he returned to the salon carrying a large bucket of water, Trent was bent down on one knee, blowing on the glowing embers, wearing nothing but his eye patch. Will nearly dropped his heavy load. Broad shoulders tapered to a firm waist. Buttocks curved invitingly. Heavy thighs bracketed a semi-erect cock nestled in thick black curls. His calves were fashionably muscled and his feet long and thin. Viscount Trent surpassed every fantasy Will evoked of a perfectly formed lover.

Without a word, Will poured the cold water into the hot kettle. Steam swathed his face. "One more bucket should do," he said without looking at Trent.

"Hurry then."

He slid a sidelong glance at Trent's exquisite body. Trent looked up, his face bracketed in firelight and smiled devilishly. An answering grin lit Will's face. Although he wanted to run outside like an undisciplined boy, he strode out of the room at a dignified pace. Then he ran, bucket in hand.

He came back and found Trent sprawled on the settee, his arms draped over the back, his thighs spread in invitation, a large sea sponge dangling from his fingertips. His cock, so long it curved near the tip, stood straight up.

Bloody hell. Will nearly came in his breeches.

With immense control, he dumped the bucket of water into the heating pot, ignoring Trent. Setting the empty bucket down, he rested his back against the hearth and crossed his arms.

"Very nice, Trent." His voice was low and gravelly. Trent's rod twitched at the sound.

"Take your clothes off."

"The water isn't hot yet."

Trent narrowed his one good eye. "Take them off."

With a wicked grin, Will slowly complied, removing his shoes first. He unfastened his coat and waistcoat, watching how the release of each button stoked Trent's erection. By the time Will lowered the front flap at his crotch, Trent's long, thick shaft extended up to his belly button.

He eased his breeches off his legs and dropped them on top of his other clothes. "Satisfied?"

"Getting there," Trent replied with a smirk.

After a quick check on the steaming water, Will advanced on Trent. Standing before his seated position, toe to toe, looking down at the twisted smile on Trent's face, a wave of glee washed over him. He felt giddy and light, ridiculously youthful.

Will leaned across Trent, his chest close to Trent's lips and wrapped his fingers around the sponge in Trent's hand. "Come over to the fire and I'll wash you."

A tug-of-war ensued over the sponge but Trent retained possession. Holding it between his big hands, he ripped it in half, handing Will the larger piece. "I put the soap cake on the mantel." He rose and stood nose to nose, his one deep brown eye searching Will's face. "Do you prefer a brisk rub or a gentle glide?"

A battle for dominance waged between them and Will wondered at it. Usually he preferred the passive role, yet something about Trent brought out the aggression in him. He had no intention of being Trent's bugger boy, he wanted a relationship on equal terms. "I changed my mind. Let's fuck right now."

Trent grinned broadly. "Patience." He gripped Will's hand and drew him near the copper kettle. Before he dipped his sponge into the water, he grabbed Will's ear and kissed him on the mouth. A slight bend in Trent's knees let Will know he'd wetted his sponge.

In the midst of clashing tongues, Will felt warm water cascade over his shoulder and drip onto his buttocks. The soft damp sponge followed the water's trail. Mmm. One swipe and his cock leaked. When Will tried to break the kiss, Trent wrapped an arm around his waist, locking him in place.

They dipped down together to wet the sponges. Fingers bumped as they dragged their sponges over the soap cake. Will's eyelids shuttered closed when Trent mopped the back of his neck, giving him a firm massage at the same time. Barely conscious of

what he was doing, Will dragged his sponge across Trent's collarbone, dribbling water down his chest.

Trent's brisk strokes with both sponge and tongue tested Will's fortitude. His heartbeat thumped against his ribs. All he could think about was laying his back on the rich carpet in the center of the room, raising his knees to his chest and Trent shoving his cock into him.

Soapy water dribbled between his crack. Will squeezed his buttocks and squirmed until the tickle faded away. While he wriggled, Trent rubbed his moist erection up and down next to Will's hardening shaft. Heavens above, that felt good. He hummed into Trent's mouth. Trent must've liked it too because he ground against Will's groin at the same time he parted Will's butt cheeks. Will's knees weakened when his friend drew the sopping sponge between his cheeks, massaging his hole and then pressing the sponge in with the tip of his finger. *Yes!* Another little push and his cock bucked against Trent's abdomen. He curled his arms up behind Trent's back, fists clenched, squeezing the water from his sponge down the older man's sinewy shoulders.

Trent chortled and withdrew both sponge and finger.

In retaliation, Will dropped his arms and loaded up his sponge with soap and water. Trent followed his movements, holding on to the never-ending kiss. His blood hot, Will created a pocket of space between them and dragged his sponge over Trent's chest. Bubbles popped on the flattened chest hair. Will swirled the sponge over one nipple while he tweaked the mate between thumb and forefinger.

Trent protested weakly and then thrust his tongue deeper into Will's mouth. He dropped his sponge and rubbed his hands over Will's soapy butt cheeks, spreading them, kneading, his fingers digging hard into Will's flesh.

Will groaned his approval, rocking his hips and massaging Trent's chest. Without warning, Trent pushed Will back, breaking the kiss. The separation chilled him but he was happy for the reprieve to catch his breath.

Before he could ask if there was a problem, Trent grasped Will's cock, stroking it firmly. When his fist reached the head, he ran his thumb over the tip, teasing the length into a burning, rigid pole.

Will's eyelids fluttered to half-mast. He forced them open so he could watch Trent's face as he slid his hand up and down Will's cock. The viscount looked so serious and determined. He felt inclined to tell him that he was doing everything just right but it sounded too condescending. Trent wasn't a virgin, after all.

Hands caressed at a slower pace now, his own gliding over Trent's chest and stomach while Trent played with Will's cock and balls.

Slipping the soapy sponge from his fingers into his palm, he washed Trent's shaft, enjoying the slide of silky skin over the solid length. He swabbed Trent's heavy bollocks, rolling the sponge around, up and down, until Trent moaned and spread his legs.

Will grinned smugly. He dropped the sponge and gently fondled his friend's sac at the same time he slid his middle finger along the skin between balls and sphincter. A muscle ticced in Trent's jaw. The two of them stood face-to-face, playing with each other, challenging each other as to who would break first.

"Why don't you fist both our cocks?"

Trent jerked in surprise.

So the viscount wasn't as seasoned as he let on. Will's confidence in his prowess soared. Maybe he could teach the captain a trick or two. "It will feel good, I promise. And I'm not touching your cock again unless it's with my mouth."

"Oh fuck," the viscount mumbled. He wrapped his large hand around their two upright penises and stroked. "Oh!" He pumped some more.

Will wrapped an arm around Trent's hips and squeezed his ass. "Glorious, isn't it?" He closed his eyes and thrust his head back, concentrating on the slick slide of Trent's hand. Up and down, pressing their rods together like they were one big meaty cock.

It felt *too* good. His breath hitched in his chest. Much more of this and...

Teeth nipped his shoulder. While he fisted their cocks, Trent raked his teeth across Will's shoulder and then moved upward to his bowed neck. He latched on there, sucking hard.

Will gasped at the mounting pressure in his balls. Soon his cock convulsed like the lid on a boiling pot.

Son of a bitch! He was going to explode before they'd barely gotten started.

"Too...soon," he huffed, shoving away from Trent's glorious hold.

Trent's hand fell to his side, leaving his magnificent cock standing out like a yardarm.

Will inhaled deeply. "I want to come *with* you, Trent."

Chapter Four

Water soaked the wood floor. Will dipped his hands into the kettle and cupped the cooling liquid. He tossed the cleansing water at Trent's shoulders and then sluiced it off his hair-roughened skin with firm strokes of his palms. Trent returned the favor by running his strong hands down Will's pliant body. Heaven save him, no man had stroked his flesh so lovingly.

"Turn around," Will instructed in a gruff whisper.

The broad muscular expanse of Trent's back excited Will as much as the front view. Before he resumed rinsing, Will dragged a thick forefinger down the channel of the viscount's spine to the dimples above his ass. A replica of a Greek statue, that's what he was. But better-endowed, he mused with a secret smile. He scooped soapy film from Trent's right cheek and then spent an inordinate amount of time dousing and wiping the fellow's well-muscled backside.

Unable to resist the sexy allure of Trent's butt, he sank to his knees and bit the bared flesh of his lover. Trent scarcely twitched but Will noted his fists clenching at his sides. So he quickly soothed the tiny bite mark with the soft lap of his tongue. "Such nice buttocks, Trent."

"Do not set your sights too high too quickly, William."

Will snorted. "His lordship doesn't fancy a *commoner* poking his ass?"

Trent twisted to look over his shoulder and gave him an evil glare. "That is *not* what I meant."

"I know but you can be such a snob." Ignoring his friend's hard gaze, he pressed wet kisses over the downy curvature of Trent's buttocks. "If you don't want to be on the receiving end, I understand. Perhaps someday, we'll have a more equitable affair. For now, I'll submit to your wishes," he said, floating his hands up and down the outside of Trent's thighs. "I want to please you."

The muscles in Trent's shoulders visibly relaxed. "I wish to satisfy you also."

"I'm glad to hear it. Stand at ease. You're too tense."

"It's been a long time, William, and you've got my gut tied up in knots." Trent executed a military pivot and stood at ease, his hands thrust behind his back, his gaze focused on a point over Will's head. "I can't help being stiff all over."

A smile tugged at his lips primarily because evidence of his friend's *stiffness* bobbed in front of his face. He yearned to suck it and Trent knew it. However, it would be a mistake to submit too readily. He was his own man.

Patience, old chap. Slowly, Will's gaze roamed over the damp curls on Trent's chest down his ridged abdomen to the glistening dark curls surrounding the base of his cock.

Oh, yes. Very nice indeed. Hands on Trent's thighs, he kneaded the heavy muscles, working his way in to the soft flesh of Trent's inner thigh. His fingertips grazed the viscount's scrotum, hanging heavy and relaxed. "I expect you to return the favor, Trent." He cupped the ball sac, hefting it gently within his palm.

Trent groaned with pleasure. "Absolutely."

Will felt like groaning too at the depth of his desire. The musky scent of Trent's balls drew Will nearer until he pressed his lips against the loose flesh. He flicked his tongue out and tasted salt. "Mmm."

"Yes," Trent grunted, the muscles in his thighs flexing. "Roll my balls over your tongue, William."

Will opened his mouth and did just that while he smoothed his palms over Trent's hard-packed stomach. He looked up at his lover, seeking guidance by watching his hot, needy gaze.

Trent sucked in his breath. "You want it?" He held down his upright shaft. "It's entirely yours, my bonny man."

That's all he needed to hear. Will released the pouch from his mouth. He eased back the foreskin of Trent's enlarged cock and plunged his lips over the pink head, sucking the water off the rigid pole. His gaze lifted to Trent's awestruck face. Oh yes, the genteel viscount liked that.

He slid his mouth down again, taking as much of his long length as he could and then he slowly eased off, his tongue swirling around the shaft, drawing on it with his lips. He teased the head with sips that drew out drops of salty moisture.

A heavy muscle flexed in Trent's thigh.

Will licked and nibbled up and down the outside of his stiff arousal, gobbling up every mouthwatering inch. The little grunts of pleasure coming from his new lover made his confidence soar. When he looked up, Trent's eyes blazed with heat, demanding more. So he glided his hands over Trent's ass and he slipped his friend's cock into his mouth. Slowly, the silky flesh slid smoothly between his lips.

He wrapped his fist around the base and stroked him while he worked his lips up and down. Juicy sounds of suction blended with the deep breaths flaring through Trent's nostrils. Caught up in the sounds and scents of sex, Will sucked harder.

"Aah!" Trent seized Will's head in both hands and bucked against his face. His fingers twisted up into Will's hair, tugging none too gently with each urgent thrust of his hips.

Will loved every minute of it. This was the kind of reaction he expected of Trent and he was thrilled to get it. His own engorged cock pulsed with the need for release. He grabbed it and pummeled heartily.

"I'm not going to last!" Trent clamped a hand over Will's hold on his cock and threw back his head.

Will worked him harder, twisting his head and plunging down until Trent's cock filled his mouth. He sucked and slurped, moving his mouth up and down the thick shaft, teasing the dark red knob, feasting on delicious raw cock.

Trent's knees wobbled. His chest moved like a blacksmith's bellows. "Bugger!"

For a moment, Will wasn't sure if that was an expletive or a request but Trent didn't stop his fierce, quick strokes.

"I want...to come off...in your hot mouth, William."

Will could only nod.

The cords in Trent's neck stood out. When he tried to contain a shout, the sound emerged in a strangled cry that fed Will's ego. *That's it. Let it loose, my friend. Show me how much I excite you.* Another cry and a surge of warm, salty ejaculate filled his mouth.

The loud climax fueled his own. He clung to Trent's thrusting hips with one hand, pounding his own erection with the other. He felt his lover's skin quiver as the last of his semen spurted out. Will's heart pounded. He was close. So close. He eased his lips off Trent's member.

An impending orgasm tightened his balls. "Oh...oh...here it comes! Mmmmp!" He aimed between Trent's spread legs, squirting thick milky fluid across the polished wood floor.

Afterward, the first thought that crossed his mind was how upset the fastidious Viscount Trent was going to be when he looked at this mess. Will hung his head and smiled.

Trent's fingers massaged Will's scalp gently now. His plump cock drooped to one side. "Get up," he said softly.

Will rose slowly to face his new lover. His heart swelled with joy when he saw the happiness on his friend's face. "Now are you satisfied?"

Trent's smile took on a wicked tilt. "For now." He grabbed Will's shoulders and pulled him into a mind-numbing kiss.

Winding an arm around his lover's back, Will tugged him tight against his body, deepening the kiss. He savored the firmness and heat of Trent's flesh. Oh, yes. It wouldn't take long to get him hard again.

As if he'd read Will's mind, Trent broke the kiss. "Give an old man time to catch his breath, William."

Will scoffed. "Old, my ass. I'm not fooled by those early streaks of gray in your hair. You're a man in your prime." He ran his hands over his lover's sculpted muscles. "I will give you an hour to rest." He grinned. "At the most."

Trent smiled back and rubbed Will's bristled jaw. "You make me feel so virile."

For a long moment, they stood frozen in time, each admiring the other. The grandfather clock ticked in the corner. Flames snapped in the fireplace grate. But the rest of the world evaporated and Will admitted to himself what his heart had known all along. He was in love with Captain Randolph Burgh, Viscount Trent.

The incessant hammering of the front door knocker interrupted his declaration. He watched in a daze as Trent tugged on his breeches and threw Will an apologetic smile.

Will began gathering up clothes. Trent pulled a shirt over his head. It fit a bit snugly. Will suspected it was his.

The middle of the night caller who'd disturbed his time with Trent invoked Will's wrath. "Who could that be?"

Trent grunted noncommittally, shoved an arm through the armhole of his waistcoat, grabbed his cutaway coat and disappeared out the salon door.

Will walked to the top of the stairs, tucking Trent's shirt into his breeches. He stood at the rail and watched the butler meet his employer below, a burning candle held in front of his stoic face. Trent straightened his hastily donned coat and the butler cautiously opened the door. A young woman burst into the vestibule, straight into Trent's arms. Will caught a glimpse of brown curls peeking around her bonnet and an ordinary pale face before she dipped her head.

"Oh love! I'm so sorry!"

Will jerked back from the banister in surprise. *Anna!* The woman sobbed against Trent's lapel, her words muffled but Trent must've gotten the gist of the matter because the blood drained from his face.

With a shaky hand, the butler set the candlestick down on the hallway table and disappeared into the shadows at the back of the house.

Slowly, horribly, Will began to make sense of her garbled words.

"The servants spied us in the...tattled to Father...exploded." She sniffled. "I have nowhere... Father insists...but I won't. The baby is ours."

Will's breath whooshed from his chest. The pain of a sword's thrust sliced through him. *Nooo!* Every hope he held in his heart shattered. *Please God, don't take Trent from me.*

The woman wept profusely, despair evident in each tear. An unwed pregnant woman had few prospects and would cling to her best hope with tenacity. And the honorable Viscount Trent, who always assisted *anyone* in distress, certainly wouldn't rebuff the woman who carried his child.

Will stepped back into the shadows, assured of the outcome below. Crushed. He rubbed at the blinding pain piercing his temple. *Fuck!* Why couldn't she have told Trent sooner?

Frig the righteous nobility! He couldn't stay a minute longer or he might smash something. Like Trent's skull. How could the man have been so careless?

Will glanced about the upper hall. How was he going to get out of here unnoticed? He tiptoed back into the salon and swiftly finished dressing. Not a man to climb out windows, he faced his adversary head-on. Tossing his cloak over his shoulders, he strode boldly into the hallway. "I'll say good night, sir. I'll file a report—"

Trent spun around, holding tight to his mistress and stared at Will as he descended the stairs. "No!"

Will blinked. His step faltered for an instant before he regained his carefree façade and continued downward, drawing on his riding gloves.

Startled into silence, Anna hiccupped and leaned back to stare up into Trent's face. Then she turned a curious gaze at Will.

His face deathly pale, Trent simply stared at him. For a moment, Will's sympathy swung to his friend.

"Mr. Hall, I..." Her brow knitted and her gaze locked on his loosely knotted neckcloth.

"Anything I've overheard tonight will be held in the strictest of confidence, miss," Will assured Anna. He stepped off the bottom step and pulled on his riding gloves. "Good night."

"No, William. Wait."

As Trent's friend, he should stay and offer support. Send for a clergyman to marry them posthaste, perhaps. But Will couldn't. He'd sooner rip his heart out of his chest than stand by and watch the man he loved slip away from him. He swallowed hard. "I should check on the results of tonight's—"

"William, do not go." His words were a soft plea, yet his arms remained locked around Anna.

"I can't stay. I'm sorry."

Finally, Trent released his tearful lady. He grabbed Will's forearm. "Don't leave like this."

"You need to take care of your lady. I'm sure the two of you have a lot to talk about." He looked at Anna with a sad smile. She seemed mesmerized by his collar. On impulse, he tugged the linen higher on his neck, the better to hide any abrasions from Trent's rough kisses. "Best wishes."

She inhaled two quick breaths and stared at him with dawning comprehension. Slowly, she looked up at Trent, her back stiffening, then followed his gaze back to Will. "My God," she whispered.

She was intelligent, he would give her that.

Afraid he'd make a fool of himself if he stayed a second longer, Will spun on his heel and jerked open the door before the butler could open it for him. He bounded down the steps to the sidewalk, his throat clogging.

The night fog swirled around his feet as he rushed away, ignoring Trent's plaintive call.

So close to all-consuming joy!

Will shoved his gloved hands in the cloak's pockets and set a fast pace with no particular destination in mind. At least he'd learned of Anna's pregnancy before he'd openly declared his love for Trent. His heart twisted in his chest.

He wondered if he'd be able to continue working with Trent after he married. It would look odd if he suddenly quit. Maybe a transfer to the Thames Marine Police?

"Wait!" At first, the soft call didn't register. "Mr. Hall! Wait!"

He turned to see Anna, her skirts held ankle-high, her unbuttoned pelisse flapping behind her, running down the pavement toward him. Foolish woman! What if she tripped? Then he saw Trent no more than a step behind her. His worry for Anna eased at the same time his jealousy roared. Out of courtesy, he waited for Anna but he wanted to run. From both of them.

No. He wanted to drop to his knees and cry.

"Please come back inside," she entreated. "Randolph—Lord Trent—wishes to talk to you and so do I."

What the hell for?

Will looked over her shoulder at Trent's anguished expression. His heart broke anew. Getting caught between the two people he loved must be devastating for Trent. Why wouldn't he let Will make it easier for him? *Let me go*, Will pleaded with his eyes.

"Don't make a hasty decision," Trent implored him.

"We weren't meant to be." The admission tore a hole in Will's soul.

Chapter Five

A harsh cry caught in Trent's throat. He couldn't lose William now. Not after he'd worked so hard to claim him. So, he did something he never thought he'd do in front of Anna. He caught William's crestfallen face between his hands and kissed him. Not a chaste goodbye kiss but an I-want-to-fuck-you kiss.

One hand slipped back to grab a hank of William's hair and he gently tugged while he probed William's slightly parted lips with his tongue. On a sigh, William let him in. Trent instantly deepened the kiss.

He almost shouted with joy when William gripped his hips. William's tongue danced with his but too soon he pushed Trent back and his gaze flicked over to Anna. "That was foolish."

Trent released William, afraid to study Anna's dazed reaction too closely. For a man known for his brilliant strategies, he'd created a fine mess.

"May I return to your house, Randolph?" she asked quietly. The dejection in her voice distressed him. Gone was the hysterical woman. She'd collected all emotion and tucked it away. "I am gathering a chill."

"Of course, Anna." He removed his jacket and placed it over her shoulders. "Have Sinclair add hot coals to the library fireplace. I will be in shortly." Trent watched Anna until she reached the front steps, then he turned his attention to William's tense jaw. "We need to talk," he said very softly.

"Anna's pregnant. There is nothing to discuss, your lordship."

"Don't you *your lordship* me! I just kissed your frigging mouth—in the bloody street, no less." Trent lowered his voice. A whisper of sound in the passage to his neighbor's coach house reminded him of his exposure despite the cover of darkness. He grabbed William's arm and led him back toward his front door. "I've offered you my bed," he hissed.

William stopped them short of the entry steps. "You also stated you wouldn't deliberately hurt Anna by carrying on an extramarital affair. So are you suggesting I'm to be used for your pleasure before you resign yourself to marriage?"

That stung.

"I care for you, William. You asked to give us a chance. Are you taking that away from us?" He shook his head in disappointment. "If it comes down to it, I am wealthy enough to care for my responsibilities without binding myself in marriage."

"But too honorable to do anything less."

Trent dropped his chin. Yes, there was the rub.

William clapped Trent on his shoulder. "That, old chap, is why I respect you so much." He dropped his hand and walked away, disappearing into the fog rolling off the River Thames.

* * * * *

Anna greeted him in the library with a frown. "Mr. Hall did not return with you?"

Trent shook his head.

"I am sorry, Randolph. It is apparent he means much to you."

"I apologize for the display in the street. I—"

"You were desperate not to lose him. I understand that feeling." She twisted a ring on her gloved finger.

Trent strode forward and enveloped Anna in his arms. He loved this woman. Growing old with her would be a fine thing. Perhaps she'd provide a male heir. Not that he had a substantial inheritance to share but there was a certain pride in the family's aristocracy.

But his heart cried for William. If he lost him as a friend as well as a lover, he'd be devastated. William was one of the few people in the world who looked at him without seeing his disfigurement. He was a man he admired on all levels—as a Bow Street Runner, a friend, a human being. The depth of his feelings for William surprised him. Now that he recognized the rarity of those feelings, he couldn't let them go.

Somehow, he must get William back.

"Ease up, Randolph. Unlike Mr. Hall, I cannot bear a strong embrace."

"Oh! I am sorry." He released her.

Anna began to pace, rubbing her tender arms. "We seem to be apologizing overmuch." She walked in a circle for a bit and suddenly stopped. "I will not lie to you, Randolph. I want you in my life. I want you in our child's life. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I will fight for you if I must."

"There's no need. I understand you have no one—"

"I don't want your pity!"

Trent swallowed. At times, Anna was a force to be reckoned with.

"You said you loved me. Was it a lie?" Her voice softened abruptly, laced with vulnerability.

"I am a man of my word."

"But you also love Mr. Hall?"

Trent hesitated. "I love having him for my friend. He is honest, courageous and kindhearted. I love the quality of his work as a Bow Street Runner. I love his compassion for victims of crimes. He is a good man."

Anna's plump cheeks tinted pink. "And as a lover?"

It was Trent's turn to flush.

"You kissed him. On the mouth." Her face flamed.

Trent poured himself a drink. "I will tell you what I told him. Once I make a commitment, I will be faithful." He downed his shot in one gulp.

"Not many men forced to marry would hold true to that promise."

"I am not most men."

"I know that, Randolph." Anna rested a hand on his arm. "As much as I want to hold you to that promise, I cannot. You love us both. How can I force you to choose?"

Trent scoffed. "There's no other option, Anna."

"But there is."

He frowned.

"Kiss me."

"What?"

She lifted the empty glass from his hand and set it on the desk. Then she stood on tiptoes and looped her arms around his neck. "Kiss me."

Trent obliged her, sipping her lips before he teased them apart with his tongue. She tasted so different from William. Sweeter. Smooth like cognac where William tasted like smoky Scotch whiskey. He took his time kissing Anna, stoking the fire in his groin slowly to life.

Where William evoked fiery passion, Anna stirred mellow desire. He wanted to bugger William until his heart burst from his chest but Anna... Making love with Anna was like making a new discovery – every detail exciting, to be savored over time.

Would his wild lust for William burn out quickly?

It was just as possible that he'd become bored with Anna's soft touch.

He groaned in frustration.

Anna misread his response, taking the kiss to a more intense level, pressing her body closer. Pregnancy had swollen her small breasts. How had he not noticed? How far along was she? He pressed his palm against her belly, feeling a slight roundness where there once was none. His child.

The notion stole his breath away.

Anna broke the kiss, cocking her head at him with a slow smile. Never before had he seen her brown eyes dance like that. "See, you can love us both." She covered the hand on her abdomen. "You've made my belly swell. In another five months I hope to deliver you a son, my lord." She ran a finger over his graying temple. "I may be indisposed at times. Perhaps Mr. Hall can fill in the gaps."

Trent sucked in his breath. What was she saying?

"Don't look so shocked, love. I do not want to lose you. I am willing to share."

Unable to articulate any words, he stared open-mouthed.

"Did I misjudge? Is Mr. Hall nothing more than a passing fancy? A challenge, perhaps?"

"No!" he squawked then cleared his throat. "My feelings for William run deep." Trent shook his head. "Your open-mindedness astounds me."

"At six and twenty, I am a realist. My hand in marriage has been available for some time with few prospects. None of my suitors did I wish to share my bed. Now I am a ruined woman, if you will forgive the term, with only one opportunity. I love you, Randolph. You love another, yet your honor binds you to me. You will not be happy with me alone." She linked her fingers with his. "I want you to be happy."

Could she mean what he thought she meant? Impossible. "Are you suggesting I take William as my lover until after the baby is weaned? Because I will not cast him away on your whim."

Anna took a deep breath, raising her luscious breasts from her low scoop neckline. "Cast neither of us aside, Randolph. Keep your lover as long as you want him. In fact, I am suggesting that he live here – with us."

Trent stepped back. "Tongues would wag."

"Let them." She chewed her thumbnail for a moment, a decidedly unladylike act, he thought with dismay. "He is renting his townhouse, I believe. You own yours. If nothing else, having his residence here would ease both your financial responsibilities. No one would censure your desire to take in a renter as a way to establish a financial base for your child's future."

Pride puffed out his chest. "I am no longer insolvent. I can support my offspring in an honorable manner."

Anna patted his arm. "Of course, love. I am merely suggesting a cover for Mr. Hall's presence. You can explain to your friends you wish to avoid for your child the financial woes forced upon you when your father's investments failed."

A separate trust for his son had merit. Funded by his boy's "Uncle William". Yes, he liked the idea. It would serve to tie the two males together. Should anything ever happen to him, he'd want William as his son's guardian.

Even a girl child requires funds for a dowry.

Anna stroked his sideburns. "I want you to have everything you desire."

He grabbed her hand away, embarrassed by the thick bristles covering his jaw. "I apologize for my rough face."

Anna smiled at him with tenderness. "It is not the first time I've stroked your face in the middle of the night."

Indeed not. He kissed her palm and set her hand at her side. He couldn't think straight. Anna and William sharing his home. Alternating visits to his bed? What about jealousy? Possessiveness? Would that arrangement work?

Would William even consider it? He seemed eager to cut Trent out of his life.

Anna held out his hat. "I won't wait up."

Chapter Six

"Are you daft, man?" Will paced his first-floor salon. His shirtsleeve billowed as he flung his drink into the fireplace. The hot coals flared into flame, licking at the stacked dry wood and quickly settling back into red embers. A headache pounded at his temples. "I am not sharing you with your future wife. I have my honor." He smacked his empty glass on the mantelpiece.

"Anna has given her blessing."

"What?"

Trent set his hat top down on the seat of a ladder-back chair. "As a matter of fact, she insists we continue our relationship. Anna wants all of us to be happy."

William searched for the selfishness in Anna's offer and came up with nothing. She'd succeeded in netting Trent, along with his name, a title and the security of his position, so why include Will? She must love Trent very much. Well, so did he, dammit! And he had no desire to share him.

He paced before the shuttered window, stopping to unlatch the interior shutter doors and latched them again. In his checkered past, he'd avoided married men at all costs. The risks of discovery and retribution were too high. "I don't wish to be the subject of your extramarital affair."

But the more he thought about returning to the background of Trent's life, the more he hated the idea. Not after those astounding kisses. Not after the feel of Trent's body pressed against his own, his friend's hand caressing his engorged cock. Trent's presence alone made Will's heart race. Will wanted the complete package, not simply friendship and professional camaraderie.

"You will always be, foremost, my friend, William. How far you take that friendship, no one need ever know." The viscount placed his hand on Will's shoulder. "Call me selfish but I don't want to lose you. Anna and I would like you to be a part of our new family too."

Anna and I. Already, he felt like an outsider. "When will the nuptials take place?"

The comforting hand on his shoulder slipped away. "I plan to apply for a special marriage license on the morrow."

Although he expected as much, the news jolted Will. His fists clenched at his sides and he looked away. He would've liked more time to adjust to the change.

Trent made a sound of disgust. "Don't shut me out before you've given our relationship a try, William. Give us all a month. If you find the situation deplorable, you are not bound to continue." Will's arms jerked when Trent clutched his full shirtsleeves in his fists. "Look at me." When he complied, Trent stared hard into his eyes. "You are a

fine man, William Hall." He hesitated for a second, the aristocratic veneer dropping away, showing vulnerability Will had never seen before. "Since the first day you walked into the Bow Street office, I've been falling in love with you. I can't stop now."

His throat constricted. How could he argue against that?

One month. By then, he'd know whether he could share Trent with a woman, wouldn't he?

Hell, he already knew he could not.

Anna probably counted on that fact.

Well, he wouldn't give in so easily. The gauntlet had been thrown and Will intended to fight to keep Trent's affections solely for himself. Let him marry her and then send her off to one of his estates. It was done all the time.

Time played against him. He had the feeling Anna was as obstinate as he and would be unwilling to give up her lover to another man. The longer she remained at Trent's side, the harder it'd be to pry her loose. He had one month to prove to Trent that they belonged together, without her.

"You may give me your answer later this morning, if you wish," Trent deferred. Desire burned in his gaze but he quickly glanced away.

The sly fox. A smile tugged at Will's mouth. Attempting to coerce him with a subtle invitation to taste his flesh. His mind already made up, it was an offer Will would not turn down. "Will you stay here for what's left of the night then?"

Trent slowly stripped off a glove. "I would be honored." His hand shook. When his fingers were bared, he smacked his gloves against his palm as though he were punishing it for betraying his tightly suppressed emotions.

The cape barely left Trent's shoulders before Will tossed it onto a nearby chair and began peeling off his friend's coat. He stood behind him and nipped at Trent's ear while pushing the sleeves down his arms. "You are well past your hourly allotment for rest, old chap."

"How right you are." Free of his coat, Trent spun around and trapped Will's arms at his sides. He kissed him savagely, grinding pelvis against pelvis. The swell of Trent's cock, beneath the square flap of his breeches, accelerated Will's burgeoning desire. In the little wiggle room allotted him, Will's fingers fumbled blindly with the buttons on Trent's waistcoat.

Modesty rushed to the forefront of Will's mind. What if someone barged in on them?

Jesus, Trent must be rubbing off on him.

"The door isn't locked," he warned, breaking the kiss and backing toward the door. "The housekeeper will be arriving soon." He didn't earn enough to afford live-in help, thank goodness.

"I don't give a fuck." Trent took a giant step forward, then looked down at his open waistcoat. He stopped with a heavy sigh. "Hurry up and lock it. Where is your bootjack?"

Will pointed to the fireplace. With a nod, Trent strode over to the cast-iron piece. Stepping on the narrow platform with one foot, he placed his opposite boot heel in the V and yanked his foot free.

Will rushed to the door and turned the key. The housekeeper spent her mornings below stairs but one should always be prepared for uncommon events. When he turned back into the room, Trent shrugged off his waistcoat and pulled off his shirt. Will stopped and stared, amazed anew at his friend's finely honed torso.

Without a word, Trent met him in the middle of the room. While Will struggled with the cloth-covered buttons on the front flap of Trent's breeches, Trent had no problem releasing Will's flap.

Where were his nimble pick-pocketing skills when he needed them?

In seconds, the long hem of his shirt unfurled over his rising erection. His breeches swished down his legs, catching on the narrow band below his knee. Cool air brushed goose bumps across his thighs. Trent hefted Will's balls in his hand before Will managed to undo Trent's last flap button.

"Mm, yes," Will murmured, warming up fast.

Finally, the last obstinate button popped free and Trent's breeches slipped down to his ankles. His cock sprang forth, long and meaty, ready for action. Will stared with animalistic delight.

Trent stepped out of his pants and nudged them aside. With a feral smile, he wrapped a hand around his lover's elongating shaft. "You know, William..." Trent plucked at the back of his waistcoat. "You have entirely too many clothes on."

Will couldn't agree more. He kicked off his buckled shoes. One flew across the room and banged against his music stand. While Trent caressed him, he stripped off his breeches, leggings and waistcoat. Trent grabbed Will's shirt and tugged it over his head.

"Now where were we?" he said, smoothing a hand over Will's chest. "Oh, yes." He encased both cocks in one hand. "I like this." He pulled their plump shafts together briefly, sliding one over the other. He scowled and released his hand. "Wait a moment." He stepped away in order to rummage through his cloak. "This will help."

Will drew his brows together when Trent held up a round tin.

"Cow teat ointment," he explained. "Makes a fine lubricant." He opened the lid and slid his fingers through the gelatinous contents, then set the tin on a side table.

"You came prepared, confident I'd succumb to your charms, eh?" Will huffed, even though laughter bubbled inside. *Yes, you arrogant beau-ideal, come take me.*

"Hopeful. Nothing more."

He hissed on an indrawn breath when Trent smoothed the cool, slick ointment over his hot cock. With a firm grip, his lover covered every inch of his meaty rod and then bathed his balls until his entire groin shone with the slippery stuff.

"Feel good?" Trent nipped his neck.

Will shivered. "*Good* doesn't begin to describe how much I like you stroking my pudding."

"Pudding? Hmm." Trent chuckled. "Stuffed sausage never looked so appetizing."

Then taste it!

He shoved their future dilemma to the back of his mind. Resting his forearms on Trent's shoulders, he played with the fine layers of hair brushing his lover's neck, trying to hide his impatience. He needed to rut!

Staring down at the two rigid members glistening in the flickering lamplight, he marveled how equally matched he and Trent truly were.

When Will licked his lips, Trent shook his head. "Our cocks may look good enough to eat but believe me, you don't want to taste this liniment. Foul stuff. I know."

Picturing Trent sucking off another man made the vein in Will's temple throb. At the same time, thinking about alternative uses for their slick rods caused Will's penis to jump.

Trent's mind apparently followed along the same lines because he squeezed his fist up both cocks until two bright red heads peeked over the top of his hand. "We can come off together like this..." He slid his hand up and down in long, slow strokes. "Or..." He leaned close and nipped Will's lower lip. His hand glided down, over Will's balls, skimming between his thighs until one slippery finger slid quickly in and out of Will's hole, leaving him hungry for more. "I can bugger your fine ass. Which do you prefer?"

Will narrowed his eyes at his lover and tugged on his hair, letting him know he wasn't going to give up complete control of the situation. "I'm going to give you a ride you won't forget."

A leer tugged at Trent's lips. Yes, there was the haughty man he knew. Trent trailed the palm of his other hand over Will's butt cheeks, while two fingers pressed knuckle-deep. "I'm looking forward to it." His eye twitched as he pressed deeper.

Will moaned with anticipation. Trent's deep probes felt sooo tantalizing.

Grinning like a fool, Will ran his hands over the hard contours of Trent's pectorals, dragging his thumbs over the stubby nipples. Tempted by the puckering dark tips, he leaned down and nipped one. Much to his delight, Trent jerked upright and growled. He gripped Will's ass and squeezed – hard.

"I love exposing the beast in you, Trent. Every day, I see it simmering beneath the surface of your aristocratic public image. It calls to me."

"You bring out the best and worst in me." Trent grabbed him in a one-armed bear hug and kissed him hard. But it didn't last long. He broke away, slightly breathless, his eyes burning with primal heat.

Trent stared deep into his eyes as Will skimmed his palms down the viscount's tight abdomen and grasped his stiff arousal. "Are you going to do something with this or not, lover?"

"Indeed." Trent gripped his arm, picked up the tin of ointment and a handkerchief and drew him over to the Chippendale sofa. Rather than push Will down on it, he tossed the tin onto the seat cushion, draped the linen cloth over the rolled arm and then dragged the sofa off the Oriental area rug until the end edged close to the ceiling-high pier glass. "Come see."

Trent stood in front of the mirror admiring his reflection. When Will approached him, Trent positioned him at the front, pulling his back snug against Trent's chest. With a heartfelt sigh, Trent rested his chin on Will's shoulder and looped his arms around his collarbone. "Have you ever seen a more beautiful man?"

Will reached back, stroked his lover's face and then turned his head to look over his shoulder. "No." He briefly kissed the man of his dreams, his heart bursting with joy.

"May I love you now, William?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

Trent turned him toward the sofa end, reached around him and centered the sofa opposite the pier glass. "Can you see?"

Will knew exactly what he meant. He spread his legs and leaned his diaphragm over the sofa arm, bracing his arms on the long seat cushion and looked toward the mirror. All he could see was the curved sofa back. He shifted himself and the sofa until he could see his ass perched in the air and Trent's erect cock waiting nearby. "Perfect."

His cock twitched with satisfaction when Trent slid his slippery finger into his hole. He was a bit concerned about the size of Trent's cock but with a little preparation...

"Oh!" Two fingers twisted inside him, slurping through the lubricant, spreading him, pushing in deeply. He relaxed and pushed back against the probing fingers, easing Trent's way. After a moment, another finger joined the others. Will bucked and swallowed a groan. His heartbeat throbbed in his neck.

Trent reached down and fondled his balls, making it easier to tolerate the slight burning in his ass. God, he couldn't wait much longer for the hard push and pull of Trent's cock. The vision sparked the tightening of his balls. "Give me your cock!"

Trent leaned over his back and nipped his shoulder. "Impatient lover, aren't you?"

"Every night I dream of you fucking me. Another second is too long to wait. I want it *now*."

With a chuckle, Trent nudged into Will's hole, slowly stretching him wide, adding more ointment to his tight ring with each small plunge. "Watch us, Will."

He already was. Will groaned through the mixed sensations of pain and pleasure as Trent impaled him. The added treat of watching in the mirror spiked his lust.

Trent's strokes were long and easy, allowing him to adjust to the length of his shaft. He caught Trent's gaze in the mirror and smiled. "My beau," he whispered huskily.

"Are you ready for your fire to be stoked, William?"

"Lud, yes!" Will clamped his muscles around Trent's engaged cock, extracting a quick indrawn breath from his lover.

Devilment danced in Trent's expression. Bracing one hand on Will's shoulder, his pace increased to a smooth undulation. In and out, in and out, like a well-oiled piston in one of London's new factories. Perspiration beaded below his Adam's apple and trickled down the center of his furred chest. Will wished he could twist back and lick it off but he didn't want to break Trent's enticing rhythm.

He watched Trent fuck him with increasing fascination. He'd never actually seen a lover's penis sink between the crack in his cheeks, felt the resulting stretch and deep penetration and then watched the hard length emerge again, pink and glossy. He found it stimulating beyond reason. The instant he whimpered for more, Trent began to thrust in earnest, plunging up to his balls and drawing out in brief, mind-shattering tugs. Will's legs trembled. He groped for Trent's free hand and drew it to his pulsating cock, sighing heavily as the hard length slid through his lover's ointment-slick fist.

Will wasn't going to last much longer. He gritted his teeth. His balls ached in readiness. "Come in me, Trent."

"Almost there," Trent huffed, stroking faster. "I want you to come first." The ass plowing abruptly slowed when Trent tucked his body close and pleased Will by hand with short, strong pulls up and over Will's cock head.

Heat burned Will's face, his ears, his neck. He panted for breath. Desire burned low in his belly. He dropped his head and watched his lover's fist pump over the sensitive flushed knob of his cock at the same time his thighs rocked against Will's buttocks. His pulse beat faster with each slow, slippery stroke. "I'm going to come," he wheezed.

He swung his head up and glanced into the mirror, catching Trent's masculine face in deep concentration. His heart soared. The simultaneously pumping, back and front, in and out, up and down, shoved Will over the edge. "Ah...now! Now!" Clenching his jaw, he bucked through Trent's fist, his release pulsing through his cock on a wave of intense pleasure. His semen steeped into the linen handkerchief Trent picked up off the sofa arm.

Seconds later, the soiled cloth dropped to the floor. His lover planted his large palms on Will's hips and resumed fast, almost brutal thrusts in and out of his burning hole. Deep, short hums accompanied each plunge. Then he pulled out almost all the way and speared back in, bellowing when Will tightened his buttocks muscles around his convulsing shaft. Warm cream shot into his body, stimulating his flagging erection for another instant before he collapsed over the sofa arm. Trent leaned forward too, his

abdomen pressed heavily on Will's lower back. Harsh breathing whooshed onto his shoulder.

Will briefly closed his eyes, totally content. "The best fucking I've ever had, Trent."

Chilly air swirled over his sweaty back when Trent eased up. The viscount rubbed Will's tense shoulder muscles and then dragged sweaty palms down his back. "Yes. Excellent." He pulled out slowly.

Will's body clung, reluctant to let his lover go. His sigh edged toward a heartfelt groan. A vision of Trent secured to his bed for the next decade crossed his mind. Anna had picked the wrong man for her lover. Trent belonged to him.

Chapter Seven

Even in a deep slumber, William's charm enticed him. Seated in a comfortable chair by the hearth, Trent admired his lover's peaceful, angelic profile. Golden lights reflected from the fire onto his cheek, nose and tousled hair. He smiled at the soft snore William emitted through slightly parted lips. An arm and one leg dangled over the side of the bed in careless abandon. Bedding twisted around the other leg. The provocative curve of William's buttocks and the strong lines of his back captured Trent's hungry scrutiny.

Trent sighed. Such flawless beauty deserved an artist's commission. A painting, or better yet, a sculpture would capture every sinuous curve for posterity.

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and propped his chin on his fists. "How am I going to convince you to stay with me?"

One blink and William woke.

"Good morning, lover," Trent said huskily.

William tilted his head so he could see Trent. A slow, lazy smile lit his face. "Morning." His voice had a sexy, gravelly sound. "What are you doing all the way over there? Naked. Teasing me with that morning erection?"

"Why? Are you sporting one yourself?"

In answer, William rolled onto his back, showing off his impressive, distended cock. "Can't be helped. I dreamed of you. Of us."

With a broad smile, Trent ambled over to the bed, bent down and kissed his lover good morning. A strong arm wrapped around his waist and pulled him down onto the bed.

They rolled from one side of the bed to the other and back again, arms locked around one another, bodies fused together, legs entangled. William pinned Trent on his back and groaned loudly. "I must piss."

Trent slapped his arms to his sides with mock resignation when William rolled off the bed and dragged the chamber pot from beneath the bed. Such a nice ass. He sighed.

He should rise and dress. Anna, typically an early riser, would be wondering at the outcome of his visit here, worrying. Yet, he lay motionless, staring at the ceiling, listening to William relieving himself into the ceramic pot, unsure how to proceed.

A hard slap to his belly dispelled his wandering thoughts.

"Move over, Trent. This floor is cold."

With a grunt of inconvenience, he scooted aside. What was he thinking? The servants would be bustling about by now. He'd mussed the covers on the guest bed next door before William woke but that wouldn't stop eyebrows from rising if they saw

him emerge from their employer's room in rumpled clothing. Especially if William didn't wipe that smug grin from his face.

"Have you made up your mind, William?" He twisted his head sideways so he could look into his lover's eyes.

His friend rested on his side, propped up on his elbow with his head cushioned in his hand. His free hand snaked out and warm fingers fondled Trent's semi-hard cock. The freedom to touch was so new, so exciting for both of them, Trent allowed the distraction, for now.

"I've wanted you for so long," William admitted huskily. "Now that we've crossed the line, I don't want to go back." His fingers pulled lightly at Trent's hardening shaft, stretching the skin up to his flared cock head and easing it back into place. "I don't want to share either. I want this magnificent cock all to myself."

Trent stared at the handsome man who awakened the dark hunger within. "That's no longer possible," he said forlornly. "I'm honor-bound to marry but we can make our relationship work, William."

He turned on his side, facing the only man he'd ever seduced. He'd be damned if he was going to give up, no matter what William said. They belonged together. He drew his brows together in frustration and slapped his hand over William's wrist. "What will it take to convince you?"

A mischievous smile broke on William's face. The seductive pull on Trent's cock intensified. "I'm a man. My sexual needs are greater than any woman's. Moreover, you implied that I mean more to you than Anna. I believed you. Now you must prove it. If you want me as your beau, my sexual demands should take precedence over hers."

"Agreed. At any rate, from what I have heard, pregnant women have little interest in intimacy." Any conflicts over his time lurked a long time away. By then, they should be comfortable as a threesome. The lurid thought of all three of them in the same bed jumped into Trent's head but he pushed the idea away, mentally scolding himself. Neither William nor Anna would consider that suggestion. He'd be very content alternately sharing his bed with his wife and his lover.

"I'll give it a month. But don't expect miracles."

"Thank you." Trent released his hard grip around William's wrist.

An impish gleam lit the younger man's eyes. "I know you must tend to your *affairs*, Trent. Let me give you a little send-off."

Before he could respond, William shifted sideways, trailed his wet tongue down his hardening shaft and flicked at his balls.

Already on edge, a moan of encouragement rumbled up Trent's throat. He split his legs wider to give his friend easier access. After a gentle ball washing with his tongue, his talented lover worked his lips up the rigid pole, running his tongue around the thick shaft, nibbling and sucking the skin. Trent inhaled deeply when William's hot breath steamed over the head and his fingers massaged his balls. Firm lips sipped at the pre-

cum leaking from the tip. In one fell swoop, his cock sank into the depths of William's hot, moist mouth.

Fire consumed him. Conscious thought faded in the sizzling glow of the moment. Heat licked his skin from scalp to toes. William tortured him with his rolling tongue and hard pulls into the back of his throat. Trent thrust his fingers into his lover's hair and massaged his scalp, urging him to continue the deep fluid draws on his cock that pushed Trent's heart into his throat. He groaned loudly when William eased off to concentrate on loving the bulbous head. Lust jabbed into his groin. He couldn't hold back anymore. His body moved of its own accord, his cock pummeling William's succulent mouth in search of a heart-stopping release. Much to his satisfaction, his lover braved the relentless thrashing without complaint. In fact, William's moans sounded more like enjoyment than distress. It was far too late for gentleness at any rate. William's skilled lips pulled the heavy load from Trent's sac.

"Yes, yessss."

Trent twisted the bedding in his fists, arched his back, shoved his hips up and ejaculated into the depths of his lover's throat. His teeth gnashed together in an effort to silence his cries of pleasure. As his body drifted down onto the mattress, William continued to suck every drop of his essence from him. Lingering jolts of desire shuddered along the length of his legs.

No one, male or female, had ever made him come as fast as William did. It was—embarrassing. He pulled William's head up and the rest of his rock-hard body followed until their chests slammed together. Words couldn't express the depth of his feelings for William. Losing him would shatter his heart.

William shifted sideways and grabbed himself. His fist bumped Trent's abdomen with each stroke toward his release.

That's it. Show me you have no more control over your lust than I do. Trent reached down and caressed his lover's balls, already pulled up in readiness. Lips drifted closer. Impatient, Trent thrust his tongue deep into William's mouth, absorbing the moan that vibrated up his friend's throat. He lifted his other hand to William's chest, smoothed his hand over the hard planes and tugged at his nipples. On a sharp intake of breath, William threw his head back and his laboring pants quickened.

"That's it, William. Spill your cream on my belly."

The lines between William's brows deepened and his neck flushed a deep rose. His stroking hand blurred over his hard cock. Trent knew a firm press between the marbles within William's soft sac would finish him off. His thumb sank deep.

William's body jerked hard and he bit off a harsh cry as warm stickiness gushed over Trent's extended arm and onto his flat belly. Another spurt of the viscous fluid dribbled into his belly button. William grunted and squeezed the last of the cum from the reddened head of his cock. At last, expelling a deep breath, he collapsed at Trent's side.

"Damn," his friend muttered.

Trent wished he could spend a whole day making William come. But he couldn't. One final kiss and he bolted out of his lover's bed. "You make it difficult to concentrate on my duty to the Crown." *And Anna.*

William chuckled and splayed his naked body across the bed. Trent ignored the flagrant display, washed from the water pitcher on the bureau and dressed quickly. "Come to my home for dinner at one."

Without waiting for a confirmation, he snuck into the room next door and waited impatiently until a knock sounded at the door.

"Milord?" A timid female voice floated through the closed door. "Mr. Hall wishes me to ask what assistance you require this morn."

Trent jerked open the door and a pretty maid jumped back. He bit back a smile at her flustered expression. He purposely left his waistcoat hanging loose and held his crumpled neckcloth in his hand. She twisted her hands together and stared at his feet.

"A manservant would be appreciated," he said with severity. "I must get to Bow Street as soon as possible."

"Yes, milord." She peeked up from beneath her mobcap. "You and Mr. Hall had a busy night chasing thugs, eh? Looks like neither one of ya got a good night's rest."

Trent choked at her impertinence.

She treaded backward hastily. "Beggin' your pardon. I only meant that a spot of tea might soothe your tired expression." She grimaced. "You look fine, o' course, quite handsome in a scary way with that eye patch an' morning whiskers an' all..."

He scowled at her.

Her hands fluttered in front of her face like a frightened bird. "I'll go fetch the manservant, milord!" She bustled out of sight.

Trent snickered. Good thing William had taken the cheeky poppet under his wing. She'd be soup in anyone else's kitchen.

Oh, blast. The servants. He suspected the rest of the group behaved as abominably as the maid. Who would take them in? No other aristocrat. They'd have to come to his house along with William. Melding the household below stairs would be as taxing for his housekeeper as the juggling act he had before him. He ran a hand over the stubble on his face.

One step at a time. A good grooming would set him right. Then a few hours in the Bow Street office and he'd be thinking clearly again. Yes, by this afternoon, he'd have a plan in place.

* * * * *

The candelabra in the center of Trent's long mahogany table reflected brilliant light in the gilded mirror over the server. The candlelight illuminated the muted colors of the dried flowers arranged in silver bowls on either side. Anna's touch, Will thought caustically. Trent didn't give a damn about dinner presentation when the two of them

supped together. The feminine decoration hinted at the changes to come. His knee bounced in agitation beneath the table while they waited for Trent's mistress to grace them with her presence.

"The servants found the nobleman in his wine cellar."

Will jerked his attention back to Trent's account of England's latest bold crime, the death of a nobleman in his own home. Who would kill a man in his wine cellar?

"The earl left London and returned to his country manor on the spur of the moment, so perhaps he surprised an intruder," Trent continued.

"The servants have all been cleared?"

"His wife claims they are all lifelong employees, devoted to the man."

"And the wife?"

"A harmonious marriage for over twenty years. Two daughters, one presented to society three years ago, engaged to a commander in the Royal Navy and the other one planning her second debut in the spring. On the surface, a content family. All clues point to a bungled burglary."

Will cocked a brow. "Bungled? Nothing was stolen?"

"A few pieces of silver, several bottles of expensive wine and a rare pistol are reported missing." Trent raised a spoon from his place setting at the head of the table and turned it in the wavering light, watching the streaks of gold play over the silver.

"The theft could've been a ruse."

"Possibly but the..." Trent's words trailed off when Anna glided through the doorway. Setting down his spoon, he rose from his chair. The servant who'd been standing beside the server stepped forward and held out a chair for her opposite Will.

Will rose too, albeit a little slower. He studied Anna, dressed in a pale rose gown gathered with a cream ribbon beneath her breasts, like one would admire a cold, marble statue of Venus. He appreciated the beauty without a stirring of sexual desire.

Conversely, he noticed Trent's deep brown eye glowed with adoration. "You look beautiful, my dear."

"Thank you, milord." Anna nodded graciously as she drifted down onto her seat. "Good afternoon, Mr. Hall."

Trent excused his footman.

"Miss Shaw." Will sat and fiddled with the napkin on his lap. Jealousy churned in his gut as Trent and Anna exchanged inane pleasantries and his lover's eyes strayed time and again to Anna's low neckline.

Such a foolish obsession, breasts. Will supposed he must've been weaned away from his mother's milk at a very young age for he had no attachment to the fleshy globes whatsoever. He did, however, have a certain passion for tweaking his lover's nipples and watching his eyes glaze. The memory made his cock twitch.

Will ate his soup and picked at his fish. Actually, he hated fish and Trent knew it but evidently, Anna enjoyed it. He sat quietly through the remaining courses, participating only when Trent asked him a direct question. Although he tried to regard the meal as a simple gathering of friends, he'd never felt so awkward. Anna threatened his happiness and envy churned in his gut. Finally, when the servants cleared the dishes and disappeared, Will reached the end of his rope.

"I'm not an expert on social decorum," he rudely interrupted, uninterested in their conversation topic, "but even I know you can't stay here unchaperoned, Miss Shaw, betrothed or not."

Anna gaped at him, her lips parted in surprise.

"Have you no relative who'll take...you in?"

"Mr. Hall!" Trent snapped, as though he were chastising a private under his command.

"Just looking after her welfare, my friend. You don't want her good name and yours dragged through the mud, do you?"

Anna delicately cleared her throat. "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Hall. As it happens, my maiden aunt has invited me to stay with her."

Will smiled in triumph. "Very well, then."

"I refused."

His good humor deflated. "Why?"

"She is a straight-laced, stern old witch. I could barely stomach her weekly visits to my father's house. Now she would harass me every moment until I wed." Anna reached across the corner of the table and squeezed Trent's hand. "Randolph has kindly offered lodging at his country home in Essex until we resolve future arrangements. The house is not far from the city, yet a fair distance from wagging tongues."

Will gritted his teeth. Trent had provided her with safe accommodations in a place he could reach from London on a nightly basis if he so chose to do so. A few days ago, Trent's visits with his mistress bothered him only mildly and regardless, he had no say in the matter. Now Anna's relationship with the man he loved seemed so much harder to accept and impossible to ignore.

Nonetheless, he'd agreed to share Trent's affections for a month. A trial of sorts. A ridiculous notion, the three of them living happily ever after but for Trent's sake, he'd give it a shot. But he wouldn't make it easy for her to monopolize his man.

"Your country house is being renovated if I'm not mistaken, Trent. All that dust and noise wouldn't suit a woman in her condition."

"The renovations are nearly complete," Trent stated calmly. "I thought we all might reside there for a while," he said carefully.

"What!" William stared, dumbfounded. "Live together? You take this notion of sharing too far."

"Fairhaven is cozy enough for familiarity yet spacious enough should a person wish to seek privacy. This London townhouse, on the other hand, has too many closely situated, prominent neighbors for our – experiment."

"I appreciate the offer, Trent. However, I enjoy living in close proximity to Bow Street. I've never been a man for the country."

"That is unfortunate, William, for I've already told the magistrate we will be residing at my country home while we investigate the murder case we discussed earlier. The deceased will be interred in the family burial vault on his estate, which is a short ride from my property."

"How convenient," Will said sarcastically. Once again, Trent had assumed responsibility for an assignment which worked to the viscount's personal advantage. "Is there no casework to be done in London?"

Trent's expression turned grim. "The family has already departed the city. Lord Pendleton's heir, an untitled nephew, is missing from his London home."

Anna gasped and her hand flew to her throat. "Lord Pendleton? Do you speak of Silas Chapman, the fourth Earl of Pendleton?"

"Yes," Will answered.

Her fair complexion faded to an ashen white. "He's dead?"

"I'm sorry, Anna." Trent leaned over and laid a consoling hand on her shoulder. "I didn't intend to bring the subject up in mixed company. Did you know the man?"

"Yes," she said hoarsely. "I know Lady Faith, his youngest daughter, especially well."

The frightened glaze in her eyes piqued Will's curiosity.

Chapter Eight

Anna folded her hastily written note and sealed it with a plain wax wafer. She'd arrived at Randolph's country house late in the day and there was no time to lose. The stable boy, reeking of horseflesh, hay and manure, stood just inside the terrace doors, shifting from one foot to the other while he waited for instructions. After the servants' betrayal at her father's house, entrusting an unknown person with so important a message made her extremely nervous but she had little choice.

The chair legs bumped over the worn carpet when she pushed back from the slant-front desk. Quickly, she rose and approached her errand runner. "Deliver this to Lady Faith and no other. Make haste, speak to no one of your errand and return immediately. Tell anyone of this and you will be dismissed."

"Yes, milady."

She thought to correct his address for she didn't merit the title but if she told him she ranked below the peerage, he might not deliver the note as instructed. Besides, if all went well, she'd be Lady Trent soon enough, so she remained mum. The boy slipped through the French doors to the flagstone terrace, mounted a small horse and cantered away. Luckily, the rain-softened earth dulled the receding hoof beats. Anna prayed Faith would heed the note's warning.

She debated about sending a similar note to her hotheaded stepbrother but she had no inkling where he'd fled.

She slumped back in the chair in an unladylike fashion – something she must work on if she became a viscount's wife but not now. She was too tired. Down the hall in the library, Randolph and Mr. Hall formulated a plan to catch Lord Pendleton's killer. Anna's fingers trembled at the thought of Brandon having anything to do with Pendleton's death. Could her stepbrother not wait to inherit?

What if Lady Pendleton carried a male heir right now? Highly improbable but many women had children late in life. She sighed. No, Faith had confided that her mother had experienced the "change of life". Brandon was definitely the heir.

If her stepbrother hadn't disappeared, she'd feel more confident about his innocence and his safety.

Pressing her hands against her queasy stomach, she rose and paced in small circles about the room. Not only was she related to a potential murderer, she might be considered an accessory to the heinous crime! After all, wasn't it she who told Brandon that Lord Pendleton had returned to his estate – alone?

How would Randolph react when he discovered her involvement? Oh Lord. Would he call off the wedding? For the sake of her unborn child, she couldn't let that happen.

If Randolph's investigation led him to her stepbrother's door, she'd be open and honest. If not, she refused to point a finger of suspicion at Brandon, who'd rescued her, when she was naught but thirteen years old, from violent rape at the hands of a man whom her father had approved for her husband. She owed Brandon her life.

What a fine mess. She'd best find out what her betrothed planned. Anna walked stealthily down the hall and put her ear to the thick wooden door but the voices inside spoke too low to hear. She knocked once and entered the library without waiting for permission. "Sorry for the interruption, love. I was getting lonely. May I join you?"

Randolph stood in greeting, his eyes glowing with affection. A soft smile automatically lit her face. She'd never tire of that adoring look from him.

Beside him, Mr. Hall hefted to his feet and spoke sharply. "We haven't concluded our business."

Anna bristled. So much resentment in that man! Well, how did he think she felt? The father of her child was in love with another man.

"I wish to help." Without an invitation, she sat in a nearby chair, hands folded in her lap.

Mr. Hall paced, his hands clutched behind his back, sneaking sidelong glances at Randolph. Neither man spoke.

Anna watched them and waited.

It was so easy to see the anguish in Mr. Hall's face. Was he thinking about the murder, or her interference in his life?

For her, the mental picture of the two kissing in the dark street pushed aside all thoughts of Pendleton's murder. Strangely enough, the memory both repulsed and intrigued her. Both men appeared too masculine for such a display. And what a display it had been! Randolph had kissed Mr. Hall with a hunger and energy he never exhibited with her. Few things ruffled her but that had tweaked her pride.

After all, she hadn't been a virgin when the enigmatic viscount first made love to her and still he'd been gentle and considerate. Since then, Randolph never changed his approach. In the last year, she'd pleased him every way he suggested, in any position. Willingly, eagerly, she took his cock in her mouth and her pussy. Occasionally, she relented to anal penetration, although she didn't enjoy it. He coddled her through their joinings, slowly building to the climax, never rushed, never out of control, pulling her orgasm from her body in supple, undulating waves. Always, he left her satisfied. Over time, she called the glow she felt in his arms, love. Until she saw him kiss Mr. Hall on the street.

Randolph loved her, she knew. But he was *in love* with Mr. William Hall.

As if her life wasn't complicated enough, she had to deal with Randolph's paramour.

Naught to do but plunge forward. "I know Lord Pendleton's family. There must be some way I can assist you."

Mr. Hall glared at her. "Our discussion is not the concern of a woman."

"Is it not? I believe three women have been profoundly affected by Lord Pendleton's death. Friends and family will be visiting and paying their respects. Now is not the time for sensitive questions. At least wait until after the funeral."

"Every minute lost gives the killer time to flee," Mr. Hall protested.

"That may be the case but if no one suspects him, why would the killer bother to run?" It was a question she asked herself over and over. What made Brandon flee? "Better to hide in plain sight."

"Hmm. A point well taken, Anna," Randolph agreed. "In times of calamity, curiosity often reigns over common sense. A killer may well linger, interested in the investigation process. If that is the case, a polite inquiry from Randolph Burgh, Viscount Trent, the neighbor rather than the Bow Street captain, might work best," he mused aloud.

Mr. Hall grumbled something about interfering women and resumed his seat, crossing his arms in disapproval.

"We could make it a social call," Randolph suggested. "Announce our engagement."

"Excellent idea." Anna beamed with approval.

Mr. Hall reclined against the sofa back, stretched out his legs, crossed his ankles and stared at his boots. Randolph sat down next to him and placed his hand on his friend's thigh. They exchanged a long, private look and then Mr. Hall uncrossed his arms. His hand fell on top of Trent's hand and he gave it a brief squeeze before they both pulled their hands away. Her stomach tightened but her smile never faltered.

"While you two question the family, I'll poke around the village," Mr. Hall offered. "My underage, runaway sister tale usually loosens tongues about strangers in town."

"Very good, William," Trent said with a nod.

A better proposal than she hoped! His absence meant she could enjoy Randolph's company more fully. Perhaps even sneak a moment or two of personal time.

After an extended period of silence, Anna smoothed the folds of her dress over her legs. A chill wafted through the room as the sun set. The fire needed tending but no one moved. Randolph settled against the sofa back, his arms spread across the back with one hand dangling loosely above Mr. Hall's shoulder. His legs spread slightly, without being obscene and his knee rested against Mr. Hall's tightly stretched breeches. His friend sat stretched out beside him, one hand tucked into his waistcoat and the other hand rested beside Randolph's hip. Both stared at a cloisonné jar sitting on a tall stand across the room, lost in their own thoughts.

To a servant entering the room, they would all appear to be relaxing in quiet companionship. Yet a taut invisible string connected the three of them limb to limb. If one tugged, the others would all tumble like broken marionettes.

Would every night feel this awkward? Anna was too tired to contend with the tension. "I'll send our calling cards over to Lady Pendleton in the morning. Tonight, I'm weary from the journey. I'll have a tray sent to my room and retire early."

"If you wish," Randolph said, rising and helping her to her feet.

She gave him a tender kiss. "Good night, love."

"Good night, Anna darling." He cupped her chin. "I think we all need rest tonight. The last few days have been turbulent."

Despite his words, passion edged into his eyes and it wasn't directed at her. Resignation pressed down upon her shoulders. She'd agreed to this trio arrangement, insisted upon it in fact. Now she had to live with it. "Enjoy your evening, sirs." With that blessing on their union, she swept from the room.

As she turned to close the door behind her, she was surprised to see Mr. Hall stand respectfully beside her betrothed and bow in a gracious farewell. She nodded politely in return and pulled the door shut on a sigh.

Tonight, leaving the two men alone wasn't as difficult as she expected. The trip and her pregnancy tired her. Not to mention all this emotional upheaval. Rest sounded wonderful. She'd need all her strength for tomorrow's encounter.

When the door clicked shut behind Miss Shaw, Will smoothed his palm up the back seam of Trent's jacket to his shoulder. He didn't like the way his friend's gaze lingered on the closed door. "She is a clever woman. Not many women understand the advantage of retreat."

Trent turned to him with a hearty laugh. "Do you think she is bidding her time to topple you from my affections? She would have to be very clever indeed." He grasped Will's jaw. "As much as I enjoy Anna's favors, I am mad about you."

The demanding kiss Will anticipated didn't materialize. Trent stroked his thumb pad over Will's lips. Need smoldered in his gaze but he banked the fire. Why?

"You know I reciprocate the sentiment, Trent."

"You love me too well, I'm afraid. Resentment and jealousy sparks off you whenever I look Anna's way."

Will had no rebuke.

"Trust me a little, will you, William?"

"It is difficult to watch you ogle Anna and hold on to the belief that you love me." Will rubbed a hand over his face. This turbulent need for Trent drove him mad. "I sound like a frivolous female." He stepped back with a sigh. If he didn't control his unbridled envy, he'd lose Trent as both lover and friend.

Trent grabbed his lapels and jerked him near again. He thrust his face close, their lips almost brushing when he spoke. "I want you every minute, day and night. Yes, I think Anna is alluring. That's nothing compared to how I feel about you. Give me a chance, William."

Hunger burned in his lover's eyes. And hurt. The fierce kiss he'd craved moments before now slammed down on his mouth. Strong fingers gripped and released the back of his jacket while Trent stabbed his tongue into Will's mouth. Groin ground against groin. Will swirled his tongue around the inside of Trent's mouth, stroking, retreating, teasing.

With a growl, Trent grabbed the lapels of Will's waistcoat, drew him back over to the sofa and nudged him in the chest. Will collapsed onto the seat. Under Trent's steely gaze, Will reclined on one elbow, lifted a heel up onto the couch, his legs wide open in invitation.

"Unbutton the front-fall on your breeches," Trent demanded, his voice gruff.

Eagerly, Will obeyed. Trent's predatory manner flushed Will's body with searing heat. As soon as he folded the flap down, his cock thrust upward like a divining rod seeking water. He shoved his shirt hem out of the way to expose the firm length to his lover.

"Stroke it."

Warmth tinged his jaw. His gaze locked on Trent's face, Will captured his friend's cock in his fist and pulled the skin toward the fat crown, then twisted his wrist and slid his hand down to the base. Straight up, twist over the crown, stroke down, he fondled his thick shaft until the head blazed bright pink. His breath hitched in his chest.

"That's it." Trent rubbed the bulge tenting his pants, proof that Will excited him too.

Will's buttocks contracted with each pull on his cock. He reached down and pulled up his balls so Trent got a good look at his puckered hole. "Fuck me," he said huskily.

"I want to watch you play with yourself, William."

"Don't you want to feel my balls roll around in your hand? Poke your fingers up my ass and watch my cock stretch to the limit? Lick the cream from the swollen head?"

"Is that what you think about while you rub that big cock of yours? My wet tongue sliding up and down your pole, licking and sucking, while I plunge my fingers in and out of your hole? You want to fuck my face while I fuck you with my fingers?"

"Hell, yes!"

A wicked half-smile teased Trent's lips. "I'll do all that and more. As soon as you accept Anna into our lives."

Will grunted, halting his hand mid-stroke. "Resorting to coercion now?"

"Showing you the alternative—long nights thinking of me while you frig your fist."

Will's boot slipped off the sofa and smacked the floor. "I know the alternative!" he shouted, jerking up to a sitting position. "I've lived it for two years!"

Taut silence followed his proclamation.

Damn Trent for forcing him to bare his private sins. Shame burned his face as he recalled the many nights he'd lain in bed pleasuring himself while he imagined Trent's hands and mouth gliding over his naked body. Dark, torturous nights engrossed in the

forbidden desire he hid from polite society. Living without Trent had been agonizing. Now that he had an opportunity to live his secret fantasy, going back to those lonely nights would be hell. And his friend knew it.

So why didn't he simply give in to Trent?

Because he was one stubborn bastard. He didn't want to share. Period.

"You led me to believe you'd be open to this blended relationship and you're not. You are barely civil to Anna." Trent bent on one knee between Will's open legs. "I want this arrangement to work, for all of us."

Will's slackening erection twitched back to life at Trent's close proximity. *A little lower, my man. Dip your head and lick me. I beg you.* "I guess I keep hoping you'll change your mind—or she will. Since that doesn't seem likely at this juncture, I want you to make it perfectly clear to Anna that this relationship is not an equitable fifty-fifty split of your time. You're here for the child and to save her reputation. You owe her nothing more."

Trent's brows drew together. "I do owe her more than that, William. I owe her my protection, friendship, respect and until she finds someone else to share her affections, I owe her companionship. What she already understands is that she will not have my fidelity."

"Nor will I," Will groused.

Trent smoothed his palms up Will's thighs. "No but you'll have not only my friendship, respect and companionship, you'll have the fullness of my heart."

"I'm selfish," Will said, running his hand over the crown of Trent's head. "Giving up just a small part of you is killing me. I want all of you." He kneaded his friend's scalp, signaling his need to bury his cock deep in Trent's mouth. "For now, I'll take what I can get."

Trent resisted the forward pressure on his head but his fingers dipped between Will's legs and massaged his inner thighs. "You'll be courteous to Anna?"

"Yes."

"You'll put a little effort into making our lives run smoothly?" One hand reached up, cupped his ball sac and gently rolled the marbles within.

"Yes." *Anything! Take my cock in your mouth!*

"You won't regret it, William." Trent lapped up the drop of moisture on the tip of his cock, gliding his tongue over the flaming cap and then slid his lips down the thick shaft.

Will sighed loudly as he watched his cock disappear into Trent's hot mouth. Although the desire to shove deep pounded in his brain, he held steady, letting Trent slide his wet lips up and down, working his way lower and lower until his lips brushed the bushel of dark blond hair at the base of Will's cock. His fingers gripped Trent's head. "Oh!"

The suction as Trent pulled back from the base lifted Will's butt off the sofa. His heart thudded in his chest. Then, Trent got serious. Wet kisses nudged his shaft to one side, then the other. His tongue swished around the fat crown, making it shine. Will's breath hitched when his friend's mouth closed over the sensitive head and sucked him. Once more, his cock disappeared into Trent's mouth. In and out, faster, easing off, then faster again. His balls pulled up tightly. Still, he resisted pummeling deep into Trent's throat. Trent was the boss, even when it came to making love and Will gladly submitted tonight.

When spit-slick, probing fingers swirled around his puckered hole, he let out a whimper and shifted down on the sofa, giving Trent better access. One digit sunk inside. Will groaned with longing.

Trent's mouth popped off Will's cock. "You want more?" A second finger nudged at the opening.

The pulse in Will's throat felt like it might strangle him. "Yes. God, yes." His thudding heart sounded loud in the quiet room.

The second finger barely pressed forward when Trent's body stiffened. "What's that?"

Alarmed, Will froze too. "What?" he whispered. And then he heard it. Thumping hooves, close to the house.

The men parted in a flurry of movement. Will yanked the flap up over his rock-hard erection and buttoned his pants as he followed Trent to the side of the window. "Who is it, can you see?"

"Someone small. He's heading for the stables. Let's go see what he's up to," Trent said, already heading for the door.

Will clenched his fists. Damn these interruptions!

Chapter Nine

"Who goes there?" Trent asked sharply, treading lightly into the stable with his hand resting on the pistol tucked into his waistband.

Will tarried a few steps behind, straining to see into the dark barn. The rider had dismounted and walked through the unlit building with the confidence of someone who'd trod there many times before. A servant had probably taken a quick ride into the village to meet a friend, sibling or lover. No harm done. Still, horse theft, even if temporary, was a serious crime.

A slight figure smacked his mount's hindquarters and the horse pranced into one of the new stalls. "Andrew, milord." His voice squeaked with nervousness.

The stable master swaggered down the center aisle holding a lantern. "Problem, milord?"

"Did you give this boy permission to ride tonight?" Flickering candlelight deepened the shadows on Trent's face, making him look more dangerous than usual.

The man stopped and slid a sidelong glance at the young rider. "I, uh, well, no...er, yes. That is, he has permission to exercise the horses as needed."

"After sunset? You are familiar with the dangers of night riding, are you not?"

"Yes, milord." The man hung his head. The lantern light reflected off his bald pate.

"It was urgent," the boy blurted out.

Trent cocked a brow. "How so?"

"I...um...the mare was acting skittish. I ran her to calm 'er down."

"Sea Mist? Skittish?"

"Yes, milord," the boy nodded emphatically. His eyes, wide as saucers, begged his employer to believe him.

Trent took a menacing step toward the stable boy. "That mare has never been skittish a day of her life. Now, where did you go?"

Will empathized with the frightened boy. At the stable hand's age, he'd been terrified of the aristocracy too.

"No farther than the Pendleton's estate, I swear!"

Trent shot a quick look back at Will and then turned back to his servant. "What business did you have there?" he asked softly.

"None!" His skinny knees knocked together.

Will shook his head. Such a poor liar. But the lad would learn.

Trent didn't move a muscle and the boy shook like a leaf. "Please don't dismiss me, milord. I won't ever ride off the estate again."

"You must have been paid very well to steal my horse for the evening."

The boy gulped. "I couldn't say no to milady."

The muscles in Trent's back bunched, shifting his custom-fitted evening coat. "Lady?"

An eerie feeling danced down Will's spine. Since no other ladies dwelled at Fairhaven but Anna Shaw, it appeared there might be more to Anna than met the eye.

No point in getting too excited yet but several reasons why Trent might exile Anna now ran rampant through his mind — she had another secret lover, she was warning the murderer of their arrival, she had an accomplice in her scheme to marry Trent and she was gloating about her success. True, none sounded very feasible but he clung to the hope that something would come between Trent and Anna and separate them.

"I delivered a note to Lady Faith," the lad admitted sheepishly.

So late at night? What could be so urgent?

Before Trent said anything that made him seem suspicious of his betrothed, Will placed a hand on his left shoulder and stepped to his side. "'Tis nothing, my lord." No need to fuel the servants' gossip about Trent and Anna. Besides, the longer Trent stewed, the better the chances he'd send her away. It was underhanded but Will learned at a young age that the winner doesn't always fight fair. "The ladies must be eager to see each other. Send the lad to bed. We have business to finish."

The look on Trent's face worried him. Anger, denial, hurt and mistrust flashed and disappeared into a closed expression. He gave Trent's shoulder a quick squeeze.

"See that the horse is rubbed down," the viscount snapped with a wave of his hand.

The boy scurried to do his duty.

Trent turned to the stable manager. "There will be no more night rides."

"Yes, milord."

Trent spun on his heel and stalked out of the stable. With a sigh, Will followed, sure that he'd have to ease the lingering ache in his groin himself.

Once they reached the center of the grassy field separating the mellow red brick manor from the stable and they were clearly out of earshot of anyone, Trent slowed.

"The rider must've left with Anna's message before she joined us tonight. He wouldn't have returned so soon otherwise," he said with disquiet in his voice. "Yet she said she'd send a calling card over in the morning." He slapped the back of one hand against the other. "What is she up to?"

Will treaded carefully on his lover's bruised pride. "The note may have been a simple announcement of our arrival."

"Possibly." But he didn't look convinced. His time as a military spy and subsequent years at Bow Street had given him a suspicious nature. Displeasure pulled down the

corners of his mouth. "She had better have a good excuse for risking the neck of one of my horses," he grouched, stepping onto the path that led to the tradesman's entry on the main floor. Gravel crunched beneath his boots.

No oil lamp burned out here. For a moment, Will considered yanking Trent into a strong embrace to calm him down and alter the course of his thoughts toward *him*. However, Trent's irritation with Anna might work to his advantage. Let the seed of doubt grow. If he was lucky, she'd be sent away by morning. "Do you intend to speak with her tonight?"

"I'm afraid I'll shake the truth out of her if I do." He leapt up the brick steps and yanked open the back door. "I will have a word with my steward, however. Any more secret messages will not be tolerated."

The throb in Will's cock wouldn't go away. He needed some privacy. "I'll bid you good night then."

"Meet me in the billiards room, William." His hard gaze brooked no argument.

Will held back a sigh of frustration. Trent had something on his mind and it didn't seem to be related to sex. Perhaps a quick trip to the water closet would suffice.

"I'm quite rusty with the stick, Trent."

Trent blinked. Will hadn't meant his comment to come out as a double entendre but it fit. His friend's lips twitched. "No bets then." He tilted his head toward the steward's door. "I'll meet you in a few minutes." His gaze dipped to Will's crotch. "And no practicing before I get there."

Chapter Ten

Ah, desire still stirred within Trent too. Will's cock twitched with anticipation.

Conveniently, the game room was located across the hall from the guest suites. To avoid gossip about intimacy with Anna, Trent quartered in the rooms adjoining Will's guest suite on the main floor rather than the upstairs master bedroom close to Anna's rooms. Will chortled. *If they only knew.*

He opened the door to the billiards room and stepped inside. The space was cool and dark, lit solely by the moonlight beaming through the windows onto the parquet floor. The sharp smell of fresh paint lingered in the air. Heavy drapes lay across the scrolled-legged billiard table in the center of the room, ready to be hung. Deeply cushioned benches lined the walls. The youth in him resented the signs of wealth but he knew Trent had worked hard to restore his family's prosperity.

"I approve," he said to himself. "Masculine yet comfortable."

He piled the drapes onto a bench and then plucked the billiard balls from the leather pockets and placed them on the green cloth covering the table. Catching sight of the cues lying in a long wooden box on the floor, he crossed the room and selected a finely polished mahogany stick. He stroked his hand down the smooth length, wondering how soon he'd find a release for his cock.

While he waited, he banked a few balls, his thoughts focused on the sinful uses for a cue stick. If it aroused Trent too, he might let him poke him with the smooth rounded pole. Lord knows, he'd masturbated with stranger objects. Would Trent like to smack the stick across his ass? His new lover promised he wouldn't hurt him, he'd never said anything about a little burn to enhance desire. A shaft-hardening spasm ran through his cock at the thought. He'd learned a lot about pleasure and pain since his days visiting The Gates of Hell, primarily about mutual consent.

When it came to Trent, any sexual play sounded good, even things he'd sworn he'd never do again. Love gave everything a whole new perspective.

He didn't hear Trent enter until he turned the key in the door, ensuring them privacy. "What a night. You're the only person I can trust, William."

Will leaned the top of his cue against his shoulder and glanced over at his approaching friend. "I feel the same about you, Trent."

Trent shoved a red ball across the table. It clacked into another ivory ball which bounced against the side. "Damn!" He gripped the edge of the table and hung his head. "Anna's subterfuge makes my gut burn."

When he raised his chin, the deep disappointment in his eyes stung Will to the core. Whatever her motive, Anna had made a big mistake.

"Is this her nature?" Trent cried, pushing away from the table and throwing his arms in the air. "Sending urgent messages in the night? I thought her clever. Is she devious as well? If so, how do I know the child she carries is indeed mine?"

Will raised a brow, his heart tripping wildly. "Do you have reason to suspect otherwise?"

"No." He waved a dismissive hand. "No! She is always chaperoned."

"Yet she meets you in secret," Will pointed out.

Trent ground his teeth. "Take your clothes off."

"What?"

"I need to bugger your ass."

Will tensed. "You are not going to bugger me when you're angry at Anna."

Silence hung between them.

"Then unbutton your flap so I can finish what I started earlier."

"I'm not putting my cock in your mouth either. You might chew it off." He carried his cue over to Trent and stood eye to eye. "What you need is swordplay to vent your frustration." He waved the cue in front of Trent's face. "Are you game?"

"With my cues?" His expression looked apoplectic. "I had them imported from South America."

"It's very hard wood." With a wicked smile, Will tilted the end of the long stick so it rubbed along the length of Trent's plump cock. "The winner chooses his reward."

Trent knocked the cue away with a curse. In heated jerks, he ripped off his coat and waistcoat. "Let's have a go." He stretched his arms above his head, out to the sides and rolled them in loose circles. His shirtsleeves billowed in fluid arcs.

"The shirt too," Will insisted, taking off his coat and throwing it onto the billiards table while he admired the shadows in the V of Trent's shirt.

The annoyance on Trent's face disappeared when he pulled the shirt over his head. It reappeared as he tossed the shirt across a bench seat.

Nice. The sight of Trent's torso never failed to stir him. His fingers itched to trace over the solid contours of his chest and the firm slope of his belly. The dark trail of hair leading into his breeches called to him, making him sweat.

Trent flexed his chest. "Are you sure you don't want me to fuck you right now?"

Will pulled his shirt over his head and flung it aside. "Maybe I want to fuck *you*."

Trent laughed but it had a nervous edge to it. "You had better win then, old sport. To the victor goes the spoils." He picked up a cue, shifting the length in his hand until he found the perfect balance. He swept his left arm up and scissored his legs. "*En garde*."

From the first *clack* of crossed cues, Will knew he didn't have a chance of winning. Trent had annoyance, motivation and experience fueling his strikes. Will fought like a London street rat, swinging wildly, using two hands when necessary. Trent danced

while Will twisted and stomped. Again and again, Trent's cue found Will's weak spots, jabbing his chest and lightly smacking his side, wearing him down while Trent barely moved his feet.

Their heavy breathing rasped into the quiet room. Perspiration beaded at their temples and dripped onto their damp chests. The cues whacked together and shimmied from the strikes. Fierce concentration knitted Trent's brows.

Will smiled devilishly when he lunged and popped Trent in the belly, scoring a point. When he tilted his cue tip up toward Trent's throat, the viscount ducked sideways, whipping his cue up beneath Will's and forcing his stick back toward his face.

Now Will dodged the hit. His own stick caught him in the shoulder and he cringed from the blow. "Nice reversal," he said, his chest bellowing from exertion.

It was a victory point. Had Trent been counting?

Before he could say more, Trent swished his cue and pointed the tip at Will's heart. "Do you concede the match?"

The fire in Trent's eye bore into him, warming his cockles. "Yes." He threw his stick onto the billiards table.

"Then..." His harsh breath echoed in the room. "Lud." He dropped his chin. "I shan't force my will on you."

"You won fair and square." Will knocked the cue pointed at him aside, wrapped an arm behind Trent's shoulders and drew him into a heated kiss. The cue clattered to the floor. He felt Trent's chest expand as he inhaled deeply through his nose and then, true to form, his lover turned predatory.

Holding on to the kiss by clutching the back of Will's head, he spun Will around so his lower back pressed against the billiards table. With his free hand, Trent unbuttoned Will's flap until the square front drooped to one side, enough for his raging erection to spring free.

Glory to God! They were finally going to make love tonight.

Standing between Will's spread legs, his lover narrowed his good eye and shoved him backward over the table. Will's boots flipped up on either side of Trent's hips.

Trent lunged at his erect cock, apparently as eager to suck the meaty shaft as Will was eager for release. He widened his eyes in surprise when Trent moaned through a long lick from his balls to the tip. The sounds of pleasure didn't stop there. He groaned as the cock slid to the back of his throat, hummed and slurped and made general noises of arousal as it glided in and out of his wet mouth. He'd never imagined Trent so...so expressive. It made him rock-hard.

When Trent eased off and flicked his tongue at the tip, Will twisted his fingers in Trent's fine hair and tugged upward, raising his chin. "God, Trent. Come up here with me."

Backing off from Will's solid erection, Trent looked up at him with a dark needy gaze and a half-smile that tugged one side of his mouth up.

Raw hunger stirred in his loins. Will scooted back onto the length of the table, kicking his cue out of the way. With a hard stare at Trent, he pushed his pants down to the top of his boots. Trent bounded up in a single leap. Thank goodness for the solid craftsmanship of the table's legs.

In the blink of an eye, Trent's breeches slipped down his thighs and his stiff cock thrust upward. He crawled alongside Will's legs until they were face-to-face. His fingers bit into Will's shoulders and he gave him a resounding kiss on the mouth.

It was hard to say if Trent forced him to lie back or Will eased down of his own free will. Either way, he had Trent where he wanted him, on top of him, rubbing his cock against Will's solid erection.

Tongues reached out and slapped each other in a mockery of their earlier swordplay. This was much more fun than jumping around, dodging blows but unfortunately, Trent quickly tired of the game. He bore down on Will's shoulders and plunged his tongue deep into his mouth in a heart-stopping kiss. A guttural moan resonated down Will's throat as Trent ground his pelvis against him.

Will's heart beat double time. He locked his arms around Trent's back and rocked up against him. His lover responded by gliding his cock up and down Will's belly in quick strokes, faster and faster, lubricated by the moist heat of their fused bodies.

Fuck me, you beast. Pound your cock into my hole and make me yours.

Will tried to lift his parted legs but the breeches bunched between his knees prevented him. He growled in frustration.

Trent slipped off him. He pivoted a hundred and eighty degrees, propped his head in his left hand and bent one knee, making it easier for Will's mouth to reach his engorged shaft. "You can suck me while I suck you."

More of a demand than an offer, it still stirred a primal response deep in his soul. "Sounds like a smashing idea." He ran his hand over Trent's flat belly, leaned over his friend's hip and flicked his tongue at the shiny head peeking out from the stretched foreskin. He couldn't resist a sneak peek at Trent's face.

The sight of Trent's parted lips so close to his cock twisted his groin tight. The thick shaft greeted his lover with an eager twitch. It was Will's turn to groan when Trent nudged the cock upright until it almost stood straight out from Will's belly and moistened the cock head with his hot, wet mouth.

Only an hour had passed, yet it seemed like it had been forever since Trent last closed his lips around Will's cock. Lud, it felt fine. And short-lived.

"More," he pleaded.

Trent grinned. "You have a gorgeous cock, Will. Have I told you that before?" He stuck out his tongue and slapped the head against it.

Will briefly closed his eyes. "I don't remember." His voice came out a bit unsteady. *Suck it.*

"Thick and meaty," Trent said, lightly stroking him.

Will held his breath as Trent swirled his tongue around the head and then backed off, resting his lips on the tip.

"Do you know how many times I'd wondered what your cock looked like? I imagined it longer."

Thanks, Trent. After nibbling on the side of Trent's extensive shaft, he retorted, "Sorry it doesn't live up to your standards."

"Nonsense. My cock is abnormally long. Yours is perfect," he said while he stroked the shaft right beneath the flared head. "The rest of you is so smooth and trim, I never imagined your cock so beefy, that's all." With an affectionate groan, he licked the fat vein running along the underside of the shaft. "It's incredible."

The roughly spoken words, as well as the slick, velvety kisses bestowed on his rock-hard cock, shot a firestorm straight to his groin. A good deed deserved a reward. He slipped his hand over Trent's hip and sank his fingers into the muscular butt cheek, drawing him closer. The musk of Trent's balls filled Will's nostrils, making him crave so much more. He lunged up and down his smooth cock, squeezing and sucking the long shaft. It seemed he'd found a way to silence Trent.

They gorged on each other in tandem, with Trent leading the way. When he licked, Will licked. When he nibbled, Will followed suit. When one sucked, the other one sucked. It felt like Will was giving himself oral sex.

When Trent reached over Will's balls and stuck his licked finger into Will's ass, Will hesitated to copy him. All along, Trent had been giving him "do not cross this line" signals. He didn't want to risk putting an end to the smoldering intimacy between them. So, instead, he dipped his head between Trent's legs and swirled his tongue around his hole.

"Aah!" Trent jerked.

Will backed off and looked up at him. Not another muscle budged while Trent stared at Will with one wide eye.

Daringly, Will leaned in and flicked his tongue around it again. The sphincter puckered. A long hiss broke the silence in the room. The curved end of Trent's cock swayed away from his sucked-in belly.

"Feel good?" He licked some more.

A noncommittal grunt burst from Trent's throat. He relaxed though, lifting his leg a little to give Will a better view. Will pushed the leg higher and dove in for a full ass rimming. Using every trick he knew, he licked and probed and kissed until Trent's butt hole gleamed.

While he worked to please his lover, Trent moved his hand away from Will's ass and grabbed his own cock, pummeling it. His grunts came faster now. His ball sac,

drawn up tight, rocked to and fro. "God, Will," he huffed, giving up on Will's cock for the moment. Red-faced, he closed his eyes and dropped his head back.

With a knowing smile, Will blew on the wet, puckered ring and pressed his thumb between Trent's balls, close to his anus.

Trent bucked and cried out. Cum shot out, splattering and sliding through the hair on his chest. More cream splashed onto his belly while he pumped his shaft. Will watched his lungs labor but as soon as it was over, he calmed quickly, taking long even breaths.

"You amaze me," his lover said in a soft husky voice as he slipped his fingers through the milky-white cream on his belly. He spread it over Will's throbbing shaft. "What's mine is yours." Placing a firm fist around the rigid pole, he stroked up and down, sliding the outer skin over the rigid inner shaft.

Will sucked in his breath when his foreskin slid toward the sensitive head. He closed his hand over Trent's fist and set a pace sure to make himself come.

"Yes, yes." He bit the inside of his cheek and clenched his buttocks, needing something to fill him up. "Oh God. Fuck me."

"I wish I could," Trent said with regret in his voice, looking down at his spent cock.

Will cut a glance to the cue stick nestled against the side of the table. Trent raised a brow at him. "Are you sure?"

In answer, he rolled onto his back and drew his knees to his chest.

With a little shrug, Trent grabbed the cue and held it aloft. "Which end?"

Will nodded toward the thicker end. He needed a good ass reaming tonight.

A flicker of arousal shone in Trent's eye. He swiped at the cum dripping down his chest and smeared it over the polished wood. Without giving Will another chance to say no, he nudged the rounded end into Will's hole.

The wood was cool and smooth and slid in easily.

"Are you okay?" Trent asked as the cue slid deeper.

"Great." He resumed stroking his burning cock at a fast pace. "That's good. Slide it in and out just like that. Mmm. Yeeaah."

"I find this strangely erotic, William."

Will lifted his head. Trent sat on his knees, slightly off-center from Will, one muscular arm gripping the breeches strung between Will's knees. His other arm pivoted back and forth and he slowly slid the cue in and out of Will's ass.

"Push it in deeper, Trent."

His friend looked doubtful.

"You're longer than that little bit you're sticking in me. *Fuck me*, Trent."

Trent pulled it out and measured his semi-erect cock against the cue. Marking a spot with his finger, he pushed the end back into Will. It hadn't gone in very far when Trent stopped. He kissed the side of Will's thigh. "You're making me hard again."

Sure enough, Trent's pink cock head peeked through its foreskin.

Will dropped his head back onto the table. "I've got to come, Trent. I'm dying here."

"By all means..." Trent slowly pushed the cue up to where his finger circled the wood.

Will grunted at the hard intrusion. "Again."

Trent slipped the wood out and slid it in again. While he held it deep inside, he leaned down and licked Will's balls.

"Yesss," he hissed, savoring the pleasurable burn as Trent withdrew the smooth cue.

"You look so damn sexy, Will." He turned his face against Will's inner thigh and sucked the skin.

The cue slid in and out faster. His arousal bowed higher and higher with each stroke. He hadn't expected the stimulation to be so intense. It wasn't the physical aspect so much as the control he gave Trent to pleasure him in an unconventional way. Although the slide of the smooth wood, deep into his body, made his breathing erratic too. Will fisted his cock in time with each thrust.

"I cannot believe how much you like this," Trent whispered in awe. He licked the hot spot he'd left on Will's thigh, then slid his moist lips down and sucked on Will's ball sac, never letting up on the steady glide of the cue.

A pounding pulse thumped in his neck. His sphincter contracted around the stick. A quickening down low tightened his balls. The head of his cock burned bright red. He dropped his head back, feeling his entire body tighten. *Give it to me, Trent.*

"Oh, William, you want a hard fuck tonight, don't you?"

"Yes, goddammit."

Trent emitted a groan of sympathy. "All right but if you tell me to stop, I will."

"I know. I trust you, Trent. Now make me come."

A muscle ticced by his eye. "Make ready." The cue plunged deep inside, sucked out and shot back in. Soon it bucked into him at a steady rate.

Will gave up trying to breathe normally.

"Do you like this, William?" Trent's voice sounded gruff. Aroused.

The cue didn't feel as good as a warm, flexible cock but the pure sinfulness of the act hitched his breath. He wished there was a mirror over the billiards table, so he could see the stick dipping in and out. Maybe he'd suggest it to Trent.

He grinned at his lover, although he was afraid it looked more like a grimace when Trent shoved the cue in again. A bead of sweat dripped into his ear. His balls bounced with each pounding stroke of his fist on his cock. He reached down with his other hand to massage the weighty sac.

His balls tingled. "Almost there," he panted.

"God, I wish I could reach your mouth right now. I'd give you the deepest fucking kiss you've ever had."

The cue pounded his ass, inflaming the ring of muscle at the entry. Deep inside, the stick bumped against a nerve that made him gasp over and over. He huffed rather than inhaled.

That's it. Fuck me with your stick. Take me anyway you want. I'm yours, Trent. I'm...ah...

"Yooooours!" he bellowed.

His cum arched high into the air and landed on the billiards table.

Trent pulled out the cue and stuck his middle finger into Will's contracting hole. "That's it, my beau. Shoot it." He rolled his finger around the circumference of the puckered sphincter.

Will rocked his hips back and forth, groaning as the last of his cum spurt out. He'd never come so hard in his life. Jesus Christ, it felt good! His ass was still squeezing Trent's finger. Quick jolts shot down his belly all the way through his thighs. Another spasm jerked his cock.

He didn't realize he'd closed his eyes until Trent surprised him with a gentle kiss. Blindly, he reached up and rubbed his hand over his lover's hair and kissed him back.

"I think..." Trent said, sounding just as out of breath as he, "We shall have a long, remarkable relationship, William." He popped his finger free and rubbed the tender hole while Will lowered his legs.

Warmth spread through Will's chest. "I'd better learn to play billiards if we're going to use this room on a regular basis."

Trent chuckled. "I think you know how to play very, very well." He plucked a handkerchief from Will's coat, which was scrunched up in the corner of the table and wiped the creamy splatters off the green cloth. The maids were going to wonder about that stain, Will thought with a smile.

After one last quick kiss, Trent jumped off the edge of the table and pulled up his pants. "I might have to reconsider our arrangement here."

"Without Anna?" Will asked hopefully.

"No. With all of us together."

"What?"

Trent looked at him with an expression of deep thought. "What she knows can be used against us. We need a way to keep her mum. Something that would destroy her reputation more than a child out of wedlock."

Will stared, open-mouthed, his spent cock quickly deflating. "I want no part of that, Trent."

"Oh, I think you might enjoy it more than you can imagine."

Chapter Eleven

A black bow hung above the doorway of the Earl of Pendleton's salon, its ribbons trailing over Randolph's broad shoulder as he led Anna past the threshold. Anna shivered at the dark omen.

Several other guests flowed around the room, paying their respects before drifting into the adjacent room where Lord Pendleton's body had been laid out. Three ladies in black greeted their guests with somber solidarity. Where Lady Pendleton and Judith looked washed out in their mourning dresses, Faith's pale skin gleamed like a pearl in a black velvet tray.

"Randolph Burgh, Viscount Trent, at your service, my lady," he said, bowing deeply.

He looked so handsome in his dark cutaway jacket and charcoal breeches. Despite the austere circumstances, Anna wanted to corner Randolph in a dark alcove and lift her skirts for him like she'd done so many times before. It had been way too long since they'd engaged in a quick, decadent coupling.

"I was so pleased to receive your calling card, Lord Trent." The black plumes in Lady Pendleton's turban nodded as she dipped a curtsy in greeting. She introduced her daughters and regarded Randolph with a keen eye. "All these years in close proximity and we've never met. Understandable, of course. Most young men prefer the bustle of the city. My husband enjoyed country life." Sadness washed across the widow's features. The corners of her mouth drooped but she quickly restored a pleasant expression.

Anna had never cared much for the stiff bearing of Faith's mother but she admired the woman's deep affection and loyalty for her husband. Lord Pendleton's death had hit Lady Pendleton hard and Anna intended to show her the deepest respect despite their differences.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, Lady Pendleton, and your lovely daughters," Randolph said, nodding to each in turn. "I wish we'd met under happier circumstances." He placed Anna's hand on his forearm. "I believe you are acquainted with Miss Anna Shaw."

Anna dipped into a curtsy. "Countess."

"Yes, we are acquainted." Lady Pendleton stared from one to the other with avid curiosity, a frown slowly forming between her brows. "Have you come here together?"

The lady's disapproval didn't surprise Anna. They didn't see eye to eye on many subjects, the foremost one being her stepbrother's infatuation with his cousin, Faith. Anna stood farther down the social ladder than Brandon, a poor relation whom Lady

Pendleton was forced to treat with the same respect as her husband's nephew. Seeing Anna in the company of an eligible gentleman more suited to Faith's social position must have put a severe crimp in the lady's corset.

"Indeed, my lady. Miss Shaw has graciously consented to be my wife."

Wide-eyed, Lady Pendleton gaped at Anna.

Faith smiled, although it looked a bit forced. "You will be our neighbor," she said, casting a wary glance at her mother.

Anna nodded. "There are a few estates between us but near enough." When she glanced at her lover, a tender smile lifted her lips and her heart fluttered. "I am looking forward to our marriage."

"Congratulations," Lady Pendleton offered weakly.

"Best wishes." Quiet, conciliatory Judith came to her rescue. "I am pleased my sister will have a lady living nearby who is close to her age."

Give or take six years, Anna reflected.

"And Mama will know a kindly gentleman whom she may call upon should the need arise." Judith lifted her doe-brown eyes to Trent. "Shortly after you inherited the title, Lord Trent, your reputation as a fair and honest man swept throughout London. There seem to be so many disreputable rogues about Town. It is a pleasure to meet a man with honorable virtues."

Anna beamed at her man, pleased to hear such high praise. Randolph, however, looked abashed. She wondered if he felt guilty about his illicit relationship with Mr. Hall. Or perhaps the ladies knew more about him than he suspected. For instance, his employment at Bow Street.

"You are too kind, Lady Judith," Trent murmured.

"All true, my lord," Anna declared.

More visitors sauntered into the room to speak to the Countess of Pendleton, forcing Anna and Trent to move on.

"Again, if there is anything I can do to help you, I am at your service, your ladyship," Viscount Trent offered.

"How kind of you." The countess's lower lip trembled. "Silas will be buried tomorrow. Afterward, there will be refreshments at the house. Please come." She hesitated a fraction of a second. "Both of you."

"We would be honored." Randolph excused himself to speak to an acquaintance out in the hall.

Faith drifted away from her mother, linked her arm around Anna's sleeve and steered her to the side of the room.

"A viscount. Quite a catch for a baronet's daughter," Faith whispered. There was no hint of jealousy or maliciousness in the remark.

Anna knew titles made no difference to the starry-eyed young woman. After all, Faith had fallen in love with Brandon before he inherited the earldom. As the earl's nephew, he had no title of his own. Certainly, she'd expected her father to enjoy a long life and Brandon would not have inherited for many years to come.

"I hear Lord Trent is renovating the house," Faith said. "It was a shame it fell into such disrepair during his father's viscounty."

"Randolph has worked very hard to restore the family wealth his father squandered." She hesitated to tell Faith how he earned a portion of his living now. Trent didn't want to tip his hand and yet, he intended to tell them, didn't he?

"That eye patch makes Lord Trent look mysterious," Faith said with fearful delight. "One might even say, dangerous." Faith cut a sidelong glance at her. "Is he?"

"He can be."

Anna watched Faith absorb her warning. Eventually, Faith cocked her head and stared into Anna's eyes. In a hushed tone, she asked, "Why did your note insist I stay away from Brandon?"

"Brandon is your father's nephew and heir to the title and therefore has the most to gain from your father's death. He will be interrogated thoroughly. I fear your reputation may suffer if he uses you as an alibi. Moreover, I shudder to think what your mother will do if she finds out you and Brandon have been meeting against your father's wishes."

Faith's face blanched. "Lord Trent is a constable, isn't he?" At Anna's nod, she stared anxiously into the hall at Randolph's back. "He suspects Brandon of murdering my father?"

"Not yet but it's inevitable. Where is Brandon?"

"Rooming at the village inn. Mother refused to offer him a bedroom in the house. She doesn't trust him anywhere near me." Faith sighed. "Soon, she'll have no choice. This is Brandon's house now."

Anna groaned. "He's closer than I hoped."

"You expected him to abandon me when I need him so desperately?"

"No, of course not." She was afraid Brandon was here long before Faith and her family arrived. "Remember, I am here for you too, Faith. If Brandon is innocent, you may get your fondest wish. If not, guard your heart."

Faith pouted. "Brandon would not kill my father. Not for the title. Not for my hand."

Anna believed the same thing. He wouldn't have killed him deliberately but could he have killed the earl by accident?

"Let Lord Trent do his work. Don't do anything foolish, Faith. Wait for the viscount's verdict." At Faith's grievous nod, she patted the young woman's arm and joined Randolph.

* * * * *

The odd looks Mr. Hall cast across Randolph's salon at Anna dampened her palms. What had he discovered?

The draperies had been removed for cleaning and the bright afternoon sun glistened through the wavy windowpanes. Elongated rectangles shone onto the wide plank floors. The room offered no shadows to hide her expressions. As hard as she tried, she couldn't hide her anxiety. "Did you learn anything of import in the village?"

"Only one stranger boarded at the inn. Mr. Brandon Chapman."

Oh, dear. Mr. Hall proved very thorough indeed.

"Do you know him?" He addressed Trent but Anna sensed he'd already made the connection between her and Brandon.

"I don't know him personally but I've heard he has a fiery temper. Especially when he loses at the gaming tables."

"That describes Brandon well," Anna injected. Best to beat Mr. Hall to the punch and admit her relationship. "However, he is not a drinker nor a philanderer nor a wastrel."

Randolph scowled at her. "Who is this man you call by his given name?"

Anna fidgeted with the finger seam in her glove. "He is my stepbrother. Shortly after Brandon's father was killed in a pistol duel, my father married Brandon's widowed mother. The marriage only lasted five years because Brandon's mother died. Then my father married my mother." Since Brandon went to live with his grandmother after his mother died, it would be easy to deny a close association with her stepbrother but many could attest otherwise. "I didn't know of his existence until we met at my coming out party." She didn't mention that Brandon, ten years her senior, had a penchant for innocent young ladies and attended many debuts. "Over the years, he has been a friend, a chaperone, an escort and occasionally, a thorn in my side. I rarely see him anymore. My father must've told him I'd left home in disgrace and he followed me here."

"Actually," Mr. Hall drawled. "He didn't mention you."

Oh...fiddlesticks! Anna's mind raced. Something having to do with her ate at the man but if wasn't her relationship to Brandon, then what? He'd trumped her once. She'd not try to second-guess him again.

"Mr. Chapman claims he is heir to Lord Pendleton's estate. Apparently, his father was Lord Pendleton's brother. He has come to discuss personal matters with Lady Pendleton," Mr. Hall reported. He raised a sardonic brow at her and then exchanged a long look with Trent.

Double fiddlesticks!

Trent gaped at her, shock and disappointment clear in his eyes. "Your stepbrother is the heir? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I..." Anna shrugged, at a loss for words. Knowing she had to say something, she offered a pitiful excuse. "I didn't know where to find him."

He slanted an incredulous look at her then paced the room, hands behind his back. "What is Chapman's current financial situation, Anna?"

"I'm not..." She fumbled over her explanation when he stopped pacing and pinned her with a pointed gaze. "He's not deep in the pockets," she admitted. "He owns a small estate he inherited from his grandmother that is beginning to show a profit."

"Which he gambles away?" Mr. Hall asked.

Anna stiffened her spine, refusing to comment. In truth, she didn't know.

"A struggling, hotheaded heir to a wealthy lord." Scorn rumbled in Randolph's chest. "Does he have an alibi for the night of the murder?"

"He says he does," Mr. Hall admitted, "but he will not say what it is."

"Do you know, Anna?"

"No," she said firmly. "I swear I would tell you if I knew his whereabouts that night."

Trent cocked a brow at her. "Would you, my sweet?"

Her betrothed didn't believe her, not that she blamed him but it hurt nonetheless. Anna looked at him forlornly, her heart plummeting into her stomach. Although her heart belonged to Trent, Brandon was family. She could not in good conscience cast blame on her stepbrother by voicing her suspicions. Or betray her friend, Faith.

Although it was the hardest thing she'd ever done, she held her tongue.

Chapter Twelve

Without drapes, the crisp autumn sunlight bounced off the salon's pale yellow walls, creating a bright space at odds with Trent's gloomy mood.

William's report had wedged another splinter of distrust into Trent's mind about his lovely bride-to-be. Although she hadn't outright lied to him, she'd withheld pertinent information from him, her stepbrother had motive to kill Lord Pendleton. Moreover, she'd sent a secretive note to Lady Faith upon her arrival at Fairhaven and now, heaven help him, she looked at him with desolate eyes.

He rubbed his fingers over his eyelid, shutting out the world, waiting for Anna to redeem herself. But she did not. She shielded her stepbrother, no matter the cost. Trent admired her loyalty to kin. Still, her silence rankled.

He lowered his hand from his face with a heavy sigh and stared at William. The lack of derision in his lover's eyes spoke well of him. A lesser man, watching his competition falter in Trent's esteem, would've been rubbing his hands together in glee. Yet, William regarded Anna with curiosity, more interested in her potential involvement in Lord Pendleton's murder than the fact that her disloyalty pushed the two men closer in mind and spirit.

The distraught look on her face gave Trent pause too. Did she worry about her stepbrother or the damage she'd done to her relationship with Trent?

"I want you to learn the truth, Trent," Anna sighed. "I pray my stepbrother is innocent but I don't know." She hung her head. "I really don't know."

Trent walked to the sideboard and poured whiskey into a tumbler. Rather than drink it, he swirled the amber contents, watching the sunlight refract across the cut glass. "Where were you the night of Lord Pendleton's death?"

"Me?" Anna squeaked. When he didn't turn around, she replied contritely. "At the theater with my father."

He spun to face her. The liquor splashed over his fingers. *A coincidence?* Rather than set down a wet glass, which would stain the wood, he clenched the tumbler tight. "Did you see Lady Pendleton and her daughters there?"

"Yes. I visited their box. Faith told me her father received an urgent message and had left Town that afternoon."

"A message from the estate manager?"

"I suppose. I don't know."

Trent made a mental note to follow up on that lead. Someone could've lured the earl out of London, away from his family, with the intent of killing him. But if that were the case, why not kill him on the road and make it look like the deed of a highwayman?

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, blotted the liquor on his fingers and set the glass down on the snowy linen. Trent had been a constable long enough to review clues from all angles. The message for Pendleton required further consideration.

Oddly, Anna's face flushed a guilty shade of pink.

"What aren't you telling me, Anna?"

She rubbed her temples in distress. "I told him!" She bounded up from her seat and crossed her arms beneath her plump breasts. The action momentarily distracted him. He hadn't tasted her sweet bosom in weeks and despite his anger and his ravenous hunger for William, he wanted her. "I never expected Brandon to follow Lord Pendleton. I only meant...oh...damn!"

Every nerve ending in Trent's body flinched, not only because she'd implicated her stepbrother but also because she never cursed. He hated to ask his next question. "Why would Chapman follow the earl? Was he going to ask for funds?"

Anna shook her head, the pins in her tight upswept coiffure popping loose from the abruptness of the movement. "I don't know his purpose."

Trent crossed the room and gripped her upper arms. She shivered beneath his grasp. Afraid he might be bruising her, he let go. Whether she lied or not, he'd never intentionally hurt her. She meant too much to him.

For an apology, he gave her a quick hug. It was a mistake, for the brief contact fueled his desire for her. He set her away from him as if her touch burned. "All right, start at the beginning." He backed his way to the hearth and leaned an elbow on the mantel.

"Faith told me her father left Town." Anna clenched her skirts. "She begged me to send a message to Brandon."

"Lady Faith did? Why?"

Anna hesitated, worrying her lip.

"Passing on a message does not implicate you in a murder, Anna. Withholding information does." Her gaze jerked up and locked on his face. Finally. He'd pierced her armor. "Tell me everything."

She cast a wary eye at William. "What I'm about to say is private family business. I'd prefer—"

"Are we not all going to be family?" William asked, his tone more tart than Trent cared for.

Her mouth gaped like a fish and snapped shut. Taking a deep breath, she plunged into her tale. "Brandon and Faith are... They want to marry. Lord Pendleton forbade it. He said first cousins shouldn't marry, which is ridiculous. It's done all the time. Brandon says the real reason for his uncle's ban reverts to his hatred for Brandon's father who upset Lord Pendleton's gig in a youthful carriage race, then left him with a broken arm while he went on to win the wager. The earl never forgave his brother. For some reason, he suspected his nephew of the same disloyalty."

Anna threw her hands up in disgust. "Lord Pendleton's rakish brother had little influence on his son. Brandon was two when his father died. At seven years old, Brandon's mother died, another sad tale in itself since my father did not see fit to raise the stepson who adored him. Brandon was raised by his maternal grandmother, cut off from his father's family."

"Given his relationship with Lady Faith, there must have been a reunion," Trent insisted.

"Not really." She pressed down the wrinkles her clenched fists had made in her skirt. After a long moment, she lifted her gaze back to his face. "He met Faith at a country fair, unaware of her relation to him. When Lord Pendleton spotted them together, he bore down on them in a rage. He had no idea what kind of man Brandon had grown to be but he's the spitting image of his father, which made Brandon's presence intolerable. As hard as Brandon tried to impress Lord and Lady Pendleton, they never saw him as his own man. So, for the last two years, he's been secretly courting Faith. He asked for her hand on several occasions, to no avail."

"So the message you sent him said...?"

"Simply that Faith's father left Town. I agreed to tell Brandon because I thought the earl's absence made it easier for them to meet secretly. They do love each other so much." Tears welled in her eyes. "I didn't mean anyone harm."

Trent's shoulders relaxed. She'd been protecting her friend. Her stepbrother's innocence had to be proven yet but in his mind, he cleared Anna. "Unless you suggested your stepbrother should kill the man, you are not responsible for his actions." Despite his intentions to keep his distance, he couldn't stay away when she looked so distraught. He strolled over to her and smoothed a loose curl back from her face. "So far, we have no proof or testimony he committed a crime."

"The earl's death may have been an accident?" she posed hopefully.

Trent shook his head. "His lordship was struck repeatedly until his skull split open."

Anna gasped. She crumpled to the floor before he could stop her.

Fortunately, his betrothed came around as soon as he laid her out on the sofa and began to fan her face with his hand. Fainting females annoyed him. He fervently hoped this would not become a habit.

"Sorry," she croaked.

"Hush." He jumped up and poured her a splash of sherry, bringing it back on swift strides. He spied William from the corner of his eye, who watched him with a slight frown. "Sip this." He held her head up and helped her drink. A line of red liquid slipped from the corner of her mouth. His thumb swept it up in a thrice and he sucked the liquid from his digit.

"Oh...I wanted to do that."

He chuckled. "Don't tease me when you're lying there half dead."

Anna struggled up onto her elbows. "I am not half dead. You shocked me and I passed out. I am not one of those weak-kneed women who faints whenever the wind blows the wrong way."

"Thank goodness for that. I'm sorry I was so blunt."

She plopped back down on the sofa, closed her eyes and pressed her wrist to her forehead. "I cannot imagine such violence, especially from Brandon."

"He does have a temper."

"I know," she said glumly. "But if he killed Faith's father, she would hate him and he'd never do anything to upset her."

"People do not think in the midst of crimes of passion." He regarded her pale face for a long moment. "What did the note you sent to Miss Pendleton say?"

Anna's eyes flew open.

"We intercepted your messenger last night. Don't worry, we didn't harm him. A few veiled threats and he told us everything he knew."

She blew out her breath. "I shall never trust another servant." She stared at the ceiling. "The message warned Faith to keep her distance from Brandon. If anyone saw them meeting clandestinely so soon after her father's death, the wrong conclusion might be drawn. A quick marriage will only make things look worse."

"Or one might make an accurate assessment of the situation," William interjected. "Mr. Chapman killed the earl to gain both wealth and his lover."

"They are not lovers!" Anna snapped, raising her head enough to glower at her nemesis. Lowering her voice, she added, "Faith swears he's never touched her that way." The admiration in her voice made Trent inwardly cringe. If true, her stepbrother showed more gentlemanly colors than he. Even now he thought about sliding his hand beneath her skirts.

"I don't believe he killed the earl either," she added, looking back at Trent. "I implore you to clear his name. In the meantime, I don't want Faith's reputation to suffer by association."

"I am always as circumspect as possible in my investigations, Anna."

"I suppose that is why you are so successful." She sighed and sneaked a peek at him. "Are you terribly angry with me?"

"I was," he admitted, cupping her face in his hand. "Now I am more disappointed than angry." He glanced up as William stalked to the door.

"I'm going to call on Mr. Chapman," he said sharply. "Are you coming?"

Torn between his lovers, piqued at Anna's duplicity and William's jealous moods, he spoke more sharply than he intended. "I'll meet you at the inn."

Focused on Anna's delicate face, he ignored the sharp slap of William's boot heels as he left the room. He waited for the footman to close the door behind his friend before he addressed his betrothed. "If you are to be my wife, you must have faith in me. Be forewarned...I will not abide secrets between us."

"I panicked, my lord. Brandon is family."

"Soon, I will be your family too."

"Yes." She clasped his hand and placed it over her heart. "I should've trusted you. You are an honorable man. Please forgive me."

The flutter of her heartbeat beneath his hand drew him closer. "You have an admirable spirit, Anna Shaw. I forgive you."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Please, Trent. Will you hold me?"

"For a moment, my love. I must follow William."

"I understand. I hate it but I do understand." She reached up for him.

His heart swelled as he slipped his arms beneath her slim back. She was so frail compared to William. Not frail among females in general but insubstantial when one compares a woman to a man. The mantel clock ticked loudly, reminding him of his promise to William. Still, he held her, savoring the supple curves lying beneath him.

Finally, he leaned up and stroked the loose tendrils of hair framing her face. "So beautiful," he murmured, brushing his lips over her temple. She clung to his waist, her breath quavering each time she inhaled. Certain she hovered on the brink of an emotional breakdown, he slipped his lips down past the outer edges of her eyes to her cheek. Sure enough, he tasted the salt of her tears. "Calm down, sweetheart."

"Randolph," she cried, clutching him tightly. "I've missed you so much!"

"Hush." He smoothed his hand over the slender slope of her shoulder.

"No." She grasped his wrist and pressed his palm to her breast. "Do not be gentle with me. Show me your ardor, Trent. Please!"

Anna's request stunned him. Do not be gentle? She carried his child. How could he be otherwise?

"You are in a delicate condition, Anna."

"The child is too small to harm, Randolph." She tugged down her neckline and displayed her plump breasts. "For you, milord."

Temptation battled duty. He feared if he delayed too long, his prime suspect would slip away. Also, the longer William must wait for him at the inn, the darker his mood would become. He did not wish to hurt the man of his heart. Yet, Anna's pleading gaze drove a wedge of guilt into him. He hadn't bestowed a great deal of attention on her since she'd announced her condition. Perhaps a measure of consideration was in order.

Besides, those breasts topped with pert dusky rose nipples, well-rounded even when she lay on her back, so recklessly displayed for his pleasure...how could he resist? He dipped his face into her cleavage, relishing the soft curves brushing against his cheeks. She clutched her breasts together, creating a deeper, fuller valley for him to enjoy.

One of the stirring things about Anna, she remembered every move, look and sound that he liked and played it back flawlessly without appearing repetitive. She was an open and responsive lover, eager to please. In return, he did his best to please her.

She sighed as he turned his head and kissed the inner curve of her breast. Yes, she was easy to please.

In some ways, both he and William could learn from her. The sex he shared with William was good, damn good but it lacked the comfort level he shared with Anna. William was spontaneous to be sure but he lacked faith in Trent's feelings. In the same vein, Trent had difficulty lowering all his defenses around William. He didn't know if he'd ever be comfortable enough to be on the receiving end of William's cock and he feared his reluctance to submit might drive a wedge between them. He'd hoped his new lover enjoyed being on the bottom all the time but William had already dropped hints he wanted more. In frustration, Trent drew hard on the side of Anna's breast. His relationship with William seemed so fragile.

A small gasp from Anna drew his attention to the pressure he exerted on her skin. He released the suction immediately, remorseful at the red mark he'd left behind. "I apologize, Anna. I—"

"Nonsense. I enjoyed it." She placed her hand on top of his head. "Take my nipple in your mouth, Randolph, and suckle me."

Carefully, he licked around her areola, feeling the tiny bumps raise as her nipple puckered tight. He stabbed his tongue at the rigid bud and licked it before closing his lips over the tiny cone. It felt so small after having William's cock in his mouth that he opened his jaw wider and sucked the nipple, areola and a bit of surrounding flesh into his mouth.

Anna's fingers curled into his hair.

In the near future, his child would be suckling on Anna's breast. Would the baby appreciate the lilac fragrance on her skin, the change in texture between breast and nipple? Would he cause his mother to arch her hips up like she did when his father fed on her? Lud, he hoped not. He wanted her to appreciate the difference between his burning appetite for her and a child's hunger. His child would have to learn to share.

A potential glitch in his plans gave him pause. Would Anna want Trent near her milk-laden breasts following childbirth? Unlikely. The thought of these luscious mounds inaccessible to him made him dig his fingers into both breasts and draw harder on his treat. He'd get the child a wet nurse.

"Ooo, Trent." She dragged up her sheer skirt, hiking it up her calves.

He raised a brow at her impatience. Usually, Anna followed his lead but no matter. He was in a bit of a rush too—to meet up with William. When he rose up on one elbow to switch breasts, he shoved the bulk of her thin gown up to her waist. Where pantaloons normally covered her from waist to knee, today she wore nothing but her chemise beneath her gown. How blessedly handy.

He closed his mouth over her other taut nipple while he stroked through the moisture-laden hairs on her pussy. Each gentle tug from his lips drew a matching spasm between her legs. His fingers delved into the warm wet channel primed for his burgeoning cock. The speed of her arousal spiked his lust in equal measure.

"I need you inside me, Trent. Now. Please." She hooked one leg over his buttocks and dropped her other foot to the floor beside the sofa. "Oh, please!"

The scent of sex wafted up from her lush open folds. In his rush to penetrate her, he fumbled with the buttons on the drop front of his breeches, a first for him. In the span of a few breaths though, he'd freed his cock and replaced his slick fingers with his thickening staff. As soon as she enveloped him in her body, he hardened into a full erection. A few strokes and he'd stretched to the limit.

In his excitement, he inadvertently bit down on the nipple in his mouth. Anna cried out but made no further complaint. In fact, based on the heated glow in her eyes, it seemed as though she'd liked it. He'd never suspected she might like rough sex.

He eased off her nipple, noting its reddening hue with a pang of guilt and pressed his cheek against hers. He slowed his forceful thrusts to a steady but gentle plunge in and out of her sopping core. Women shouldn't be manhandled like a...well, like a man. They were soft, delicate creatures meant to be coddled, pampered, drawn into an orgasm on a gentle wave of ecstasy.

She arched up, driving him deeper. He accommodated her by sinking as far as he dared on each forward push, his child's well-being drifting at the forefront of his mind.

The chime of the hall clock reminded him how much time slipped by. He had to go. "Are you close, Anna?" he asked, knowing she enjoyed their coupling but he hadn't felt any telltale contractions leading to orgasm. At least, not since he bit her nipple.

"Yes."

He suspected she sensed his impatience to end it quickly. In recompense, he reached between their bodies and found the little nub that always made her hitch her breath when he rubbed it. This time was no exception. He drew the slick cream from around his sliding cock and smeared it over the swollen bud in quick firm strokes.

Anna's eyelids drooped and her lips parted on ragged breaths. Her breasts rose and fell at a faster pace.

"Come for me, sweetheart. Squeeze my cock and bathe it in your cream."

A small cry burst forth from his lover. The pressure around his cock tightened. Mmm, much better. He pumped harder, holding back the forceful thrusts his body craved, yet driving into her body vigorously. It was enough to draw his balls up tight.

His heartbeat pulsed in his neck. "I must make my release," he ground out.

"Yes, my love." She held on tight as if his climax might propel him away.

His body jerked when the first of his seed spewed forth. He sank deep, holding steady as his hot cum spurted deep into her wet sheath. A groan stuttered up his throat as the last bubbles of pleasure burst from his body.

When it was finished, he pulled out of Anna's warm cunt and pecked her on the mouth. "Very nice, don't you agree?"

Eyes closed, she murmured her assent.

Trent sat up on the sofa and pulled a handkerchief from his inside coat pocket to wipe away the sticky mess at the junction of Anna's thighs. When she seemed reasonably clean, he pulled down her skirts and stood, finally swiping the linen square over his softening cock. On the way out, he'd stop by his room and leave the dirty handkerchief in his washbowl for his circumspect valet to launder.

"Rest, darling," he said, tucking everything back into order. "I must hasten to meet William."

With a final buss on her cheek, he hustled from the room, his thoughts firmly set on the task ahead.

It didn't enter his mind until he'd ridden away that Anna hadn't found her release.

Chapter Thirteen

By the time Trent approached the village inn, foam dripped from his horse's bit. Will sat restlessly in his saddle, anxious to share his news. The words froze in his mouth as the smell of man and horse and...the ripe aftermath of fucking reached him.

Damn him! He knew Trent would succumb to the wily Miss Shaw.

"Mr. Chapman is not here?" Trent asked, reining in his mount.

Will bit back his anger. Trent had never promised fidelity. Yet he'd foolishly hoped... Pah, he would not dwell on it now.

"The innkeeper said Chapman set off an hour ago," he said in a clipped tone. Had Trent not dallied with his betrothed, they would have a suspect in custody right now. He didn't have to tell Trent that. The guilty look on his friend's face told him they thought along the same lines.

"This way." With an urgent kick to set his horse in motion, Trent raced down the main road and veered onto a wheel-rutted carriage lane tunneling through the woods. Ahead of them, fresh horseshoe prints broke the drying mud.

"Shortcut!" Trent yelled, cutting onto a narrow path.

Grinding his teeth at the wild ride, Will jerked his reins to the side and followed Trent's horse at a canter. Dying leaves clung to low hanging limbs which impeded the way. While Trent expertly swerved through the forest, Will ducked and dodged and cursed the encroaching trees. How he hated the woods in autumn!

The smell of damp, decaying leaves swept him back in time. It had been a cool day like today when he and his mother had left London bound for her new employer's country estate. He'd never been outside the city before. He recalled the blur of autumn color passing outside the carriage window. The fear and excitement of moving to a new home had knotted his stomach. His mother's bubbly smile flashed before his eyes. He remembered her delight over her elevated position as lady's maid. He hadn't been too keen on leaving his friends behind but she'd made it sound like a fascinating adventure.

They'd never made it to their destination.

Sweat dripped down from his hatband to his jaw.

Against his will, the terrible memory flashed through his brain like a nightmare.

Not far from the city, a masked highwayman had accosted their stagecoach and then dragged his mother into soggy, leaf-rotting woods like these. Will had chased after her and witnessed the robber raping her. He'd stood frozen in place, crying because his mother was crying. When the highwayman aimed his pistol at his mother's head, she'd screamed at Will to run and hide. He did, covering his ears when the pistol fired.

A long time later, he crawled out from his hiding place. The coachman had bolted, leaving them behind. Will had been six years old.

If a tailor traveling the London road hadn't heard his soulful cries, he might've stayed with his mother's dead body until he'd froze or starved to death.

Pushing the dark past away along with the spider's web clinging to his damp cheek, he turned his thoughts to happier times. The tailor had taken him in and he'd grown up below stairs with two foster fathers, a tailor and a cook, who loved each other with grand passion.

The back of Trent's greatcoat caught his eye and an inner glow filled him. Like his fathers, he shared heartfelt passion with Trent. However, the two men Will had grown up with had bonded for a lifetime. He wasn't sure how long he and Trent would last.

Trent turned his horse *again*. God save him. Would they ever find their way out of here?

A short while later, the detour proved worthwhile because they burst back onto the carriage lane in sight of a horseman ahead, who swayed back and forth in his saddle in rhythm with the horse's slow gait. Will could breathe again.

At the sound of galloping horses behind him, the lean man jerked upright and kicked his horse. Man and horse were no match for Viscount Trent though. In seconds, Trent caught up to the fleeing man. Slipping one foot free of his stirrup, he looped his leg in front of him, riding sidesaddle until he drew close enough to jump the rider. They both tumbled to the ground and grappled in the ditch. The horses scampered away.

It didn't take long for the brawnier man to prevail. Trent dragged the stranger to his feet and yanked his thrashing arms behind his back.

"I have no purse!"

"We don't want your money," Will said quietly.

The man stilled, breathing heavily. He lifted his gaze, his eyes widening when he recognized Will. "What is it you want of me now, Runner?" He licked a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. "I've told you I have family business to attend to." For a brief second, his gaze shifted down the path.

In the distance, a flash of a white hem caught Will's eye. Straining to see through the falling leaves, he spotted the corner of a thatch-roofed stone building not too far ahead.

"Meeting someone at Pendleton's hunting lodge?" Trent asked.

Chapman's lips thinned, sealed tight.

A hard gleam settled in Trent's eye. "What are you about?"

"My dealings are none of your concern. Now release me at once."

Trent gave his prisoner no leeway. "As Lady Pendleton's neighbor, it is my civic duty to forewarn her of trouble."

Will made a mental note to keep Trent's affiliation with Bow Street a secret for now. Obviously, Trent wasn't ready to play that card yet.

"Neighbor?" Chapman looked over his shoulder at Trent, taking in his eye patch and a quick glance at his expensive clothes. His face paled. "Bloody hell, you're Lord Trent, Anna's paramour. My stepfather told me about you."

"I am her betrothed."

The admission hit Will hard in the chest. Trent would never be able to claim him publicly. With Anna on his arm and a baby in the nursery, everyone would assume the satisfied gleam in Lord Trent's eye stemmed from marital bliss, not from the love of his male consort.

Open affection had never been an option for him but hiding behind a woman's skirts tweaked his pride.

"Miss Shaw has spoken of you too, Chapman," Will sneered. His saddle creaked as he adjusted his seat. "I am compelled to place you under house arrest until my investigation is complete. I must advise you, sir, that you are the prime suspect in the murder of Lord Pendleton."

"No!" Chapman winced when Trent jerked his arm between his shoulder blades. "Good God, man. I *did not* kill him. He was killed before we had a chance to meet."

Will glanced at Trent, trying to read his thoughts by his expression, an impossible task. They had little to go on and no witnesses to confirm or deny the man's claim. Not yet, anyway.

"Do you deny following the earl to his country house the night he died?" Trent asked.

The man's head drooped. "I wanted a private interview with Pendleton," Chapman admitted. "When I heard he'd gone to his estate alone, I jumped at the chance to meet with him. I arrived late in the evening. The footman informed me the earl had retired. I pushed past the servant, insisting on seeing his lordship but the man caught up with me and convinced me to return in the morning." He studied Trent with woeful eyes. "By sunrise, I was too late. Pendleton had been discovered in the wine cellar, his head bashed in."

An odd place for a murder, Will thought again. He looked forward to interviewing the wine steward.

"The parson handled the situation at the house while I rode back to London to advise the family," Chapman said.

Trent snorted. "No one could find you after Pendleton's death."

"On the way home, a business associate waylaid me. We'd been working on a land purchase in Surrey for months and it looked like it might come through. What I thought would be a few hours' delay turned into an overnight excursion. By the time I returned to London, the family had left for Essex." Chapman raised his chin and stared defiantly at Will. "It's the servants you should be hounding. Not me."

"Yet during the initial interview at the Home Office, Lady Pendleton cast no blame toward any servant," Will said. Which made no sense to him. He reflected on all the

mischievous he'd witnessed and participated in, while working below stairs. Then again, the servants usually got blamed for everything. It spoke well of the lady that she hadn't cast blame on her staff.

Trent quirked a brow at Chapman. "Only *you* raised a modicum of suspicion, sir." He dragged Chapman back to his grazing horse and whistled for his own wandering gelding. "You shall accompany Mr. Hall. As it happens, he is my guest tonight and so shall you be, sir. Mount up."

The man's cheeks paled. "Very gracious of you. However, I have a funeral to attend tomorrow. I do not think my green hunting jacket will be appropriate attire."

Trent brushed at the dirt and leaves on his clothes and adjusted his skewed eye patch. "I'm sure we can find a suitable coat for you. Now mount up." His tone brooked no argument.

While Trent held the reins, the fellow mounted. Trent's horse ambled back to the group and waited patiently for its master. With Chapman's reins tight in his fist along with his own reins, Trent slipped a boot into his stirrup and swung a leg over his saddle.

Will's horse skittered sideways in the crush of horseflesh. This ride would not be over soon enough.

He stared straight ahead when they passed by the stone hunting lodge, ignoring the flash of blonde hair and white muslin inside the dusty window. He noted Chapman casting sidelong glances at the building, his expression crumpled with longing and regret. Lady Faith would not be meeting her beau today.

A mental image of the two lovers clasping each other in a joyful embrace sparked the memory of Anna Shaw's perfume on Trent. His gut tightened. The evening plans he'd envisioned when they returned to Trent's home fizzled. No sipping fine spirits while naked in front of the hearth, no leisurely exploration of hard bodies and harder erections. Not even a passionate kiss. How could he touch Trent after *she*'d rubbed her scent all over him?

God, he needed more time to think this strange relationship through and it was damn difficult with this case on his mind.

* * * * *

The funeral was a long, drawn-out affair as befitted a member of the nobility and tired Trent beyond reason. People had traveled from all over the county and Town to pay their respects. After the burial, a long procession of visitors returned to the house.

Bleary-eyed and solemn, Lord Pendleton's widow stood in a loose knot of family and friends inside the drawing room, accepting condolences. She was clearly not happy to have Chapman at her side. Ignoring her nephew, she accepted William into her home as Trent's friend and guest but deeply etched lines on her brow expressed her displeasure.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, my lady," William said, raising his chin and clasping his hands behind his back. "The Home Office instructed me to conduct interviews as soon as possible. I'm sure you don't wish to hinder the investigation into your husband's untimely death."

Trent did his best to remain stoic. It was amusing and gratifying to watch William imitate *him* while holding his temper in check. *Nicely done, my man.*

"No, no." Flustered, she waved her handkerchief. "You have your instructions." She frowned at her nephew. "I would feel safer with a Bow Street man in my home. At least today I hold sway in household decisions. Tomorrow—" Her voice cracked and she held her handkerchief to the tears swelling in her eyes. "I may be tossed into the street."

Trent, who rarely smiled under normal circumstances, felt the lines bracketing his mouth deepen. "I am certain your nephew will make living arrangements agreeable for all," he interjected, staring hard at the new Lord Pendleton.

The gentleman mumbled something agreeable and turned to speak with Lady Faith.

William sketched a quick bow to the widow. "I shall withdraw as soon as I pay my respects to your daughters. With your permission, I'll conduct interviews in the kitchen."

"Yes, of course." The dowager countess waved her hand in dismissal.

Trent inwardly seethed at her pompous treatment of his consort. If she kept it up, he might snap her fluttering hand right off her wrist. "Wait, William," he said before his friend left.

Lady Pendleton pressed her lips together in irritation when William turned around.

Tamping down his anger, Trent directed his question to the countess. "Do you know who sent the message asking your husband to return to the estate?"

She looked perplexed and then the lines on her face cleared. "The estate manager, I believe."

William nodded to Trent. "I'll start with him as soon as I leave here." He turned on his heel and drifted closer to Pendleton's daughters who were overwhelmed by a younger crowd of sympathetic neighbors.

When Trent's gaze followed William, he noted a young miss stared at him too, with coquettish interest. *Poor girl.*

He understood her infatuation. William was a handsome devil but she didn't see *his* William at all.

Trent needed a breather from the solemn whispers and constant sobbing. He escaped into the hallway and leaned against the wall opposite Lord Pendleton's drawing room, watching the milling group inside. Lack of sleep had put him in a foul mood.

Last night, Anna had greeted her stepbrother with restrained happiness and then frowned at Trent for the balance of the evening. She'd made it perfectly clear that she did not intend to share her affections with Trent that evening. He, in turn, decided not to press her.

The interview with Chapman had yielded no more than what he'd told them in the woods. William had insisted on guarding Chapman's door all night to prevent the man from bolting again, which Trent felt unnecessary but William ignored him. He gave up on pleasing anyone, withdrew to the library to catch up on correspondence and eventually retired to his bed alone, tossing and turning, yearning for the hard length of William beside him but too stubborn to fetch him. The man wasn't his lapdog, after all.

But Lud, he'd missed him.

When William finally made his excuses and exited the drawing room, Trent wanted to grab him by the lapels, drag him into the nearest alcove, slam him against the wall and kiss him madly. Instead, he inhaled deeply, willed his growing erection down and nodded to his friend.

William leaned close, dipped his head down and spoke softly. "I'm going below stairs to interview the servants now. Try not to glower at Lady Faith. I think you're scaring her."

"Perhaps a fright will loosen her tongue and she will tell us the truth about her lover's claim of innocence."

"I'm afraid that might be a lost cause."

"Indeed." Trent glanced from Lady Faith to her mother. "Lady Pendleton's opinion is equally biased, except she believes he's guilty."

"She *hopes* he's guilty so he won't turn her life upside down."

"Yes." Just standing by William's side relieved the tension coiled inside. "Perhaps Lady Judith has an unbiased opinion. Shall we meet before supper to compare notes?" He cast William a look that said he wanted some private time with him.

William's lips tipped up in a sensuous smile. "I'll be looking forward to it." Whatever had been bothering him seemed to have passed. "Since the house is full of guests, why don't we meet at the lean-to where the late arrivals tied up their horses? There is a feed shed attached to the back."

Trent brushed at a speck of dust on his black jacket. "Five o'clock."

He looked up in time to see a pregnant housemaid cross the hallway carrying a high stack of linens. Just then, Brandon Chapman walked out the drawing room door with the Ladies Faith and Judith on each side. It was hard to say who ran into whom. Neatly folded white squares tumbled onto the floor.

"Oh!" The girl stared at Chapman with a mixture of horror and awe. "Beg your pardon, milord!"

"Watch where—" A quick glance at the servant and Chapman shut his mouth. He even turned a bit red around the collar.

William rushed over to help the girl pick up the linens. Although he spoke to her, she ignored him, her gaze locked on Chapman who was too busy fussing over Lady Faith to pay the servant any more mind. Lady Judith also assisted with restacking the linens in the girl's arms and shooed her away as soon as the last slightly askew square plopped on top.

Trent felt like a useless popinjay. On the other hand, he might not have witnessed the odd interaction between the servant and Chapman if he'd joined the fray. Those two bore further scrutiny. Was it his child she carried?

"She knows better than to pass through this hall today," Judith told William. She glanced over at him and smiled. "Lord Trent, we are going to take a turn around the garden before the sadness of my father's passing crushes our spirit entirely. Would you gentlemen care to join us?"

"I'm afraid I have business to attend to but thank you for the offer," William said, bowing away.

He tried not to stare after William, afraid his longing might show in his eyes.

The fifth Earl of Pendleton and Lady Faith had already wandered down the hall, arm in arm. If Lady Judith meant to chaperone, she didn't seem too worried about misconduct between the secret lovers.

"I'd be honored to join you." He peered into the drawing room to see if he could catch Anna's eye.

Judith followed his gaze. "Anna is engrossed in a quiet conversation about blunderbusses or some such thing with my father's friend, Lord Humphrey. We'll be back before she realizes you've gone, my lord."

"That doesn't speak well of my place in her affections," he said without rancor.

With a smile, Judith took his arm. "Come. You look like you need to stretch your legs."

They walked down the hall of family portraits, matching noses and eyes and full lips from generation to generation. Trent stopped with a jerk in front of a portrait of a pistol duel. One man stood with his back to the viewer, arm outstretched, smoke rising from his pistol. His opponent bent over backward, clutching his head, his pistol falling to the ground. It was an unusual subject matter to say the least.

"Ah, my Uncle Tyler, Brandon's father," Judith explained with a sigh. "My father wanted to remember his brother's death. Morbid, don't you think?"

"What was the duel about?"

She cocked her head at the painting. "A jilted husband demanding satisfaction."

He raised a brow. "Chapman's mother committed adultery?"

Lady Judith laughed, the sound pleasantly musical. "Not at all. The other gentleman called Uncle Tyler out for sleeping with his wife. My uncle was quite the ladies' man." She looked down the hall after her sister and then down at her feet. "It

seems to run in the family." Her cheeks turned pink, as if she'd said too much. "My father said his brother got what he deserved." Her lips thinned.

Trent didn't know what to say. Evidently, Pendleton's animosity toward his brother and his son ran deep. He was about to walk on when the candlelight illuminating the hall reflected on the bright handle of the falling pistol. His breath caught in his throat. He'd seen that pistol before. In Snake Cavern.

"Is that pistol the one that is missing from the house?"

"Why, yes." She looked at him quizzically. "What is the matter?"

"I've seen one like it. Recently." A jolt of excitement surged through his veins. "Please excuse me. I must speak with Anna."

She blinked in surprise. "Yes, of course."

He walked at a fast pace back to the drawing room.

Chapter Fourteen

"Come with me." Trent towered over Anna. She sat prettily beside an elderly gentleman who scowled at his bad manners. "Please." He proffered his arm. "I have a weapon I want to show you."

Anna perked up at that. "Excuse me, sir," she said to the man as she rose.

Trent tucked her hand through his crooked arm and strode from the room. Anna's heels clicked rapidly beside him.

"I need your expert opinion on a rare pistol."

"Here I was hoping the 'weapon' was something more personal." Her gaze dropped to his crotch.

He arched his brows in surprise and then laughed at the pout on her face. She brightened and flashed him a seductive smile. "You never cease to amaze me, Anna."

"You never cease to excite me, Randolph."

"Hm." Her flirtation roused his cock. The pregnancy hadn't dulled her passions one whit. More often than not, William occupied his thoughts but Anna's gregarious nature and sensuous allure also filled him with joy. "I shall endeavor to keep you happy, my dear."

Her smile grew.

"Behave yourself, love. This is not the time or place for play."

She nodded, folding her hands primly in front of her gown. The innocent pose almost made him laugh aloud. Anna acting like a virgin was one of his favorite games. If he didn't have a previous engagement, he might have thrown her over his shoulder and carried her off to his room. He shook his head at her antics.

"Here we are," he said, stopping in front of the duel painting. He pointed at the fatally wounded man in the picture. "Take a look at that pistol. Could it be a one of a kind?"

She withdrew a quizzing glass from her reticule and looked at the painting closely. "It's possible. The design is French, probably one of a set of prized dueling pistols. Tracing it will be difficult considering our relations with the French are strained."

"A set. Of course." Had the entire box been stolen the night of the murder or just one pistol? Finding one or both guns would help the investigation immensely. What was the connection between the smuggler at Snake Cavern who possessed it and Pendleton?

His thoughts drifted back to the night he and William went undercover and helped the smugglers unload their booty. He envisioned the fat, white-haired smuggler with

the gun tucked in his waistband. Details of his shadowed features eluded him but the man had a birthmark on his back shaped like a boot.

Trent hadn't liked the way the man had stared at William, whose youthful, unblemished body had glistened in the torchlight, his lean muscles straining from the weight of the smugglers' casks. My God, he was beautiful. A golden-haired Adonis ripe for picking. His. All his.

Was it five o'clock yet? He had a strong need to touch William, stroke his bare chest, caress his cock and balls...

His skin flinched when Lady Judith spoke to him as she approached, yanking him from his memories. "Still intrigued by that painting, Lord Trent?"

"Yes. Stay a moment if you will." He waited for Pendleton's nephew and Lady Faith to catch up to her. Chapman made a slight grimace when he noticed where they all congregated.

Trent supposed he'd have to stop thinking of him as Mr. Chapman and address him properly. "What can you tell me about your father's pistol, milord? Was it part of a set?"

For a second, the new Earl of Pendleton hesitated and then he gave a brief nod to Trent. "Yes. He commissioned the pair while in France on his wedding trip with my mother." His jaw tightened. "He must have known he'd need them shortly after he returned from the Continent."

"What happened to them?"

"My mother gave them to Pendleton. She didn't want to see them ever again. I think my uncle slept with the damn things."

Lady Judith tossed him a disgusted look. "My father kept them in his armoire."

"Is that where they were stolen from?" Trent asked.

"Only one gun is missing so we think he might have taken one out to confront a burglar. No one heard anything so we aren't certain what happened."

William's inquiries below stairs would hopefully turn up additional information about that night. In his gut, he felt the gun held the key to the puzzle.

"I'd like to get a closer look at the pistol." Find its mate and he'd find a killer.

* * * * *

Will checked the head butler off his list of possible witnesses or killers and let the man get back to work. The long line of servants had dwindled down to six or so. He'd gotten nothing of import from any of them except a kitchen boy who'd heard two men arguing about money near the wine cellar. Unfortunately, the boy had ignored the fracas and could impart nothing more of value.

The estate manager had indeed sent a message to the earl. A lightning strike fire had destroyed several acres of autumn crops. The loss would require juggling various

accounts to pay the earl's debts. It was not a critical situation. He'd asked for the earl's assistance, at his convenience. There was no need for a speedy return. The estate manager suggested the earl used the small crisis as an excuse to leave London since Pendleton preferred the country.

Nothing in the tale indicated foul play.

Two servants confirmed Chapman's story about leaving without seeing the earl. They swore Pendleton was still alive at that time. As far as they knew, Chapman was nowhere near the wine cellar. Of course, that didn't mean Chapman couldn't have snuck back in the house.

Jonas Thornton, the wine steward, claimed he'd let his master into the cellar with his key around midnight and left him there. Not surprisingly, it was Thornton who found Pendleton the next morning. The man sweated profusely during his interview but adamantly declared his innocence. Will had mixed feelings about the wine steward. Either he feared the worst because he was the last person to see the earl alive and circumstantial evidence pointed to him or he actually killed the earl and saw himself hanging for murder. Either way, he'd keep a close eye on him.

The only other nervous body was the pregnant girl who'd dropped the linens in the hallway upstairs. She sat while she waited her turn and graciously let everyone file ahead of her since they had to stand in line.

He smiled when the cook sat down at the table across from him. Although he looked nothing like the portly ruddy-faced man he'd grown up with, Will had a soft spot for cooks in general. His apron was splattered with grease and flour and specks of things Will didn't want to think about. The cook had been grumbling about all the work he had to get done every minute he waited, which was precious little time since Will had called him straight from the kitchen to the front of the line. How his adoptive father, a fastidious tailor, ended up loving a messy, single-minded cook similar to this man, he'd never known.

"His lordship had no complaints about my cooking, so I had no complaints about him," the man spouted. "Don't know who killed him. Sorry he's gone. Can't help you any more than that, son." He rose to his feet. "I've got sixty people to feed in a few hours. You know where to find me if you need me."

Although a chef had plenty of blunt objects in his kitchen with which he could kill a man, Will couldn't fathom a motive. The earl complained his soup was cold? He'd worked cases where murder had been committed for less. Cooks could be temperamental. He put a question mark next to the man's name and called the next employee in line.

Was it five o'clock yet?

He'd missed Trent last night. The cold hard floor hadn't diminished his desire to break down Trent's bedroom door and make him pay for bedding Anna. He'd wanted Trent to drop to his knees and beg for Will's cock. After a prolonged teasing game, Trent would clasp his hands behind his back and sink his lips over Will's hard cock.

Guided by Will's hands, his head would bob up and down like a puppet. Will could almost feel the soft, giving flesh of Trent's wet mouth wrapped around his rod. He'd come down his lover's throat and then walk away, leaving Trent with a raging erection.

A ridiculous whimsy, of course. He'd never treat Trent that way. He'd simply been angry and hurt and jealous that Trent had spent time with Anna. But he'd agreed to this threesome trial, so he'd remained curled up on the floor, satisfied that Trent had slept alone.

The short rift over, now he wanted nothing more than to end these interviews and romp with Trent in the hay.

"What is your name?" The pregnant girl finally sat across from him, her eyes downcast.

"Sally."

"Surname?"

"Thornton."

Will glanced up from his paper and quill. "The wine steward's daughter?"

"Yes."

Interesting.

"Housemaid?"

"Yes."

"Where were you between midnight and five a.m. on the night in question?"

"Sleeping."

"Alone?"

Spots of color popped on her cheeks. "Yes."

"Do you have any witnesses to verify that fact?"

"I sleep with three other girls under the dormers. After working twelve hours on our feet, we all sleep heavily."

"So heavily they wouldn't notice if you rose and went downstairs to meet your lover? Or to help him kill the earl?"

Rather than getting riled at his accusations, she drew into herself, wrapping her arms over her stomach, refusing to look at him.

"Who—?"

"This," she pointed to her rounded belly, "destroyed any chances I had with a beau." Acid dripped in her voice. At Will's raised brow, she explained, "I am with child because I was ravished." Her wounded gaze lit upon his and skittered away.

The harshly spoken words punched him in the chest. He couldn't form any more questions, especially the ones foremost in his mind. His mother's screams echoed through his brain. A shiver shuddered beneath his skin and yet he felt hot. Clammy.

He started to rise from the bench along with the anger bubbling within but checked his actions. Unlike his mother, Sally had lived through the horror. He sat down again, pushing his childhood nightmares deep inside. Yet he had to know her story. He had to save her if he could. The way she'd stared at Brandon Chapman when they'd collided in the hallway bothered him again.

"Is Chapman the father?"

The girl blanched. "He made me call him Silas."

"Silas?" Will blinked in confusion. "Silas Chapman, the fourth Earl of Pendleton, is the father of your child?"

When she nodded, he rubbed a shaking hand across his forehead. This new information opened the door to many possibilities. *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.* Motives popped into his mind with lightning speed, Lady Pendleton hiring a thug to kill her cheating husband, Sally Thornton seeking revenge. Hell, any of Sally's friends or family members might be the killer. Or her beau.

"Before I make any assumptions, Miss Thornton, you'd better tell me about your relationship with Lord Pendleton."

"I'm a servant. He took me when he pleased. I had no choice." She swallowed hard. "I despise him for what he did to me but I didn't kill him. When I told him I carried his child, he offered me a small stipend when the child was born. Now who will pay? His nephew?" She made a rude noise.

"Do you know who killed Lord Pendleton?"

"No, sir."

Her emphatic response was either practiced or heartfelt, he couldn't tell which.

"Can you attest to your father's whereabouts that evening?"

"As I said, I was sleeping."

Ah, he'd struck a nerve there. Her hard stare said *I'm-not-saying-anything-incriminating-about-my-father*. It was a look of conspiracy if he'd ever seen one. She definitely knew more than she was saying and he'd bet her father knew the whole story. Because he was the killer.

Her father must have been furious when he'd discovered the earl had forced himself upon his daughter. But why did he wait so long to strike back? The inconsistency nagged him but he let it go. The wine steward had the means, motive and opportunity to kill Lord Pendleton. That was convincing enough evidence for him.

Convinced he'd found the murderer, he summoned a footman to find the wine steward and bring him back to the servants' hall. The linen closet would have to suffice for a prison cell until Trent was ready to take Jonas Thornton back to London for trial.

As soon as he turned the key in the door lock, muffling the bellowing wine steward's protests within, relief washed over him. This case had exhumed too many painful memories. Now he could rebury them and concentrate on the living.

A glance at a mantel clock hurried his steps. He was late.

Wait for me, Trent. I need you tonight.

Chapter Fifteen

The dusty smell of hay enveloped the back of the lean-to stall. Fading afternoon light filtered between the wooden plank walls onto a hay pile, wooden barrels and burlap bags of horse feed. Deep shadows clustered in the four corners of the shed. Will used all his senses to spot Trent, the faint smell of his body, the rustle of his greatcoat hem from the breeze blowing through a knothole, the black silhouette barely discernible in the gray shadows to his left.

As soon as he turned toward the dark figure, Trent stepped away from the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. "About time you put in an appearance, William."

"While you were busy socializing, I was doing my job."

Trent responded with a loud *humph* and stepped closer. "After you snubbed me last night, I wasn't certain you would come."

Yes, well, one night of restless dreams was enough. "I *was* angry you left me waiting for you at the inn while you dallied with Anna. However, I'm not like a woman who bemoans a slight for days." He turned and barred the door behind him.

"Thank God." Trent spun him back around and pulled him into a fierce hug.

Trent kissed his neck and then growled into his ear. "I apologize for the delay yesterday. How can I make it up to you?"

His heartbeat jumped as Trent smoothed his palms down his coat sleeves and back up to his shoulders. A keen hunger throbbed in his groin. He slipped his hands beneath the tails of Trent's coat and squeezed his buttocks. "I think we are of like minds."

Trent slammed his mouth over Will's. Holding him tightly, he ground his pelvis against him, forcing him back a step.

Tongues darted and danced. Beneath his pants' fall-front, Will's cock lengthened. He pushed his groin at Trent, making him take an awkward step backward. With a long groan, Trent angled his thigh between Will's legs but Will didn't want to hump Trent's leg, he wanted to feel the hard length of his cock. He twisted back, groin to groin. Lips and arms locked together, they weaved around the shed in a sensual dance, bumping into and tripping over the stores. The tango ended when he stumbled backward against a spare carriage wheel. The hub poked between his knees. Trent grasped the wooden spokes on either side of him, blocking him in. He stared at him, his eye glittering with desire.

"I want you. Here. Now, William. Will you have me?"

Oh, yes! Settling his hips against the wheel, he jerked open his flap and shoved his breeches down to the buttons at his knees. The tip of his thick cock swept outward. "My pudding needs a little more puffing up, Trent."

He expected some defiance but Trent didn't hesitate. His lover spread his legs wide, bent from his waist and slowly swirled his tongue around the head of his cock.

His breath hitched in his chest when Trent's mouth sank over his hardening shaft. The sight of the man he dreamed about for so long bending over him, taking him into his mouth filled him with raging lust. He clutched Trent's head and guided his mouth up and down. "That's it...take me deep. Aaaaah." He shivered when he bumped the back of Trent's throat. "So goooooood." After a few minutes of hot mouth fucking, his flushed cock stretched upward, full and rock-hard.

Like a flare of torchlight, Trent lit up. He grabbed hold of Will's slippery shaft and stroked the base while he hummed and pumped Will's cock in and out of his wet mouth. There was no doubt he enjoyed making Will squirm. He added his other hand to the mix, gently playing with Will's balls until he moaned at the intense pleasure.

The grip around his sac eased away and then two damp fingers slid over the puckering entry to his ass.

"Oh God...oh..." He grunted as Trent pushed his fingers into him, tightening up and then relaxing as his lover slowly readied him for something much bigger. Nothing beat the erotic sensation of being sucked and finger-fucked at the same time. He rocked his hips and squeezed his buttocks, chasing the flowing tide of orgasm.

With a loud slurp, Trent slipped his lips off Will's hard length, replaced his mouth with the cocoon of his fist and continued stroking him. "How does that feel, William? Good?"

He nodded, barely able to breathe.

A crooked smile tugged at Trent's lips. "I think you're ready for me," he said, pulling his fingers free. "Turn around and grab the wheel hub."

Will did as he was told, leaning down and sticking his ass high in the air. Trent tapped his boots farther apart, spreading Will's legs until his ass lined up perfectly with Trent's groin.

"Beautiful." His lover smacked a butt cheek.

Will grunted in surprise. The slight sting heated more than the spot where palm met skin. A previous lover had once whipped his ass until he couldn't sit down but this felt different. Trent had slapped him in a friendly manner, not in brutal domination. The lighthearted strike had him so aroused, he craved another smack. He wouldn't mind a tingling buttocks before Trent impaled him.

"Your ass is cold, William. Allow me to warm it up." Warm fuzzy thighs melded against the curve of his behind. Trent's cock nestled into the crease.

Will mentally struggled with voicing what he wanted, unsure what Trent would think of him. He didn't want to alienate Trent but his lover deserved to know he liked a little eccentricity in his affairs, not like the acts in the dungeons of Snake Cavern but enough to spice up their joining. Compared to a fuck with the cue stick, how peculiar did an ass smacking seem? Besides, he deserved it for acting like a child when Trent bedded his betrothed.

"You feel good pressed against me like that." He swallowed nervously. "I liked your first method of warming me up too." He paused, waiting for Trent to think it through. His friend didn't say anything but he stroked the flat of his hand over Will's cheeks. Even that gentle touch fired his blood. Finally, after taking a deep breath, Will blurted out, "Would you like to see a rosy glow on my buttocks?"

"It's getting so dark in here, I can barely see my hand."

Disappointed, Will didn't reply. He'd let Trent take him his way. There'd be plenty of other chances—

"But I should give you a thrashing for your attitude toward Anna. She's been very accommodating considering the situation and merited a few minutes of my attention. You deserve a few strikes of reprimand perhaps?"

His throat went dry. "Yes."

A loud *smack* splintered into the silence. The slap stung for no more than a second. "You are too easy on me, Trent."

Crack!

Will gritted his teeth.

"Your manners are offensive." *Wap! Wap!* Trent struck one cheek and then the other. "Your behavior is discourteous." Cool fingers brushed over his stinging skin. "I shall have to teach you proper respect for ladies." *Smack!*

The flesh on his rear end began to burn and his balls tightened. "I am sorry, your lordship."

Two large hands settled over his butt, briefly. "I believe you." *Whack!* "But an apology will not get you out of your punishment." A torrent of slaps rained across his ass.

Will grunted. "Yes, sir." He closed his eyes as Trent smacked his bottom until pinpricks of pleasure mingled with the heat.

The hits ceased. Trent's breath sounded harsh and ragged.

"I think you have learned your lesson." Trent's palm glided over the tender skin and then slipped between Will's legs to fondle his balls.

With a moan of longing, he spread his legs wider. *Oh God, Trent. Fuck me!* He sucked in his breath when Trent tested the length and stiffness of his cock by running a tight fist up and down the turgid length.

"I hope I have not dampened your spirits too much, William."

"Not at all," he wheezed. God in heaven, the slide of Trent's hand shot heat to the tip of his ears. Ready to shoot, his muscles flexed tightly. He didn't want to come until Trent was firmly seated inside him. "Fuck me, Trent."

"Gladly." Standing behind him, his lover slipped his cock head past the tight ring of muscle in Will's burning butt. "How many more unusual diversions do you have up your sleeve, William?" he asked while he slid in deeper and deeper.

"More...than you can imagine," he said between short puffs of breath. The steady thrusts of Trent's thick cock pushed him to the edge.

"Between you and Anna, I am beginning to feel inexperienced."

As always, the mention of Anna jabbed at his gut and pulled him from the dreamy fog where he'd drifted. Would he ever be able to accept her as a part of Trent's life—their life together?

Trent pushed deeper. "Since you are so adventurous, let's see how much of me you can take." He wedged in more and more until his balls slapped against Will's ass.

Will grimaced at the fullness but his body adjusted quickly.

"Are you all right?"

"Yesss." He groaned as Trent picked up his pace. Heat flushed through his limbs and threw him back into a sensual haze.

Trent pumped faster and faster. His fingers dug into the tender flesh of Will's butt. "Ah, ah, ah." He panted audibly on each thrust.

Will grabbed his cock and stroked it in rhythm with Trent's tempo. Pearls of moisture broke out on his forehead while Trent pounded into him over and over again. The once-chilly shed felt hot now. Slick heat built where skin slapped skin. He concentrated on their bodies linked together, drawing pleasure from the erotic union and giving pleasure in equal measure.

The pulls on his shaft combined with the plunges in his ass escalated his pulse. His heartbeat thumped in his ears.

The shed wasn't the most intimate place for a rendezvous but that didn't alter his feelings for Trent, or diminish the desire rushing through his veins. Men like them had to improvise. With Trent—*Lud!* His breath caught in his throat. Fire burned in his balls. *Oh God!* He could climax—"Aaaaaah!"—anywhere! Breathing hard, he stared at the ejaculate on the shed's dirt floor.

He hissed through his teeth as another spasm shot through his cock. The tightening of his ass and quiet moans must've set Trent off because he plunged in deeper.

Trent's fingers dug hard into his hips. "Fuck, William! Ooooh!" Trent's groin rocked hard against his tingling cheeks. A few more thrusts and he bent over Will's back, wrapping his arms around his torso, pushing deep and shuddering hard.

A warm gush filled his ass. A swirl of pleasure tightened his groin. God, he loved getting fucked by Trent.

After a brief kiss on the back of his neck, Trent glided his palms up Will's chest and raised him upright, pulling him away from the wheel hub and holding his slick back against his own warm chest. His cock, embedded deeply, throbbed within. "That...was magnificent...my dear fellow." After a few deep breaths, he pulled out and spun him around for a passionate kiss.

Will was still catching his breath when their lips melded together. Not that he complained. Anytime Trent wanted to hold him and make love to his mouth was fine with him.

By the time the kiss ended, his heart rate had almost returned to normal. A warm glow enveloped him. Still, the cool night air brushed goose bumps over his butt. With a shy smile, he pulled up his pants and buttoned them. "Let's go back inside for a drink. I have a lot to tell you." He headed for the shed door.

"I, as well." His clothes set to rights, Trent combed his fingers through his mussed hair. "It appears the smugglers at Snake Cavern are linked to our murder here."

Will paused with his hand on the iron door latch. "What?"

"Do you remember the old, potbellied smuggler by the wagon?"

Will nodded, remembering the chilling feeling that ran up his spine when the man stared at him. His hat had shadowed his face but the torchlight had glowed in the smuggler's eyes – devil's eyes, he'd thought.

Trent put his hand over Will's, unlatched the door and pushed it open. "Pendleton's stolen pistol ended up in his waistband."

A rush of damp night air cooled his brow when Will stepped outside. "But he's not the murderer." The wine steward was just as fat but much taller than the man in Snake Cavern.

"How do you know?"

"Because I have the murderer locked in the linen closet."

"What!" Trent gripped his upper arm.

Will smiled and walked faster. "Lord Pendleton's death was a crime of passion but Brandon Chapman didn't do it. Two servants vouch they'd seen the old earl after Chapman had left the house. It turns out the supposedly straight-laced, happily married lord is bedding one of his servants, against her will I might add. Guess who the girl's father is?"

In a mere second Trent came up with the correct answer. "The wine steward."

"Correct, milord. I suspect the steward killed him in a rage. So now we have both the smuggler and the murderer in custody."

"No. According to the latest missive from the Home Office, several of the smugglers escaped capture, including the one with Pendleton's pistol. When the wine steward tells us to whom he gave the gun, we can track him down in a trice."

"And the case will be closed." He stepped close and clasped his friend's shoulder. "All in all, a most rewarding evening, Trent."

Trent turned toward him in the moonlight and grinned wickedly. "Indeed, William. Indeed."

* * * * *

However, when they confronted Mr. Thornton about the gun, he claimed ignorance about the weapon and bellowed his innocence for all the servants to hear.

Will cursed the man for prolonging the investigation. "The judge may give you leniency if you help us capture the band of smugglers. If you don't cooperate, you will surely hang."

"I tell you I didn't do it!" the red-faced man spat angrily. He glanced away guiltily. "I admit we argued that night on the way to the wine cellar. I wanted to send my girl to my sister in Cornwall. I needed money for the long trip but the bugger wouldn't pay. He said he held a fondness for her. He'd support the child with a yearly stipend after its birth as long as Sally stayed nearby." His meaty fists, bound in front of him by a dresser scarf, pounded the shelf. "Sally begged me to get her away from him but—" His voice cracked. "But I knew if I sent her away, he'd never pay."

Will snorted in disbelief. "So you killed him, stole some silver and his gun and sold them for transport."

"She's still here, isn't she?" Thornton growled. "I didn't take nothin'!" He looked from one to the other. "I wanted to kill him. But I didn't. I left him in the wine cellar, where I hoped he'd drink himself to death."

"Why did he go to the wine cellar in the first place?" Trent asked, leaning a hip on the working table pushed against the wall. "Why didn't he simply ask you to bring him a bottle?"

The man blinked, swallowed and hung his head. "That's where he took Sally whenever... Jesus. I get sick thinking about him with my little girl."

"Sally was there?"

He shook his head. "He'd sent for her. She came to me instead, crying her eyes out, complaining she's big with child and he's not gentle." His face turned ashen. "After I'd talked with him, I went back and told her she had to go if she wanted her baby taken care of." His voice cracked. "I didn't know what else to do. I don't have enough saved to send her away." He stared down at his feet. "She refused to go to him. Ran off to who knows where. Tried to chase her down, I did, but I lost her in the woods. By the time I returned to the house to tell his lordship she'd disappeared, Pendleton was dead."

Will laughed. "That's a pretty flimsy story, Thornton."

The man squared his shoulders. "Ask the parson. He knows. I woke him up in the middle of night and asked him to help me find Sally."

"We will speak with him," Trent said, standing and taking a step forward. "In the meantime, I'm afraid you will have to stay here until we can clear you or transport you to London."

"I didn't do anything wrong. You talk to the parson." The wine steward glowered at them.

Will turned and followed Trent out of the small room, locking the door behind him. "I'll go talk to Sally again. She swore she was sleeping the whole night."

"I'm going to search the steward's room. Maybe we'll get lucky and find something of value."

Will sighed. "It looks like it's going to be another long night guarding a suspect's door."

Chapter Sixteen

Misery seeped into Trent's bones. He looked up and down the empty corridor of Pendleton's servants' hall. Despite the clear view, he lowered his voice. "I don't want to spend the night apart again, William. Lock the girl in the closet with her father if you have to."

William raised his hand as if he might touch him but dropped it quickly. "We can't risk exposure here. Meeting in the shed was too dangerous by far."

True enough. Trent had briefly considered the hazards of meeting so close to the guest-filled house but longing for William had overridden his common sense. Apparently, he hadn't regained his wits since he contemplated sleeping with William at Pendleton Manor. The man stole his sensibilities at the most inconvenient times. "I suggest we move our operation base, along with our suspects, back to Fairhaven tonight. Lady Pendleton will appreciate a fewer number of guests. Tomorrow we can ride to the parsonage to question the clergyman. It's just as far from my home as it is from here."

"A fine idea. Right now, I'm betting Anna is wondering where her dinner partner has gone."

Trent arched a brow. "A considerate thought for Anna? That lesson I taught you in the shed must have worked." He grinned at the memory of William's muscular ass tightening after each smack of his hand. The sight of William's reddening buttocks, the feel of his quivering flesh and the sound of his hand hitting him had aroused him more than he'd anticipated. How often would William succumb to him in that way? And what other manner of lusty games did William enjoy playing?

"You liked that, didn't you, Trent?"

A smile tugged up the corner of his mouth. "Indeed I did."

"I too," William said with a tinge of color in his cheeks. "I am not infallible like you, Trent. Sometimes I need a smack on the ass to set me straight."

"If we were both perfect, we would make an extremely dull pair," he joked, feeling all his imperfections and failures rushing to the surface, both professionally and personally. He'd made his share of mistakes. Foremost on his list was waiting so long to woo William. "Seriously, old sport, it is a rare occasion when I find fault with you. You are more critical of yourself than I but if you feel the need for chastisement, I'll be happy to oblige you." His smile grew.

"When I'm feeling angry with myself, I'll let you know."

He wagged his eyebrows. "I'd appreciate that."

William chortled and shook his head. "Now go to Anna. I will find you when the men withdraw to the library for a pipe."

"I need to search the wine steward's room first."

"I'll take care of it. Go."

With a nod, he strode down the hall to the stairway, thinking how lucky he was to have William on his Bow Street squad, as a friend, as his lover. He jogged up the stairs to the main floor with a light heart.

He must honor Anna with his name and he loved her as any man should love his future wife but William held a special place in his heart too. Since it was critical that he and Anna move forward in their relationship, he was anxious to get home and test how life would be with the three of them living together at Fairhaven.

Just inside the dining room archway, he paused, instinctively scanning the room for trouble before he entered. The twenty or so remaining guests milled about, searching the place cards for their names. He'd arrived just in time.

His gaze rested on Anna's slim back. A dark brown spencer matched her upswept hair and a cream-colored dress flattered her skin tone. Then again, he'd never seen her dressed in something he didn't like. He was doubly lucky to have found such a bright, pretty woman for a wife. He'd make an honest woman of her soon—before her pregnancy began to show. He would not tolerate anyone gossiping about his lovely Anna.

As if she sensed him staring at her back, she turned and greeted him across the room with a slow smile.

Drawn like a moth to a flame, he sauntered toward her. If they were not in public, he would've gathered her in his arms and given her a resounding kiss just because her sweetness and generosity made him happy. As it was, he kissed the air beside her cheek. "I am sorry I kept you waiting."

"Brandon and Faith have kept me company," she said without a bit of censure in her voice. "I trust everything is going well for you tonight."

He offered her his arm and led her around the long table to their seats. "Oh, yes."

It wasn't the investigation that came to mind, however but William's naked body bent over a carriage wheel. An image of Anna in the same position popped into his mind and his cock roared to life. He'd like to swat her round bottom and watch it blush too. The thought of her breasts jiggling and hearing her squeal with each smack added to the excitement of his fantasy. As carnal as William in her own way, Anna never rebuffed a new twist on foreplay or lovemaking. She might decline a second go-round but damn him if she wasn't the most open-minded, erotic woman he'd ever met. Yes, she'd cheerfully bend over for a playful spanking.

Both his lovers, side by side, with rosy cheeks perched high in the air, now there was a vision. Who would he choose to penetrate first? Anna with her ripe juices clinging to her pussy lips or William with his compact muscles and musky scent—

"Randolph?"

He glanced around the table, aware he was the last person standing, with a long bulge pressing against his fall-front no less. Thankfully, he stood behind Anna's chair, his hands gripping the top slat. With a brief glance down at his betrothed, he sat in the open seat next to her.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Fine." He folded his hands on his lap. "Be ready to leave by ten o'clock."

She nodded, not expressing any surprise.

Once Lady Pendleton and her daughters were seated, conversation buzzed around him in hushed tones. Most of the discussions centered on Lord Pendleton, the perfect gentleman, a fine husband and father and a good friend. No one mentioned the earl's lesser qualities – what a closed-minded, abusive son of a bitch the earl had been.

Trent itched to quit the room and follow up on the few leads he had in the case. The sooner he wrapped up the investigation, the better. He had other important matters on his mind.

After five courses, the hostess finally gave the men permission to depart for the library while the women adjourned to the parlor. As soon as the group broke ranks, he pulled Brandon Chapman, the new earl, aside.

"You are not acquitted yet, Pendleton, but it appears we have a more likely murder suspect locked in your linen closet."

Relief and surprise washed over the chap's face. "Who?"

"Thornton, the wine steward. His daughter, a housemaid, is also a suspect. Both will be accompanying us back to Fairhaven tonight for further questioning. I trust you will be staying on for a while?"

"Yes."

"Good. I may have more questions for you later." He glared at Anna's stepbrother. "As the fifth Earl of Pendleton, I expect you to act with the dignity and honor befitting your station. Do not leave without notice."

Chapman stretched his neck as if the raising of his chin would make him taller. "Lady Faith told me you're connected to Bow Street. I shall cooperate fully, good fellow. I have nothing to hide." He looked over at the family portrait of his uncle, his wife and two daughters hanging on the wall above the hearth. "Not anymore."

Trent pondered about the rash new earl. Brandon Chapman might not have killed Pendleton outright but he couldn't help feeling that Chapman contributed to the death in some way. Perhaps he paid the steward to do the deed for him.

Hopefully, William had some answers.

* * * * *

"I found nothing to tie the steward to the murder." William paced the wide corridor outside the library. "No silver, no large sum of money that would indicate he sold the missing silver pieces or the pistol, no bloodstained clothes or shoes. I did find a letter from his sister agreeing to look after Sally and the baby."

Trent narrowed his one good eye in thought. "So whatever happened in the cellar, it appears the wine steward received no compensation. If he truly sought money to send his daughter away, his plan failed."

He gripped his lapels and walked in step with William while he thought through the possibilities. Pendleton's nephew had at least two servants on his side who swore he'd departed the house before Pendleton died. The truth, or did Chapman purchase the servants' loyalty?

The wine steward swore he'd left Pendleton alive in the wine cellar. He'd admitted he wanted money from the old man to send his daughter away but Pendleton refused to pay. The old lecher wanted the girl to stay nearby. Instead, he offered terms to provide for her, which the wine steward accepted. So why kill his daughter's benefactor? Unless he changed his mind for his daughter's sake, decided not to accept the terms and a violent fight ensued. Since there was no proof Thornton stole anything valuable, the money motive lost significance. Now Sally Thornton had motive. The man was using her.

"So did Miss Thornton run away as her father said, or did she go to the cellar and kill Pendleton?"

William blew out his breath in obvious frustration. "She admitted to running. She said she hid in the hunting lodge and cried for hours. She showed me her muddy boots and dirty dress hem. Briars were still stuck to it."

"Which could have happened at any time."

"Yes." William stopped pacing opposite the closed library door and tapped his finger against his lips. "For all we know, father and daughter could've been in on it together."

And Brandon Chapman too, he thought. "We have to hear the clergyman's story. Put a timeline to this mess."

"Agreed."

Silence fell between them when the library door swung open and a guest sauntered out into the corridor. Deep male voices and the clink of glass resonated inside the library. The familiar, inviting sounds made Trent yearn for the comfort of his own library where he could think in peace, preferably with William sitting close beside him on the sofa and Anna tucked beneath his arm on the other side. He sighed, wondering if such a scene of domestic bliss would ever come to fruition.

He nodded to the gentleman as he passed by, waited a few moments for him to move out of earshot and turned back to William. "The pistol still bothers me," he said, forcing his thoughts back to the case. "How did it get from Pendleton's wardrobe into the hands of a smuggler?"

"That baffles me too." William leaned one shoulder against the wall and crossed one ankle over the other.

The casual pose accentuated his leg muscles and drew Trent's eye to the bulge at the apex of his thighs. When he lifted his gaze back up to William's face, a teasing grin played about his friend's lips. Delight danced in his green eyes. Given the close proximity to other people and the off chance of being heard, neither made a smart remark.

Trent mimicked William's stance against the opposite wall. Two could play this game, he thought with a private grin. "Maybe we're approaching this investigation from the wrong angle."

William briefly scanned Trent's crotch. "I think the angle is fine." His gaze skipped back to his face.

Devil take it, desire ran rampant whenever William looked at him like that. With a quick brush of his hand, he adjusted his swelling package. Couldn't he spend five minutes with William without thinking about fucking him? He'd never been so ensnared by another human being. The power William held over him was frightening. *He* was the aggressive one and yet he yielded to every come-hither look William cast his way. He succumbed to William's desires, whatever they might entail. Every thought centered on pleasing his partner, keeping him close, making William want him so much he'd never leave. He had to regain control!

He straightened away from the wall, clasped his hands behind his back, paced away from William and concentrated on the topic at hand, the pistol. "We must flush out the smuggler and determine how the pistol ended up in his possession."

"How, old chap, do you plan to do that?"

Trent turned and looked at William, thinking about the keen interest the smuggler had shown in him. The long looks at William may have indicated suspicion but then wouldn't the man have confronted him? No, he'd bet the smuggler had other interests in his handsome friend.

"I'm going to invite him to my betrothal ball."

A deep crease formed between William's brow. "We don't know who he is." He cocked his head and stared at Trent. "You are going to lure him here. With what?"

Trent gave him a devilish smile. "With you, William."

Chapter Seventeen

"It's a crush," Will announced to Trent and Anna as they stood in the receiving line outside Trent's large gallery where the ball was being held. "The large crowd speaks well of your popularity, Trent, and yours too, Anna."

"It's a shame Faith and her family are in mourning and cannot attend." Anna sighed. "They could help me remember the names that belong to all these new faces when you are preoccupied, Randolph."

"I'm only interested in one unidentified guest." Trent paused to greet a couple, waited for them to blend into the crowd and turned back to Will. "Have you visited the terrace gallery below stairs set up for our *special guests*?"

"That particular costume party is just starting to warm up. The Ancient Rome theme is a big hit."

"Glad to hear it."

The tall case clock in the hall struck eleven. Only a few stragglers arrived now.

Anna tapped Trent's arm with her fan. "It is time we joined the dancing, Randolph."

Will had to admit, they made a fine-looking couple. Trent, always dashing in a black coat and matching breeches with white stockings, dazzled the eye with a silver threaded waistcoat, a snowy neckcloth and the ever-present eye patch that gave him a mysterious, slightly dangerous air. Beside him, Anna wore a white, high-waisted dress similar in style to the other young ladies in the room. Silver neoclassical embroidery lined the low neckline and trailing hem. Sparkling silver hair-combs swept her brown curls into a loose bun at the back of her head. She looked rather pretty, Will thought grudgingly, with tiny curls framing her face.

"Yes, yes," Trent said to Anna. "A slow cotillion if you please. Spinning around guided by only one eye makes one embarrassingly ungraceful."

"That's nonsense and you know it," she protested. "I've seen you fence and you have perfect balance."

"She has you there, old chap."

Trent glared at him. Apparently dancing wasn't one of his favorite pastimes.

"Go indulge yourself with the group downstairs, William. I am not sure I can rely on my staff to keep those unruly guests in line."

"What do you expect when you spread the word of an open orgy?" Will asked in a hushed voice, uneasy with the whole scheme. "Every libertine within twenty miles has come."

Disaster hovered over their heads, he could feel it. So far, nothing in the entire investigation had gone their way. Every suspect had an alibi, including the wine steward and his daughter. The clergyman had verified their stories and sent Will to talk to an estate huntsman who had noticed the lodge door had been left ajar the morning of the murder. The huntsman had found a hairpin on the chair, supporting Miss Thornton's statement that she had indeed been there.

The only clue left was the smuggler who possessed Pendleton's pistol. Flushing him out with an orgy seemed farfetched to him but Trent was confident it would work and his plans succeeded. Usually.

Trent looked indignant. "Since we don't know the social rank of our friend from Snake Cavern, it was imperative that everyone feel welcome."

Will looked around the room at the polished upper class, dancing, drinking punch, tasting the sweets from the trays passed by liveried footmen and gossiping in small groups. Did any of them know about the rowdy bunch drinking ale below stairs? He'd guess they did. Several hours from now he expected to find half of these guests mingling with those below, dressed in the gauzy toga robes and golden eye masks Trent provided to the orgy guests.

"Keep a sharp eye," Trent said in a low voice, "for a birthmark shaped like a boot on his lower back."

"I will." He bowed to Trent and Anna and quit the room. They'd make an appearance in the terrace gallery following the midnight supper and the formal announcement of their betrothal. By then, Will hoped to have the smuggler in custody.

If the man dared to appear.

The lure of Anna's antique gun collection on display coupled with a decadent party brought more unsavory characters than he liked. Keeping them contained in a few rooms and a garden terrace might prove impossible. Trent hadn't worried about theft because every shilling he earned went into either renovating Fairhaven or reinvested into his lands and business holdings. The house was fairly empty of furnishings, artwork and expensive decorations. Still, smugglers liked to browse.

The formal party had been located as far from the private party as possible. Will walked the long corridors from one end of the house to the other and took the family staircase down a level. Before he reached the last few steps, he heard the muted laughter and squeals of an unrestrained gathering.

French doors on his left, closed against the chilly autumn night, led to a hillside garden terrace. On the opposite side of the hall, a row of three doors led into private rooms, usually reserved for the owner's family but currently unused by Trent. Tonight, they'd been furnished with low benches, large floor cushions, fountains of wine and a few strategically placed privacy screens. Servants were not permitted inside but there were many stationed in the hall, offering trays of food, giving directions to the changing rooms and prohibiting guests from drifting into other parts of the house.

After a few words with the head butler about an argument between two men that ended in fisticuffs outside, Will headed to the men's designated changing room. No one would talk to him if he remained dressed in his gentleman's attire. He wrapped the white cotton gauze around his waist and threw the extra material over his shoulder. A quick glance in the looking glass confirmed his belief that he appeared ridiculous but a dandy changing next to him winked with approval. Will ignored him. He began his search for the pudgy smuggler behind door number one.

The lively scene inside didn't surprise him. Men chased squealing women around the large central wine fountain, grabbing and pinching whatever they could. Togas had begun to slip off shoulders and breasts and hips. One couple kissed ardently behind a potted plant, their hands tugging at the knots holding up their togas. Soon, passions would explode and everyone would join in.

If the smuggler showed up, tonight's orgy would hopefully distract him enough for Will to catch the smuggler off guard.

Doubtful he'd find the miscreant in this room though. This group was too tame for a devil-eyed smuggler.

He started to leave but a few of the ladies seized his arms. One actually flung herself onto the floor and wrapped her arms around his leg.

"Don't go, sir!" A well-rounded, matronly woman giggled into his face. "You are the finest specimen here."

Another female, clinging to his arm, ran a fingernail down his biceps. "I can stand on my hands. If you kneel and hold my legs, we can pleasure one another at the same time."

Will quirked his brow up in astonishment.

The woman at his feet walked her fingers beneath his toga and up the inside of his thigh. He jumped away like a skittish colt, brushing the roaming hands away.

"I...uh...am looking for a friend," he said with a forced smile and churning stomach. "I shall return." He hoped they didn't seek him out later and remind him of his pledge.

Door number two yielded more of what he expected an orgy to look like. The room smelled like sweat and ale and frigging. A smoky coal fire burned in a stove set in the corner. Male-female couples sprawled semi-naked on the tiled floor, humping and fucking. Most lay with the man on top although a few men fucked their women from behind. One woman knelt before a drunkard sprawled in a wooden chair, sucking him off. He wondered why she bothered, given the man's lack of response.

The lovers weren't the most creative group he'd ever seen. Later, he suspected he'd see couples doubling up, enjoying group activities. However, from the bawdy comments and lustful moans, most seemed happy for now. None fit the description of the smuggler from Snake Cavern.

A couple entered the room from the interior door connected to the first room. Without preamble, they found an empty space and dropped to their knees, wrapped in each other's arms. They obviously knew each other well.

Another couple exited the room through the same door, not nearly as cozy as the couple who came in. They stood apart, hastily putting their togas back in order, avoiding eye contact with one another. Before the door closed behind them, Will saw the man head for the tapped barrel of ale while the woman turned in the opposite direction. In a little while, they'd both be back with new partners.

As a lone male standing within a room of copulating couples, Will felt distinctly out of place. There wasn't a door leading to the third room from inside this one, so he left the way he came in.

As soon as he opened the third door, the sights and sounds took his breath away.

Stark-naked men dominated the room. Fat, thin, hairy, bald, short and bow-legged, tall and knock-kneed, broad-shouldered, barrel-chested, with plump or flat asses and penises of all shapes and sizes. Men everywhere. A few women too, sandwiched between them. They were a boisterous group, drinking tankards of ale filled from the stack of barrels against the back wall. Here, inhibitions flew free.

A knot of men anointed their cocks with foamy drink which a young buck on his knees licked off with relish. A woman on her hands and knees tasted several men's penises while another man penetrated her from behind. One wild fellow rode around the room on a man's back, smacking his rear to make him buck.

Will wandered into a quieter anteroom where a ring of men lay interlocked, face to groin, in a circle. He recalled the first time he'd experienced a masturbation chain like that. He'd been so green, so excited to have found others like him, he came almost as soon as warm human lips closed over his cock head. Surprisingly, the fellow had sucked him dry without a qualm. His cock jerked upward at the memory.

"Over here!" a man called on his left. He waved Will toward the men lined up against the wall who waited for the big-muscled stallion inspecting them to make his choice.

For many years, he'd made contacts in a similar manner. Back alleys, shadowy taverns and private clubs all supported lusty men eager to bend over for a quick fuck.

The bugger eyeing the line of men looked over his shoulder at Will and raised an inquisitive brow. *No thanks*, Will replied by glancing away. When the man finally decided on his partner, he simply turned the other man around, pressed him up against the wall and buggered him while the others watched with envy.

It took a moment for Will to drag his gaze away. His cock ached for some action.

Tonight, he'd probably end up with the men sitting on the long bench watching the frivolities while they pulled on their meat. For now though, he strutted around the room like a dandy, looking for a man with a birthmark on his back.

* * * * *

"What is Brandon doing here?" Anna asked, holding Trent's hand at arm's length as they strolled down the center of the dance line. They parted and took their places across from each other. She frowned at her stepbrother's royal blue coat and tan breeches. He certainly didn't look like he was in mourning.

He strode toward her with a wide grin on his face. With a glance at Trent and a mumbled pardon to the dancer to her right, she stepped out of line to greet Brandon. Trent appeared at her side in the blink of an eye.

"Brandon," she scolded, "it is not proper to appear in public as such." She waved a hand at his attire. "For shame!"

"I am too happy to parade around in drab-colored clothes." He kissed her on both cheeks. "Happy for you, my dear."

Anna made a rude noise at his bold lie. "I take it Faith has consented to be your wife?"

"Yes!" He grinned from ear to ear. "It is our secret, of course, until a sufficient amount of mourning time passes —"

"And the investigation is complete," Trent added.

"Yes, yes." He bounced on his toes. "At any rate, I couldn't resist coming to wish my sister the best." He glanced at the three crystal chandeliers and the gold filigree embellishing the long room. "You will be quite happy here, I suppose."

She linked her gloved hand through Trent's arm. "I am happy wherever Randolph is."

He looked at her with shining eyes. "I understand perfectly."

As much as he irked her at times, she couldn't help sharing Brandon's good cheer. Maybe his new title and a devoted wife would settle his wild ways.

"Lord Trent." Brandon nodded respectfully. "Your announcement tonight shows me that you are an honorable man. I trust you will take care of Anna and keep her happy."

"That I will." Although his words were polite, he didn't look pleased to see Brandon.

"It is a shame all men do not treat the women they bed with the same esteem."

Randolph glared at him.

Anna had an itch to kick him. "Randolph will be an uncommonly good father."

"I don't doubt it. It is along those lines that I've also come tonight." He turned to Trent with a serious expression. "I wish to set my uncle's wrong to rights and repay you the monies you lent me to send his mistr —"

Randolph grabbed his arm in what looked like a bruising grip. "Perhaps we should discuss this elsewhere, Lord Pendleton? My library?"

"Ah, yes. Of course." He turned wide eyes to Anna. "Excuse us, will you, sister dear?" He looked back over his shoulder as her betrothed yanked him away. "Congratulations again. Visit us soon!"

Anna stared after them. *Men*. Did Randolph think she didn't know about the pretty housemaid old Pendleton impregnated? Faith had divulged that family secret months ago. Lady Pendleton refused to believe it, of course. Her husband was infallible in her eyes.

Lord Pendleton apparently hadn't made any arrangements to care for the servant or her child. If Faith or Judith had funds of their own, they would've sent the girl away as soon as they heard of her condition. Neither wanted a bastard growing up in their household without the proper recognition from his father. Thank goodness Randolph had stepped in and paid for her passage to a home for wayward women, accompanied by a midwife. After the funeral, Faith had told her Brandon agreed to support his uncle's offspring until the child came of age.

That's when she thought her stepbrother, ten years her senior, might have finally grown up.

She shuddered to think she might have befallen the same fate as the housemaid if not for the honor of her beloved Randolph. Struggling to support a child on a shopgirl's wages wouldn't have bothered her. Living without the man of her heart in her life would've destroyed her.

A pudgy little nobleman from a neighboring estate filtered into her view, requesting a dance. She set Randolph and Brandon from her mind for the time being and rejoined her ball.

An hour later, she wondered what kept her lover away so long. Had he gone below stairs without her? The thought of him snuggling up to Mr. Hall amidst all those strangers, without her, set her teeth on edge. He was supposed to be here at midnight to formally announce their betrothal and then go check on his other guests. With her.

Gathering her skirts in her hand, she set out to find the waylaid host. After checking the library, where he was supposed to be, she hurried to the parlor where her antique gun collection was on display, worried that something had gone awry. The two coachmen who'd been hired to guard the glass case rose from their chairs when she entered.

"We 'aven't seen his lordship," the burliest one said. "Been quiet 'ere."

"Thank you." New worries crowded her mind. *Where could he be?* She walked determinedly down the stairs to the terrace gallery.

Her dress resembled the costume togas enough that she didn't bother to change. She donned a golden demi-mask and entered the room where she knew the wine fountain had been set up.

The wine-stained togas scattered around the room didn't surprise her. The unclothed, insensible souls sprawled on the floor raised her brows a bit. She'd never seen so many naked bodies and heaven help her, if she hadn't heard them snoring, she

would've thought them awaiting the collector of the dead. Not a soul moved in this room.

The vigorous noise next door drew her attention. She had to push hard to open the connecting door. As soon as she squeezed through, she realized why. A man pressed a woman against the door. Her toga bunched around her waist and her legs wrapped around the man's hips. He pounded into her, unmindful of Anna's intrusion.

Other couples strained against one another all around the room. In the center, a pile of intertwined bodies wiggled and moaned like some fantastic creature of Greek myth. Mouths nibbled on whatever lay nearby whether it was a wrist, a shoulder, a leg, a breast, a juicy mound or a turgid rod. Buttocks muscles bunched as probing parts intersected with open parts. It was all rather amusing.

However, when someone grabbed her ankle, she kicked free and fled the room. Sharing passion with a complete stranger wasn't her cup of tea.

The next room stole her breath.

Chapter Eighteen

What a gorgeous specimen of mankind.

In the crowded, musky smelling room, she homed in on Mr. Hall, who slumped back on a hard wooden bench with the back of his head resting against the wall and his hands resting at his sides. He looked exceedingly relaxed. And pampered. Three men surrounded him, rubbing his nude body with oil from a bowl near his feet. His broad shoulders gleamed, the oil defining every firm curve. One wouldn't describe him as powerfully built, yet there was strength in the lean muscles that slowly flexed in his arms and chest. Ridges lined his flat stomach. His thighs splayed wide and his ardent admirers paid particular homage to the thick, solid penis that jutted outward.

A sensible woman would shield her eyes from his unclothed form but Anna could not tear her gaze away. The man was flawless. She continued her perusal down his long, finely shaped legs, which she'd admired in his tight breeches on more than one occasion. Even his feet were perfectly formed.

Her pussy clenched with want at the mere sight of him. Randolph possessed a strong, healthy body, sprinkled with hair that tickled and delighted her but he wasn't built as lean and firm as his lover, William. *Oh my*. Mr. Hall was quite appealing when he wasn't glaring at her.

What a greedy wench she was for lusting after them both!

But why not? Sharing Randolph with Mr. Hall had been a foregone conclusion for her. Yet, the idea of Randolph going from one lover to the other had always left her feeling a little cold. Why not share together?

Did Mr. Hall harbor an aversion to women, or did he simply prefer male company? The difference might be important to their future together. Initially, he'd shown a distinct dislike for her. Lately though, he seemed much more tolerant. In the receiving line, he'd been remarkably civil, almost warm, to her. What would it take for him to actually *like* her?

She knew what Randolph liked best about her and it wasn't her talent on the pianoforte or her unusual interest in antique weapons.

At first she thought Mr. Hall's eyes were closed but at closer examination she realized he stared from beneath his lashes. She followed his gaze and caught the gasp before it escaped her throat.

Randolph had taught her things that only a practiced courtesan should know and she'd enjoyed most of them but none of it prepared her for the debauchery in this room. The scene that grabbed Mr. Hall's attention could've been pulled straight from her lurid thoughts.

A buxom woman knelt on the floor before a naked man, probably a stranger, who leaned over the top of her head and clutched the edge of a table directly behind her. The full length of his cock slid smoothly between her red lips. It was strange and erotic, seeing another woman's head dipping and swaying between a man's legs.

Typically, she cupped Randolph's sac in the same manner the woman did, so she must have been doing it right. On the other hand, if she tried taking in all of Trent like that, she'd gag.

If the woman's vigorous draws on the man's member were any indication, she seemed to be enjoying the taste of her partner. Anna studied her closely. Did her cheeks sink in like that when she sucked on Randolph's cock? It looked rather gluttonous.

A needy hunger fluttered low in her belly.

The woman watched her partner's tormented features, something she'd never thought of doing. Randolph's pleasurable moans had always told her what she needed to know. Next time, she'd peek up at his face.

The most fascinating part of the scene, however, was the fellow standing behind the man, holding his flank while he slid his reddened cock in and out of said man's buttocks. She'd never seen two men engaged in sexual activity. The unnaturalness of it gave her shivers. And yet, the smooth rocking of the man's hips mesmerized her. As she watched his butt muscles clench with each long, slow forward thrust, the fierce concentration on both their faces, well...her inner muscles tightened too.

She'd never particularly cared for anal sex but viewing it...*oh, my*. She rubbed her thighs together and felt the dampness of her sex. Where was Randolph when she needed him?

Now that she looked around the room, she saw men linked with men everywhere. Men on their backs, on their knees, rocking, thrusting, pounding, or sucking each other. At first, so many male couples shocked her but then oddly enough, she found their unions as stimulating as the male-female couplings in the other room. Perhaps more so. What they did was not only unlawful but deliciously decadent, which made it more exciting, she thought with a smile.

Men touched each other differently than she touched Randolph. Firmly. Without hesitation. Inherently knowing what their partners would like.

Her gaze drifted back to William Hall, lazing against the wall while other men kneaded the muscles in his neck, arms and legs, a king among peasants. It surprised her that he seemed to like it when one man slapped his chest and plucked at his nipple. But why not? She certainly enjoyed it when Randolph teased her nipples into hot rosy buds and Randolph enjoyed it when she reciprocated. She couldn't imagine hitting Randolph in any way, though. Some things should be left between men, she supposed.

Mr. Hall's glistening cock beckoned her. It was as though the others had readied the bulky length for her. At various times, several hands glided around it, over it and down between his spread legs. None ventured near with lips or tongue. Had he forbidden such an intimate act? They were strangers, after all.

But she wasn't. Would he let her slide her lips up and down the shaft, lick the thick vein on the underside, suck the fat crown and take him into her watering mouth until she couldn't take anymore? Could she make him moan with desire?

Oh, Lord. Her nipples tightened.

She advanced one step toward Mr. Hall and stopped. What was she thinking? Randolph might evict her from his house if he saw her fawning over his lover. She'd need his permission before she touched him in any way.

Just then, Mr. Hall glanced her way. When he spotted her, he sat up quickly, brushing his admirers away. He scanned around her, searching for Randolph no doubt and then stared at her quizzically when he didn't see him.

She moved toward him with determined steps. "Don't get up, Mr. Hall," she said, raising a hand to forestall him. "I am enjoying the view tremendously."

In a self-conscious move, his arm fell across his lap. "Where is Trent?"

"Randolph is off with Lord Pendleton somewhere, discussing a housemaid. Who knows how long they will be." As if she saw a room full of naked men all the time, she sat down nonchalantly on the bench beside him. "Quite a turnout, I see."

He inched over so his slick body didn't soil her gown. At least, that's the reason she suspected. She hoped he wasn't easing away from her in distaste.

"Even with the eye masks, I recognize quite a few gents," he said, his gaze skimming the room. "However, I don't see the one I'd hoped to see."

"A shame." She cast him a sidelong glance. "You seem to be enjoying the party, nonetheless." She wondered how Randolph would react to that. He had sent Mr. Hall down here to spy on the crowd but was this lack of reserve what he had in mind? Other men had been *touching* Mr. Hall.

A knot tightened between her shoulder blades. Randolph had planned to bring her down here later to "mingle" with these guests. When she had agreed to do whatever he asked in order to help him nab their quarry, she foolishly hadn't inquired what that might entail. A shiver of fear and excitement fluttered beneath her skin. How far would she go to please him?

She'd better stick close to William Hall. A wicked grin teased her lips. This might be a good opportunity to get to know him better. *Much* better. She cast a covert glance at the tip of his cock peeking out from beneath his arm.

A muscle ticced in Mr. Hall's jaw. "You don't belong here."

"Why ever not? There are other ladies here." Her gaze swept back to the woman who licked and sucked the man's cock while another man fucked him. Now she toyed with both of the men's sacs. "I am quite envious of that lady's talent, the one kneeling by the table. Do you see?"

"I see."

She tilted her head at him, trying to gauge his disposition toward an advance from her. He stared back blankly, his thoughts a complete mystery. Maybe if she shook him

up a bit, she'd get a better read on his mood. "Is that what you and Randolph look like when you are together?"

He shot her a disgusted look.

She waved a hand in front of her face as if it were a fan. "I am flabbergasted." She dropped her hand, deliberately skimming his arm when she did so. "And intrigued."

"What we do is private."

"Come now, sir. Does that scene not pique your curiosity?" She knew it did. Before he'd covered himself, she'd noted how stiff his cock had been. "Your lover poking you from behind while another takes your cock deep into her wet mouth? One filling you while the other pulls your seed from your sac? I can only imagine how good that would feel to a man like you." The flush in his neck emboldened her. "That could be the three of us."

He sat stiffly beside her. Silent.

"A woman's mouth is just as supple as a man's. Perhaps it is softer. Warmer." Her hand slid over his thigh.

He plucked it off and set it down on the bench between them. "I think you've had too much wine tonight."

"Perhaps." She had been drinking wine steadily since the party started and she did feel a little frisky. Quite impulsive, actually. Her judgment might be distorted. She furrowed her brows in thought. "Do you think Randolph would disapprove of us...starting without him?"

She turned her head to look directly at Mr. Hall. His gaze was locked on the threesome, showing no signs he'd heard her. Yet, she could almost hear her words resounding in his head. *That could be us.*

Laughter bubbled inside her. Of course, Randolph wouldn't disapprove. He wanted the two of them to form a friendship. Foreplay certainly indicated a level of personal attachment. If it led to more, well, how flattering for Randolph to have two lovers in his bed at the same time. If Mr. Hall gave just a little of himself to her, she wouldn't mind sharing Randolph at all.

The only way to reach that goal was to win Mr. Hall over.

"Why don't we try a little experiment?" She slid to the floor at his feet. "That's what this particular festivity is all about, isn't it?"

His gaze snapped to her face. "Actually, the party was arranged for a guest who didn't come."

"Yet." She raised her brows, daring him to contradict her. There were still hours to go until dawn after all and a smuggler might be busy until the wee hours of the morn. "Why don't we amuse ourselves while we wait?"

The threesome by the table began to make significant noise. The men huffed and puffed. The woman moaned and slurped loudly. Other busy couples in the room added

to the rising sounds of orgasm. The sounds slithered beneath her gown and made her drip with desire.

She shifted around to sit in front of Mr. Hall and glided her hands over the top of his glistening thighs. His muscles tensed beneath her fingers but that didn't deter her. Her fingers slipped downward, between his thighs, pushing gently to spread them wider as she neared his balls. "Let me see."

She expected him to slam his legs together like a young virgin but he didn't. His arm shifted ever so slightly, revealing his thick, jutting cock.

"Very impressive, sir. I imagine many lovers have been well pleased —"

"If you're going to do it, do it," he snapped, staring over her head. His engorged cock twitched upward a bit more.

Ah, so he wasn't repulsed by her. He wasn't happy about his reaction to her but so what? A flourish of her tongue would change his mind. Holding back a grin, she slipped her lips over the end of his cock.

His sudden upward surge caught her off guard. The man was ready to rut!

If he meant to provoke her with his abrupt action, he failed. She knew how to handle a bucking stallion. A few gentle pulls with her lips and he settled quickly enough.

While he stroked in and out of her mouth, she looked up, as she promised herself she would and discovered his attention was centered over her head, presumably still studying the threesome behind her back. His mouth moved but only heavy puffs of breath came out. Then his gaze dropped and their eyes locked.

The fiery passion in his eyes flushed heat up her neck and into her cheeks. His hips rocked, faster and faster, his buttocks lifting off the bench and his narrowed gaze never left hers.

Anna tried to accommodate him. Unfamiliar with his likes and dislikes, she relied on her instincts, licking and sucking, swallowing as much of his length as she could and then retreating, guided the whole time by Mr. Hall's frantic thrusts.

His hands gripped the edge of the bench and his knuckles turned white. His thighs quivered. A long sigh slipped past his parted lips. He was close and she wasn't certain what she should do.

He exploded before she had another thought.

She gulped. Once. Twice.

And it was over.

He sat back, his head tipped back against the wall again, his chest rising and falling at an uneven pace. This time, his eyes were definitely closed. "Bloody hell."

Anna felt empty. Unsure of herself. Yet full of passion. On edge.

She spun around and rested her back against the edge of the bench seat next to his leg. The two men of the threesome they'd been watching now sat on the floor close to one other, talking quietly. It took a moment longer to locate the woman.

Dear Lord.

She lay sandwiched between two new male partners. Anna wasn't certain but it appeared the lady was being penetrated by both men. Was that possible?

All she wanted was one man to ease the ache between her legs. Where the *hell* was Randolph?

* * * * *

Holy, fucking son of a bitch! What did Anna do to him? Will's whole body was quivering. He'd come quick and hard and so...*involved* in his climax.

How had a woman bewitched him like that? She'd spoken like a harlot, teasing him with the sights and sounds around him. Anna had stroked his skin, not his cock but his leg, sending shivers up and down his arms. No woman had ever done that to him. It wasn't right. He didn't even like her!

But where was the cold resentment he usually felt when a female touched him intimately?

He'd wanted her lush mouth on him. He shook his head at the absurdity of it. The bottom line was he'd imagined being that man braced against the table and she'd taken advantage.

When Anna had looked up at him with those big brown passion-glazed eyes, something had cracked inside. He'd felt connected. *Saved*.

It made no sense!

Guilt flooded him. It was bad enough someone other than Trent had made him climax but did it have to be Miss Shaw? He wasn't sure if ejaculating into *her* mouth made his sin less offensive or more so.

How would Trent react to the news that his lover had turned to another to satisfy a moment of lust? Trent's betrothed, no less. Would he disown them both? His gut churned at the thought.

Other than a golden half-mask, Miss Shaw had not attempted to hide her identity. Insensible woman. She still wore her evening dress. Word would spread quickly of her infidelity.

He frowned as he glanced around the room. It was an orgy, for God's sake. Did anyone care who performed with whom? Perhaps not now but there would be whispers, he knew.

It irked him that he considered her reputation. She'd interfered with his happiness, threatened to steal Trent's affections. What did he care if her indiscretions caused Trent to withdraw his promise to her? Isn't that what he wanted?

He clenched his fists at his sides. Their transgression had been as much his fault as hers.

The thought of Trent casting Anna aside made his belly ache. She didn't belong in a country cottage, raising Trent's child on her own, her spirit crushed. Will didn't want to be the cause of that.

Deuce it!

That could be us.

Before she'd walked into the room, he'd been picturing the three of them in place of the two men and the woman in the center of the room, thinking along the same lines. At the time, he thought Trent would never give her up, so why not surrender to a happy threesome? Make the best of an impossible situation.

And then she'd teased him, drawn him into her seductive web and slipped her lips over his erection. He'd nearly hit the ceiling.

Anna possessed talent, he'd give her that. Trent had taught her well. Jealousy swelled unbidden when he imagined her servicing his lover but he tamped it down. In its place, a strange, erotic heat began to bloom. What would it be like having her kneel between them?

Across the room, a heavy man, wearing his white hair pulled back into a queue in the style of the 1780s, rose from the floor where a leaner man, younger by many years, had been straddling him. His little cock flopped forward beneath a barrel belly, limp and spent. His partner, still bearing a stiff rod, tried to follow him but the burly man pushed him away and headed toward the ale barrels. Will recognized the smuggler before he spied the boot birthmark on the man's back. He bolted off the bench and stood, suddenly uncertain how to proceed without creating a mob scene. Who knew how many of his crew he'd brought with him?

The man turned around, tankard in hand, and scanned the room. His gaze locked on Will. Recognition flared in his eyes. A leering smile slowly spread across his face as he studied Will's body. The lax position of Will's cock didn't appear to put the man off at all. He strode forward, stepping over bodies rather than going around.

"Well, well. Fancy meeting you here," the smuggler said when he was still several feet away.

From her spot on the floor in front of the bench, Anna started to rise. Will stepped forward to meet the man, tapping Anna with his foot as he passed and then stood blocking the smuggler's view of her. Where this protective stance toward Anna came from, he didn't know but surely Trent would want him to make sure Anna stayed out of harm's way.

"I thought I might see you again," Will replied, trying not to curl his nose at the man's stench.

"Yeah. Looks like we have similar tastes." The man licked his full lips as his gaze wandered down Will's body once more. "You, my friend, are prime meat."

Will didn't reply. The man wanted to touch him, he could see it in his beady, dark eyes. The thought revolted him. Still, he needed to divert the smuggler to a non-public area so he could interrogate him.

Anna had circled around them and now stood behind and to one side of the smuggler, her hand covering her mouth as soon as she spotted the marking on his back. She looked at Will with wide eyes. He pointedly ignored her, afraid he'd draw the smuggler's attention to her. As far as Will could tell, the man hadn't even noticed her existence but he wasn't going to take any chances. He tilted his head toward the door, hoping she understood his meaning. Anna lifted her hem and streaked toward the exit.

"Would you like to go somewhere with more...entertainment opportunities?" Will asked the fat man.

As expected, the man's eyes lit up. "What do you have in mind?"

Will leaned forward to speak directly into his ear. "A private room with...uh...sporting equipment." He stepped back, forcing a smirk onto his face.

"You like to play, eh?" the smuggler asked with a chuckle. He rubbed his hands together. "Good, good."

Will sucked in his gut at the nausea swirling there. The man outweighed him by fifty pounds. Fortunately, it was blubber, not muscle. If Will caught him off guard, restraining him should be easy. He hoped.

He picked up his toga off the bench and wrapped it loosely around his body. "Follow me."

The man swiped his hand over his little sausage several times and then pulled on it as if that would make it grow. Nothing happened. Will fervently hoped the man's recent ejaculation and his advanced age precluded it from rising anytime soon. The man chuckled at Will's raised brow and then eyed Will's cock with a hungry gleam in his eye.

Chapter Nineteen

Anna couldn't find Randolph. She'd searched every room in the sprawling country house. When she returned to the gallery, she'd breezed through the throng, trying not to appear overly concerned as she inquired after her betrothed. No one had seen him since they left the room together.

The guests whispered behind their gloves, speculating over his whereabouts and who may be sharing his company at the moment. Their choices for Randolph's mistresses were not worth considering. *She* was his mistress, for heaven's sake!

No, she was more concerned that her stepbrother was also still missing. It had been hours since they departed for the library. Where had they gone from there?

Midnight had come and gone. It wasn't like Randolph to miss a rendezvous with Anna. Granted, it wasn't a sexual affair they'd planned at midnight but they had intended to announce a wedding date. In her mind, he'd missed a momentous occasion and he wouldn't be easily forgiven.

Torn between anger and panic, she hurried back downstairs to find Mr. Hall. Maybe he could shed a clue on his lover's location. This time, she skipped the first two doors and headed straight for the men-lovers room.

The sight of men fucking men stunned her anew. Lined up right inside the door, one man banged into another man's ass while he in turn sucked another man's cock. Heat rose in her cheeks. The sound of flesh slapping flesh matched her tripping pulse. The grunts and groans vibrating through the room locked her feet in place and made her pussy throb. For several long moments, she couldn't stop staring at all the rubbing and thrusting and smacking. Then she realized they all had something she didn't, a mask.

She spun away, grappled with the doorknob, trying not to think why it was so slippery and finally lunged into the hall. Hopefully, everyone had been too busy to notice her.

The one person she'd expected to see in there, she hadn't seen. Now Mr. Hall was missing too. She rubbed her upper arms in alarm.

"Looking for someone, miss?" a liveried servant asked.

She set a hand at her throat in relief. Finally, someone she recognized. "Have you seen Mr. Hall?"

The tall, distinguished servant leaned down and whispered directions in her ear. Her brows rose, then fell into a frown. "Under the stairs?"

"Yes, miss."

Just as the servant indicated, beneath the back of the stairs, a flush door panel opened with a firm push in the upper corner. An oil lantern lit the rock steps descending into the root cellar. Unsure who—or what—she'd find, she crept down the cool, narrow passage. Dampness oozed through the bottom of her dancing slippers.

"Son of a bitch!" William Hall's voice resonated in the cavern below.

The crack of a whip jolted her upright and she almost slipped off her feet. She couldn't stop the loud gasp that rushed from her throat.

What kind of horrid scene was she walking into?

"Anna!" Mr. Hall yelled. "Stay put."

Frozen in place, her hands shook.

"You'd better be telling the truth," he ground out to someone else. The whip cracked again.

A little relief swept over her. At least it sounded as if Mr. Hall wielded the whip. What manner of interrogation was he conducting down here?

He rounded the corner to the bottom of the stairwell, whip in hand and stared up at her, his eyes venomous. The frayed hem of his toga stuck to his oiled calves. His bare chest heaved with agitation. "What are you doing here?" he barked. The dank humidity made the honey-colored waves on his forehead droop down below his eye. He brushed it back with his wrist. Even in the dim light she could see his knuckles were bloody and swollen.

This dark side of Mr. Hall made her nervous.

He rolled his neck and took a deep breath. "Have you told Trent our guest has arrived?" His voice sounded perfectly normal again, which made the situation surreal.

"How...how did you know it was me?"

He rolled his eyes at her response. "The slide of your slippers. The feminine sound of your gasp. I guessed it was you."

"Are you lashing the man?"

"Not yet." He stared at her meaningfully. "Trent?"

A bit of the chill in her arms dissipated. She blinked, forcing her mind back to her dilemma. "I cannot find him anywhere. I've come to solicit your help."

"Wait here." He disappeared into the blackness beyond the stairwell. "If you're lying, it will be my knife marking you not this whip."

"Go to hell," the unseen man spat back.

She imagined the fat smuggler tied to a post, then altered her vision when she heard the crack of a chair leg and a loud "Oomph".

"You can wallow in the dirt like the pig you are until I come back." The sounds of struggle ensued and the man's curses became muffled as though he was being gagged. Recalling Mr. Hall's torn toga hem, Anna guessed he'd put strips of the fabric to good use. She hoped the thin fabric held.

Glass shattered. The smuggler must be putting up a fight.

Anna swallowed hard. Even though she knew Mr. Hall was a Bow Street Runner, she'd never imagined him ruthless. Overall, he was a quiet man who suppressed his emotions. She'd seen him look with longing at Randolph and he exposed his petty jealousy occasionally but he'd always seemed passive. *Ah but still waters run deep.* The enigmatic man behind the mask gave her shivers just like Randolph did and made her pussy weep even more.

What would it be like to be at the hands of *two* masterful men?

She could see herself bending down onto all fours as Mr. Hall cracked the whip over her head. "Is that how you want her, Trent?" he'd ask his lover.

Trent would lift her chin with his finger so her mouth lined up with his turgid erection. "That's good," he'd reply, resting the tip of his cock on her bottom lip.

Not only could she see his excitement, she could smell it. Now she wanted to taste it. Her tongue eased out between her parted lips.

The whip cracked, snapping the wooden floorboards by her knees. In her hurry to withdraw her tongue, she'd bitten down on the tip. *Ouch!*

Trent would laugh. "You know not to touch until I say so, Anna. Only I have that privilege, my dear." He'd reach down and squeeze her breasts, one at a time and then circle the areolas with the pad of his thumb until her nipples grew taut.

She'd try not to moan or wiggle as he rubbed each nipple between his fingers. Any movement might bring Mr. Hall's whip down on her back. Forcing her body to relax, she'd let her juices flow.

"Are you wet for me yet, sweetheart?"

"Yes, Randolph."

Mr. Hall, standing behind her, would verify her statement, dipping his hand between her legs and running his thick fingers around her moist, swollen lips. When he dipped them inside, she'd squeeze his fingers with her inner muscles.

"She's soaked," he'd announce as he drew her cream up to her puckered hole and swirled it around.

"You may take me into your mouth now, Anna."

With her heartbeat racing in her chest, she'd part her lips and slip them up and down the velvety skin on Randolph's cock. Trent's hands would cup her jaw and set the pace while she slurped his hot shaft in and out of her mouth. No matter what he made her do, she loved pleasing him.

As his breathing hitched into a shallow rhythm, he pumped into her mouth faster. "That's it, sweetheart. Yeah. Oh, yeah. Suck it."

Mr. Hall continued to test her heat level by stroking his fingers in and out of her throbbing cunt. His thumb, slick with her juices, would slide up to her hole and press in. This time, she couldn't stop the moan.

The whip cracked.

When she gasped, Randolph slid to the back of her throat, pulled out and pressed deep again. His cock slid in and out steadily. Forcefully.

When she protested by groaning, the whip snapped.

She knew Trent would stop the intense play if she pressed her thumb into the back of his hand. It was their signal that he'd pushed her too far. As yet, she'd never stopped him from taking her as he pleased. Making love with Trent was an adventure.

She cursed the demon inside her who savored the rough treatment, thrived on it. No respectable lady behaved so abominably—which made it even more thrilling, she thought with an inner smile.

She worked harder to draw a climax from him.

Mr. Hall sunk his thumb deeper into her ass and wiggled it around.

"Fuck her, William," Trent demanded. "In the ass, like you like it."

She could feel her pulse beating in her ears. Quivers shot through her drenched channel. She held her breath when his thumb popped free because she knew there was more to come. Mr. Hall lubricated her with her juices again. This time, he probed her with the head of his thick cock.

Oh God.

She jumped when Mr. Hall popped back into view at the bottom of the stairs. He bounded up the steps two at a time, grabbed her elbow and spun her around. "Come on, I need to get out of this ridiculous costume."

Anna rather liked the way it clung to his masculine form but she didn't say so. Her short fantasy left her dazed and her sex coated with slickness. Mr. Hall's nearness flushed heat straight to her core. Best to focus on something else, or she'd be propositioning him again. There was no time for that. Not until she knew Trent was all right. The sooner they found Randolph, the better.

After Mr. Hall had posted a burly servant at the root cellar door, he stopped outside the men's dressing room. "Wait here."

She nodded, thinking how silly he was acting considering she'd probably seen every male in the county naked in the last few hours. This was a night she wouldn't soon forget.

Mr. Hall reappeared in a flash, buttoning his breeches beneath his untucked shirt and open waistcoat. His jacket lay over his arm in a jumble. The stockings he wore sagged at his ankle. The overall look was rather uncouth if he intended to return to the party.

"Have you no shawl? It's brisk outside."

"You think they went outside?"

He glanced up at her. "I assumed you searched the house."

"Yes but with all the guests—"

"You are a thorough woman, Miss Shaw." He appeared chagrined at the thought. "I doubt you would fail to notice Trent. Let's not waste any more time." He tucked his coat over her shoulders and guided her out the French doors to the garden patio.

A burst of cold night air whipped at her hem. She tugged the coat tighter around her shoulders. "Do you know where Randolph and Brandon might have gone?"

"Let's check the stables first."

As she hurried beside him, she tripped over her hem. Without looking at her, he swept his hand beneath her arm, lending her support should she need it. A warm fondness for him bloomed inside her. Despite his moments of antagonism and the intolerance toward criminals that bent toward cruelty, Mr. Hall was a kind, caring soul. They could be friends, more than friends, if he'd give her a chance. They loved the same man who loved them both in return. Surely they had something in common besides a large dose of willfulness.

Like an inclination to undertake exciting, sometimes dangerous, ventures.

Anna tripped again but the warm hand at her elbow caught her.

"Do you think Randolph and Brandon rode off the estate, Mr. Hall?"

"No but we will make certain so we know where to limit our search."

Well. That sounded good. Perhaps she was making headway with him after all. She clamped down on the emptiness inside her womanly core.

* * * * *

He should've left Anna back at the house. For one thing, the scent of sex clung to her skin, reminding him how good it felt to have his cock stroking her warm, wet mouth. For another, Trent wouldn't have abandoned both of them tonight without good reason and when he returned, neither of them would be where he'd left them. Trent was probably looking for them right now. The irony made him grin but the optimism quickly slipped away. A bad feeling twisted in his gut.

After a long span of silence, Anna peppered him with questions while he scanned the shadows for danger. The moon was almost full, the pathway bright and she obviously felt no tingle at the back of her neck like he did.

"The smuggler claimed someone sold him Lord Pendleton's stolen pistol," he said in answer to her latest question.

"Of course he blamed someone else," Anna said with exasperation in her voice. "He's not going to admit to murdering Lord Pendleton."

"He'll probably hang for the smuggling offense, so there's no reason to lie anymore."

"Some people like to keep their secrets, Mr. Hall, even when faced with death."

Secrets were dangerous things, Will thought ruefully.

"My cousin is a clergyman," Anna continued. "He often complains about the people on their deathbeds who prefer to take their confessions straight to God."

He nodded, certain he would be one of those poor souls.

A stable boy rushed to attend them as soon as they neared the stable doors. "One gent," he told them when Will inquired about Viscount Trent and the new Lord Pendleton, "rode in on horseback and left not too long ago. Said he couldn't bear being parted from his lady. Haven't seen his lordship, Lord Trent, that is, sir."

Anger heated Will's neck. If that self-important new lord hurt Trent in any way...

"You don't think—" Anna clutched his arm. "No, don't think it, Mr. Hall. Brandon's head is full of Faith, nothing else. He wouldn't—"

"He would if Trent discovered something new that incriminated him." Will turned and stalked away, kicking the water trough as he passed it.

"Oh, dear." She scurried to catch up to him and then clung to his arm as they walked along. "I so hoped Brandon didn't kill Pendleton."

"The smuggler said a lad sold him Lord Pendleton's gun for a bride price. Do you know anyone else besides you planning on getting married soon?"

She sighed in defeat. "Poor misguided Brandon, his chances with Faith shall be destroyed."

A memory clicked in Will's brain but he couldn't grasp it or its meaning. Right now, he only cared about Trent's well-being.

Anna worried her bottom lip and then glanced up at Will with wide eyes. "We must find Randolph." Urgency broke up her words. "Brandon's punishment can wait. We know where he's gone, right? Right now, Randolph is the important one. He might be lying mortally wounded—"

"Be quiet so I can think, will you?" Although he'd spoken harshly, he set his other hand on her arm and patted it reassuringly. She shut her mouth on a sob.

The depth of her concern hit him low in the belly. She truly loved her paramour. If getting pregnant had been a ploy to snare a viscount, she'd done it because she cared about him deeply. Perhaps she thought he wouldn't have offered for her under any other circumstances.

Even if Anna hadn't gotten pregnant, he'd bet she would've remained as Trent's mistress. She wouldn't have let her lover go easily. He wasn't sure Trent would've been able to let her go either.

Now, he was glad life had worked out differently. Trent had been right. There was something special about Anna. In a perverse way, they all belonged together.

If Will had a choice today, he'd be twisted in the sheets with his lover every night but Anna might be watching. Or stroking him while Trent fucked him.

A twinge of lust jerked his relaxed cock.

No sense dwelling on Anna's motives now. What was done was done. She loved Trent. He loved him too. Nothing to do now but work together to find the lucky man.

"We'll spread out, within sight of each other and search the grounds." He glanced down at her white skirt flowing beneath his coat. She should be easy to keep in his sights and his billowing white shirt was equally visible in the bright night. Perhaps, if they were lucky, Trent would spot them first.

"Randolph!" Anna called, heading in the direction of the pond.

Will set off across the lawn toward the greenhouse, the closest building to the garden terrace, keeping Anna in his peripheral vision. The ground sloped down to the water and he lost her for a moment but he could hear her calling Trent.

The door to the greenhouse was locked. No broken glass glittered on the ground in the moonlight. He didn't hear any painful moans or harsh breathing. Then again, he couldn't hear much with Anna's constant shouting.

He cocked his head. Hell, she was calling *him*! And then...silence.

His feet flew across the lawn. He heard them before he slid down the bank to the water's edge.

"Tell me where she is!" A lad held Anna around the waist and waved a knife at her throat. "Or I'll kill your pretty dove."

Will skidded to a halt. *Jesus*. He felt the blood drain from his face.

Trent knelt on one knee opposite them, bent at the waist, holding his ribs. His hair was mussed, his eye patch missing. He spat blood from his split lips.

Will patted his body for his gun and then stared in horror at Anna. His coat hung off her shoulders, pulling down lower on the right from the weight of the small pistol in the pocket. "Anna." His throat clogged.

She clutched the edges of his coat in her fists. "Don't kill me. Please. Randolph—" Her frightened gaze shifted to Will. "Stop him—"

"Shut up!" Her assailant squeezed her tighter and swished the blade dangerously close to her pale skin.

Dammit, why had Trent insisted on attending the ball without a weapon at his disposal? The plan to arm himself before he went downstairs to the orgy obviously hadn't worked out at all.

Dear God, would he lose them both in one fell swoop? He was beginning to like Anna. In many ways, she reminded him of himself. Strong-willed, stubborn, loyal.

Will's knees wobbled when he stepped toward them. "What's this about!"

"Stay back!" the boy yelled.

Trent's gaze never left the attacker's face. "Sally is in London at a home for wayward women," he said in a raspy voice. "She *chose* to go there. Let Anna go."

The boy's face contorted with hatred. His nostrils flared. "Liar! She was going to go to her aunt's house."

"Travel all the way to Cornwall in her condition?" Trent shook his head and took several deep breaths. "She feared the hazards of the long journey."

"Sally doesn't belong with those sluts!" The boy's voice wobbled with emotion. "She was a good girl until Pendleton got hold of her!"

"Kill me then. I was the one who sent her away." Trent winced as he tried to stand. "Release Anna." Before he rose halfway, he wavered and slid back down to one knee.

He waved Will away when he took another step in his direction. "Don't an...tagon...ize a des...perate man."

It all started coming together—the piece of Sally's interview he'd overlooked. *Pendleton destroyed any chance with a beau.* He'd never followed up on Sally's beau. At the time, her father was the prime murder suspect. He thought he had the murderer in the bag, plus he'd been anxious to meet Trent at the lean-to.

His negligence might have killed his man and Anna too.

"Kill *me*," he shouted, pounding his chest. "Sending Sally away was my idea."

Trent glanced at him, his brows furrowed in anger. "Don't...lie for me, William."

Anna squirmed in the attacker's arms. *Deuce it, what was she doing?*

A powder flash at Anna's thigh rocked them all backward.

The assailant bellowed and hopped on one foot. Anna slipped free, tossing Will's coat off her shoulders and rushed to Trent.

"Bloody hell." Smoke sifted up from the musket ball hole in Will's jacket pocket. He added *courage* to the list of Anna's admirable traits.

"She's blown off my toes," the boy wailed, holding his ankle and rolling on the ground in pain.

Will snatched up the knife, his gut tightening when he saw the bloody blade up close. His fist coiled around the hilt. For a deadly moment, he held the knife over the scum of the earth who'd threatened the man he loved.

The writhing young man whimpered when he looked into Will's eyes. "Don't kill me."

The pitiful plea disgusted him. "You showed no mercy when you held Anna at knifepoint."

"I wouldn't have killed her!"

Will scoffed. "You killed a peer of the realm and wounded another. Over the loss of a woman?"

"I loved her!" He sobbed loudly. "That rotten earl raped my girl."

That gave Will pause. Could he fault the lad for seeking revenge? No. He'd gone too far though, when he attacked Trent.

A painful hiss from his lover's lips veered Will's attention away. Trent lay flat on the ground now. Anna had opened his waistcoat, revealing several long dark stains on his shirt.

"If he dies, you die—by my hand," Will snarled at the youth. He turned and sank by his friend's side, his heart in his throat.

"He hit my rib. I'm okay," Trent panted.

Will tore open Trent's shirt. Several slices and one deep cut marred his beautiful torso. Anna eased his clenched fingers open. A crosshatch of defensive wounds bled from his palms. She blotted the cuts with her gown.

"You're not supposed to grab the knife blade," she sobbed angrily.

"My aim...was off."

Anna lowered her head to his shoulder and cried.

A knot formed in Will's throat and his eyes burned. "I'll carry him back to the house. You send someone for a doctor."

"What about me!" Sally's beau cried.

"You're lucky I don't finish you off," he growled.

"Please...help me." Tears ran down the youth's face.

Will stared at the assailant's shattered boot and blackened foot. It looked like he might be missing a toe or two but it was hard to say. "Bind your foot. I'll send someone to fetch you."

The boy curled into a ball and wailed. For a brief moment, Will felt sorry for him. He might survive the shot but not the noose. He'd freed Sally at the cost of his own life. The ultimate sacrifice for love.

Will understood. He'd be willing to die for Trent.

Tonight though, it seemed as though Will's presence barely registered in his lover's mind. Trent centered his attention on Anna.

"Anna." Trent grasped her dress with a bloody fist. He coughed, spitting blood over his puffy lips. "Find a clergyman."

Chapter Twenty

Trent lay deathly still in his bed. The searing pain in his chest left him breathless. The hole he'd punched in his tongue with his teeth when Sally's beau jabbed his chin in a solid upper cut hurt just as badly.

Caught unaware, without a weapon and wounded from the start, he'd lost ground quickly. The lad wielded his knife with the expertise of a seasoned mercenary. William and Anna's arrival foiled his fighting strategy but he wouldn't complain. In the end, his friends served him well.

William sat in a hard wooden chair by the bedside, clutching his arm, whispering over and over, "Don't die, don't die." Outside, the wind howled like a banshee crying for the dead. The sound swept around his neck, choking him.

"Where the hell is the doctor?" William shouted at the closed door.

His lover was restless. William had carefully undressed him, washed away the sticky blood, bandaged Trent's hands, forced Scotch down his throat to dull the pain, stoked the fire in the grate and pressed gauze over his gaping wound. With nothing left to do but worry, he fidgeted.

William pressed his forehead to Trent's bruised cheek. "Please don't die."

"William," he beckoned in a weak voice.

"What?" He leaned back enough to look into his eyes.

The agony he saw clouding William's gaze ripped at his heart. "Shut...up." Trent winced at a spasm of pain in his tongue. "Not...going to die."

William tried to smile but his chin shook. "You look like hell."

No doubt. He felt like he'd been run over by a coach-and-four. "Scratches."

William didn't argue.

Trent closed his eyes. He was so tired.

"Dammit! Where is the fucking doctor?" William shouted.

Anna burst into the room, out of breath. "How is he?"

Trent's eyes fluttered, slitting open so he could see his future bride. All he distinguished was a blurry figure and bloodstains on her ball gown. Damn, he'd ruined her night. She'd been so excited about the wedding announcement. He hated that he'd let her down.

He'd make it up to her. Whatever she wanted. A new gown to replace the ruined one, a rare antique weapon for her collection, one night a week solely for her...no, three nights. William would agree to a more equitable schedule. It seemed as though his lover had shown genuine concern for Anna down at the lake.

Had he imagined that? His clarity was a little fuzzy.

He heard music. Was the ball still in progress? What about the orgy? Someone needed to tell them all to leave. He turned his head toward William, drawing his brows down as he tried to piece a sentence together.

"Will... Go home" was all he managed to say before darkness claimed him.

* * * * *

A tear slid down Will's cheek. Anguish crushed his heart. And anger.

He stood up and bellowed, "Where is the bloody —"

"He's coming, Mr. Hall," Anna replied calmly, moving to his side. "The doctor is coming." Her fearful gaze roved over Trent from head to toe. "Should we cover him up?"

"Do whatever you want. I've been told to leave." He didn't go, though. Trent would have to get up out of his bed and personally kick Will down the stairs and out the door before he'd *think* about leaving him.

Anna pulled the sheet up to the patient's waist, then pulled it back to his thighs when it stuck to a cut on his hip. "He didn't mean it."

Will was very much afraid he did. Facing death opened the eyes of a lot of people. Will didn't belong in Trent's life. Anna did. Along with their child.

All the pent-up anger and jealousy and self-doubt oozed out of his pores, leaving him empty.

"Did you find a clergyman too?" he asked quietly.

"I sent a servant to wake the parson." She looked up at him, misery plain in her eyes. "Do you think Randolph wanted last rites?"

"He doesn't believe he's going to die." He gave Anna a look of resignation. "He wants to marry you. Now. Just in case he's wrong."

"Oh, God." Anna collapsed to her knees. "I never wanted him to feel obligated."

Grasping her under the arms, Will lifted her onto the chair he'd vacated. "He loves you, Anna. Don't doubt it. He told me..." He glanced at the flames in the hearth. It seemed easier now to face how much Trent cared for Anna. "He planned on marrying you. Even before you arrived at his house to tell him you were pregnant."

"He did?" She brushed a lock of hair back from Trent's forehead.

"Yes."

When she tilted her head, he saw a small smile on her distressed face. "Oh." The smile faded. She swiveled in the chair and looked up at him. "Until you came along."

"It doesn't matter now, does it? His intentions are clear."

"As clear as mud," she mumbled.

A young man carrying a medical bag charged into the room, his face florid. "Am I too late?"

Will stepped back from the bed, as if the close proximity would give away his feelings for Trent. "He's unconscious and needs stitches."

A short while later, the efficient doctor tied off the last of the stitches. "The next few days will be critical. Keep the cuts clean. If the wounds fester, coat them with honey." He winked at Anna. "My mother swears by it."

"Your mother!" Anna exclaimed.

The chap nodded. "Some of the best treatments are home remedies." He shrugged. "If you prefer, I can perform a bloodletting but only if he's feverish."

"He's lost enough blood." She frowned at the young man. "I think —"

Will set his hand on Anna's shoulder. "If Lord Trent worsens, we'll send for you."

The doctor nodded, packed up his bag, stifled a yawn and left just as a disheveled man of the cloth entered.

"Am I too late?" On the opposite side of the bed, he leaned down to examine the patient.

"Why does everyone keep asking that?" Will grouched. "He's sleeping."

"Hmm. He looks rather pale. Does the doctor expect the viscount to wake?"

"Yes," Will and Anna said together, even though the doctor had promised no such thing.

"There's nothing you can do right now," Will told the pessimistic little man. "You may leave. Sorry we disturbed your sleep."

"What Mr. Hall means, Father, is that Lord Trent didn't make his intentions clear when he asked us to summon you. We don't think he intended to make his last confession but we cannot be certain. Until he wakes—" She broke off, unable to continue.

The parson looked over his spectacles at her. "You are his intended?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, brushing the back of her hand over Trent's bruised cheek.

"Hmm." He looked over at Will. "Perhaps I will stay for a while longer. In case he stirs."

Anna instructed a servant to bring more chairs and the long vigil began.

* * * * *

Two long days and nights later, Will finally smiled. "I think he's back to normal, Anna."

Trent grunted and stirred.

Anna gasped and sat up straighter. "What makes you think so?"

Will pointed to the tent in the sheets at their lover's crotch.

"Oh, my!"

"It's probably just morning arousal but —"

"Dreamed of you," Trent rasped.

Will glanced up to see the man of his heart staring at him. Then Trent turned his head and looked at Anna.

"And you too." He raised a weak hand to his throat. "Water."

Anna jumped up to pour a glass. "Thank God, you're alert, Randolph." She jabbered on but Will stopped heeding her words.

Trent had dreamed of him. Was that a good thing or bad? Self-doubt pumped the blood through his veins at a fast pace. Was that all they shared between them now — dreams?

Anna squeaked when Trent pulled her closer. She held a glass up in the air, the water sloshing in the half-empty tumbler. Will looked away when they started to kiss.

At least, Trent hadn't woken up wondering why Will was still at his house. He braced himself for the eviction. A small part of him had already given up but the stubborn part of him racked his brain for a clever retort. Was there any chance to change his friend's mind?

"William!" a deep voice called.

He blinked. Anna sat in her chair with a satisfied look on her face, pressing her shiny lips together. He filled his lungs with courage and looked at Trent. "Yes?"

Trent covered his damaged eye with his hand. "Where is my eye patch?"

"You lost it in the scuffle," William told him. "It's not important, Trent."

"I barely noticed its absence," Anna said.

He looked from one to the other. "The ragged scar doesn't revolt you?"

"No," Will and Anna said simultaneously.

Trent smiled. "Come here, William, and give me a kiss."

Damn. He didn't know if he could. He wasn't ready to say good-bye.

"What's the matter?" Trent asked with a frown.

"Someone might come in. The doctor or —"

"Lock the door then!" Trent's face flushed from the exertion of yelling.

Anna jumped up. "Easy, love." She dabbed a damp cloth she kept by the bed over his forehead. Her betrothed growled at her. She stepped back and glared at Will. "For God's sake, kiss him. I won't watch if you don't want me to." She turned her back to the bed.

Not wanting to upset Trent further, he leaned over and smacked a kiss on his lips.

His lover grabbed his lapel in a surprisingly strong grip. "Kiss me."

Swallowing his melancholy, he slid his lips over Trent's mouth in a crushing kiss. Tongues flicked at each other, then melded together. Will's body, tired from lack of

sleep, stormed to life. A moan cracked in his throat. He'd missed this so much! It had only been two days. How would he survive never kissing Trent again?

The kiss softened, whether from Trent's weakened state or tenderness, he wasn't sure. The grip on his lapel loosened but held firm. The rush he'd felt moments before slowed into a smooth current that soothed his soul. He wished the kiss would never end. On the other hand, if they kept it up, he'd be rolling onto the bed next to Trent.

He ended the embrace slowly, running his tongue over Trent's cracked lips, pecking little kisses on his mouth, slower and slower. Reluctantly, he pulled away.

A slow grin cocked Trent's lips. "Best elixir I've ever had."

So don't make me go.

The sheet shifted. Will followed the wave of cloth down to the bump at Trent's groin. "Are you going to lock the door, William?" His sliding knuckles were clearly outlined beneath the sheet.

"Gentlemen." Anna cleared her throat. "None of that. Randolph must heal before engaging in strenuous activity."

Trent chuckled. "I'll just lie here, Anna. I promise."

She huffed, put her hands on her hips and gave him an exasperated look.

Trent stopped playing with himself and his eyes drifted closed. "Yes, my sweet. I'm too tired anyway."

Will thought he'd drifted back to sleep but the viscount spoke again. "Water."

Will held his shoulders up and put the glass to his lips. Trent drank, sighing when he was done.

"Did you fetch the minister, Anna?"

She stepped forward, glancing sidelong at Will. "I did but when you didn't wake, we sent him away."

"Get him back."

She cast another brief glance Will's way. He stared back, his gut in knots. "May I ask why?" she asked, turning back to her betrothed.

Trent gave her a look that said she should know the answer. "I want to marry you. Right now."

Will quickly looked away, hiding the pain that surely showed in his eyes.

"I'll need my solicitor too. William, post a rider to London." He paused for breath. "And bring the man here." He looked from Will to Anna and back again. "I'm changing my will." Trent sank back onto his pillows. "Wake me when either man arrives."

Will didn't know what to think but he'd be damned if his lover was going to destroy his world in front of a minister or a solicitor. "I won't be bought off with the promise of funds when you die. Or marry Anna if something should happen to you. Or comply with whatever other scheme you're cooking in your brain to ease your guilt over letting me go." He glared at Trent when he turned toward him with a cocked

brow. "You asked for a one-month trial. All of us living together. The time for a decision is past and *I'm not leaving.*"

Trent raised his arm toward Will and dropped it again. "What the deuce are you talking about? Who asked you to leave?" He looked at Anna with suspicion.

"Not I!" she exclaimed.

"You told me to go home." Will paced the length of the bed, agitated in the extreme.

"I did? Whatever for?"

Will stopped and spun toward him. "I don't know!"

"Maybe it had something to do with Pendleton's case? Something I wanted you to do in London?"

"The case is closed." Will quickly related the last few days of activity. "Sally's suitor confessed to the crime. He'd been stealing wine from the wine cellar to sell to our smuggler friend, who was a local tavern keeper. The lad planned to use the money to rent lodgings for Sally and him. The earl caught him in the act. After he murdered Pendleton, he stole the earl's pistol and sold it, along with a few bottles of rare vintage, to the smuggler from Snake Cavern. Unfortunately for him, Sally wanted nothing to do with a murderer, no matter how just the cause. Both men have been extradited to a London jail."

"Sally loved her beau enough not to give him away, though," Anna added.

"Which could've cost Trent his life," Will said angrily.

"William." He grasped his arm with a bandaged hand. "I don't know what I meant but I don't want you to leave. Not now, not ever." Trent's face lost the slight coloring in his cheeks. He tried to scoot up in the bed but gave up in seconds.

Anna stroked his sheet-covered calf. "You need to rest, Randolph."

The aristocrat in him waved a hand in the air. "No. Must explain."

Will was still processing Trent's words. Warmth flushed his body from head to toe. It was all a misunderstanding. His consort still wanted him. Praise the Lord! He clasped the hand clinging to his arm. "It's enough to know you still care."

Anna moved to the other side of the bed and adjusted the pillow behind his head. "Rest. We'll take care of your wishes, my love."

Trent nodded. Yet, he fought his weakness for a little longer. He patted Anna's arm with his other hand. "Love you both." He paused a few moments while he regained some strength. "In my will... It's a matter of precaution, William. I wish you to...be my child's guardian. He will call you uncle."

Will smiled. He'd accepted a long time ago that he'd never have children of his own. That didn't mean he didn't like children, or desire a child. "*Uncle William* sounds grand, Trent."

"Good." His fingers relaxed. In the blink of an eye, he dropped off to sleep.

Anna stared across the bed at Will. "So, we're going to be family. Officially." She smiled. "I'm glad, Mr. Hall."

"William." He grinned at her. "Call me William. After all, we have been intimate."

Anna's face flushed bright red. "Yes, about that..."

Chapter Twenty-One

"How am I going to tell Randolph what happened between us?" Anna bit her thumbnail. She paced the dressing room adjoining Randolph's bedroom while they waited for the clergyman and solicitor to arrive.

Butterflies swarmed in her belly, due in a large part to guilt. It had been wrong to entice William behind Randolph's back. The other reason for the butterflies... Heavens, making love to William's cock had left her hungry for more. Even now, a few steps beyond Randolph's sleeping body, she yearned to touch William—in very personal places. *Dear Lord.*

"I must confess before we're wed."

William rested a shoulder against the clothespress door and crossed his arms. "We should tell him together. There is no room for secrets among us."

She gazed at him, relieved he was willing to share the burden. He was a good man. "Thank you," she said softly.

As she sank down on a travel chest, she released a sigh of worry. She thought she knew Randolph well but there was no telling how he would react to infidelity from both of his lovers. With William at her side, she'd feel stronger.

"I don't regret what I did." She glanced up, her face warm, interested in William's reaction.

He raised a brow. How was she supposed to interpret that look? Derisive? Curious? Amused?

She averted her gaze for a brief moment and then looked back. She would not let him unsettle her. "I only regret trifling with you without Randolph's knowledge."

"It would've been best if you'd come below stairs with Trent, as planned."

"So he could watch?" *Lord, what made her say that?* She squirmed on her seat, mentally pushing back images of Randolph watching her service William. Yet, the idea of the three of them together wouldn't leave her.

William's brow arched higher. "Would you like that?"

She didn't know how to reply. Did her fantasies lower his esteem of her? Or make him hot? "Would you?"

They stared at one another. Anna wondered if her expression was as unreadable as his.

"What shall we tell him happened?" he asked quietly.

A fair question. One she mulled over for a few minutes. What excuse did she have? She was intoxicated? No, she'd known exactly what she was doing. She'd even had a motive – to show William a way for them all to love one another.

Had her plan worked? It brought her closer to William, made her want to know him better. As for his reaction to her...she didn't know. She respected his choice to love another man and regarded him highly for standing by that choice.

"I'll tell Randolph it was a mistake, a moment of weakness."

"Was it?"

She ignored the question and stared at a knot in the pine flooring. "I'll promise him that I'll never approach you again."

"Never? How disappointing."

The heat in her cheeks flared. Was he mocking her? Or did he really mean it? She swallowed against the dryness in her throat. "Not without Randolph's approval."

"Hmm."

Dare she tell William how much she cared for him? How much she admired his devotion to Trent? His pride and courage? "If you want me to touch you, that is."

A light chuckle danced into the air. "Anytime."

Oh, God. A raw craving coiled in her belly, tempered by the warm fullness in her heart.

"I'm flattered by your attention, Anna, which is a strange and unique state for me. Women in general don't appeal to me but you do."

A tremor of pleasure shuddered through her body.

"I'm not sure what to do about it," he said gently.

She stood slowly, gazing at him across the room.

He stared back without facial expression but his eyes regarded her with smoky desire and more. Tenderness.

She walked one pace forward and stopped. He didn't move. Despite the longing flowing through her veins, she couldn't move another inch.

A kiss to seal their affections didn't seem right. A hug? Not enough. No words came to mind to express her feelings. Yet, she needed to do *something*.

She forced her feet another small step toward him.

"Lord Trent?" a voice boomed from the other room. "Are you lucid, milord?"

For a second, she froze. William straightened away from the clothespress. They looked at each other one last time and rushed into Randolph's bedroom.

* * * * *

"Before the ceremony begins, I...we must speak to you, Randolph." Anna slid her gaze to the clergyman. "Privately."

Propped up in the bed, with a fresh eye patch in place, wearing a waistcoat and coat over his nightshirt and the bedcovers hiding the rest of him, Randolph looked every inch the aristocrat. Albeit, a sick one. He waved an imperious hand at the clergyman. "Do give us a minute, Father."

As soon as the bedroom door closed, he looked from one to the other. Perspiration dotted his brow. If he wasn't so ill, she might have thought his pale complexion indicated nervousness. "Well, what is it?"

Anna opened her mouth to speak but William jumped in, keeping his voice low in case the clergyman listened at the door.

"During the...uh...party below stairs, Anna and I shared an intimate occurrence." At Randolph's widening eye, he rushed on. "Blame it on the context of the situation if you will but it wasn't an act. We thought you deserved to know."

"You... What? How?" He gaped at them both.

A flush of guilt heated her cheeks. "I took his cock into my mouth," she told him shyly.

He shook his head. "William, I don't understand. You don't like —"

"I like Anna."

"Indeed?" He turned toward her, his face pale. "Is this going to be a habit, my sweet?"

She blushed. "I only sought to bring us all closer together. I'll do whatever you wish, my lord." With her hands clenched in front of her and her heart in her throat, she waited for Randolph's verdict.

He was silent for a long time.

Then he smiled. Roguishly, she thought. The smile broadened into a grin.

He laughed!

Good heavens, had she hurt him so badly he retreated behind mirth?

"I'm sorry, Randolph."

"Oooh, it hurts to laugh." He slung an arm across his stomach and reached for Anna's hand. "I love you." He gave her hand a squeeze and looked up at William, including him in his endearment. "Next time, I want to be there."

Chapter Twenty-Two

William's vigorous sucks on one side of Trent's cock and Anna's delicate licks on the other side fired Trent's blood. Since the attack, his wife and his lover had found some common ground. Meeting in the middle, he reflected with a small smile, proved very gratifying indeed.

If he hadn't been in constant pain the last few weeks, he might have enjoyed their compromise more frequently.

He doubled up the feather pillow behind his head and watched their mouths duel over him. William, completely dressed, sat on the mattress by his left hip while Anna, wearing her night shift, straddled one of his legs. The covers he'd thrown off his overheated body lay crumpled at the foot of the bed. If only he could wake with his two favorite people in his bed every morning.

Wouldn't that put the servants into a tizzy! They already whispered about his frequent behind doors meetings with William. A naked man in the master's bed, along with the master's wife, would ruin all their reputations in a flash. Even if the servants swore to secrecy, he wasn't certain William and Anna would agree, although the strain that once existed between seemed to have disappeared.

His grin grew more lopsided when their feasting lips collided at his flushed crown and they paused to share a brief kiss. Ah, perhaps his fantasies weren't so farfetched after all.

William grabbed the base of Trent's cock and swooped down, rolling his tongue around the shaft as he stuffed his mouth full. Not to be outdone, Anna slid down Trent's leg and pushed his other leg out of her way. Warm moist breath flowed over his sac a moment before a long lick ran up the seam between his balls.

Tingling pleasure gathered in his groin and shuddered up his spine. Trent's hips jerked. A twinge of pain shot through his ribs. He grunted, determined to ignore the familiar ache, hoping they'd dismiss his guttural complaint as a sound of intense pleasure but he could not fool his lovers so easily. Both paused in their sensual crusades and looked up at him with concerned gazes.

"'Tis nothing!" he shouted, waving an arm in the air. He hoped the son of a bitch who did this to him died slowly when he hung by the neck, not only for stabbing him but for murdering Lord Pendleton. The old lord might have been a lecher but he didn't deserve to die and Trent didn't deserve a honeymoon where he hadn't been able to make love to his wife—or his beau.

After a long pause, William resumed fucking him with his mouth, although the forceful pulls that had drawn Trent's balls up tight now slackened to gentle tugs. Anna drew away completely. He ground his teeth in frustration.

It was time he quit his sickbed and returned to life's normal tempo. "Leave off, William," he growled, rolling his hips away. "Summon my manservant. I am going to have a shave, dress and go riding this morning."

Anna gasped. "You cannot! The doctor advised you lie in bed another fortnight."

"I will not." He swung his legs over the side of the bed, pushing William to his feet at the same time. "I am amply healed."

"Please, Randolph." Anna scrambled behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck. The soft full curves of her breasts pressed into his back. "What if the pain overcomes you and you fall from your horse? I cannot bear the thought of you hurt again—or killed."

Trent drew her slender arms away from his neck. With tenderness swelling in his heart, he kissed the inside of her wrist. "I am not so foolish that I would gallop across the park on my first day back in the saddle, milady."

"I must agree with your wife, Trent."

Hm. William had mellowed more than he thought.

"But if you insist on riding, you will not press your horse faster than a walk," William added, crossing his arms over his chest. "And I will accompany you."

Anna slipped off the bed and stood by his side. "If you go riding, I am going too."

Trent chuckled. "I think not." He smoothed her shift over her increasing belly, just a gentle curve over her abdomen but enough for him to imagine the growing child inside.

"Then walk with me—us," she cast a tender glance at William, "instead." She skimmed her warm hand up his bare thigh. "I need to stretch my legs too. Soon winter will be upon us and the air will be too cold to breathe."

With a resigned look at William, he pushed off the bed and stood up. "Fair enough." He'd been practicing walking around his room when no one was around. It felt glorious to take a few steps without a gnawing ache in his side or a pounding headache. No more than a dull throb pressed on his ribs. "I feel fit," he said, pounding his chest. "Anna, tell Cook to prepare a hearty breakfast. I'm famished. William, order me a bath and a shave."

"I'm glad to see you back to your old self, Trent." William gripped his shoulder and then stepped closer to give him an enthusiastic kiss. Suddenly, he broke it off and gave Trent a robust hug. "I've missed you," he whispered.

A month ago, Trent might have thought William meant *in his bed* but now something deeper, more profound than friendship and lust, flourished between them. He held his lover at arm's length and looked into his serious emerald eyes.

A slow smile spread over William's face. "I love you, Randolph Burgh, Viscount Trent, my commanding, charming beau."

At a loss for words, he clutched William tight.

William held him with equal conviction. "If you—" he dropped one arm and held his hand out to Anna. She clasped it without hesitation. "—and your wife will have me,

I choose to remain here as an integral part of your relationship. We make a much happier threesome than either two of us would be."

"It is about time you figured that out—William," Anna chastised, stepping closer and hugging them both.

With a wicked grin, Will dropped his hand down to Anna's buttocks and gave it a playful squeeze. "When are *you* going to learn your place, madam?"

"I know exactly where I fit in, sir." She ran her tongue over her upper lip and winked at him.

A deep flush darkened William's neck. "We shall see."

Her eyes danced. "Soon, I hope."

Warmth and comfort spread through Trent. His fondest wish had come true. He squeezed his soul mates in delight. To hell with the bath and shave. "I think I shall postpone everything and go back to bed."

Anna looked up at him, another look of concern stifling the joy in her eyes. "Are you feeling unsteady?"

"Not at all. That was an invitation for all." He raised an inquiring brow at each of them.

Anna, brilliant strategist that she was, had united them as one. Initially, the news that Anna had taken William in her mouth had shocked him. A touch of envy had sliced at his heart. However, he immediately recognized the unfairness of his reaction, considering he expected each of them to calmly accept his attraction to the other. Jealousy wasn't an easy monster to slay but he'd done it without further ado.

Now he understood Anna's motive. If they were going to live together, they must act as a unit, not separate couples.

Trent would've liked to have seen Anna kneel before William and service him. He still could not imagine William submitting to Anna. But, according to Anna, he had come mightily.

Now it was his job to hold them all together.

"William, while I lay back and watch my wife ride me, you stand by the bed where I can suck your glorious cock."

A stretch of silence met his order. Both Trent and Anna looked at William anxiously, waiting for his decision. He didn't look too pleased with the suggestion. Trent racked his brain, trying to come up with a more appealing position for William but his beau spoke first.

"How about I bugger your ass while you make love to your wife?"

Now it was Trent's turn to feel the heat of uneasiness flush his face. The moment of truth had arrived. Did he love William enough, trust him enough, to be penetrated by him? Even during the orgy with his college friends, he'd never let another man bugger him. Was he man enough to take it?

The thought of Anna peering over his shoulder while William impaled him made his face burn hotter and, surprisingly, his cock plumped up in excitement. A whole retinue of arousing positions trickled through his mind. Whether he lay on his back or between Anna's legs or knelt between William's raised legs, whether he licked his lovers or they licked him, they'd all be together, rather than one waiting beyond the action, the outsider.

If they were going to flourish as a threesome, Trent must compromise as much as his wife and beau had. What was the sacrifice of a little pride compared to the heart-rending sacrifice William and Anna made to be with him? It took a lot of courage sharing him with someone else.

He peeled his nightshirt over his head and tossed it onto the armchair by the hearth. Dizziness dimmed the edges of his vision. Casually, he grasped the bedpost until the lightheadedness passed. The brief moment of weakness didn't alter his desire in any way. His cock stood out straight from his groin. "William, do with me what you will."

The joy that flooded William's face made Trent's decision worthwhile. While William yanked off his layers of clothes, Trent turned to Anna with a feigned scowl. "Get up on the bed, woman. It is time I claimed you as my wife."

Anna dipped her head but he could see the upturned corners of her smile. "Yes, my husband."

"Wait." He snagged the back of her shift and then hauled it up over her head, exposing her nakedness. "Turn around and face me," he said, flinging the material to the floor.

She slowly spun toward him, her hands covering her mound, like a shy virgin. The timid pose drove his cock upward. "Yes, milord?"

He admired every inch of his amazing, delightful wife. A rosy blush swept her body from her scalp to her toes. "Beautiful," he whispered, cupping her cheek. He gazed into her eyes with a look meant for her alone. "How lucky I am to have you. I adore you, Lady Trent." Before he over-romanticized the moment, he brushed a gentle kiss over her lips and smacked her lightly on the buttocks. "Now lie down and let me love you. I feel William breathing down my neck."

Anna crept up onto the mattress, raising her buttocks high so he could see the dewy, pink pouting lips of her pussy. Once she reached the middle of the bed, she flipped over and stretched out spread-eagle. She lifted her head to look at him, her expression somber, yet a teasing glint sparkled in her eyes.

"Minx," he muttered. He looked over his shoulder at William with a wide grin. "Be gentle. I am a virgin, sir."

William smoothed his palm over Trent's buttocks. "I shall endeavor to pleasure us both. I found this in your dresser." He held up a tin of cow teat ointment.

Trent attempted a smile.

William sidled up to his back and wrapped a heavy arm across Trent's chest. "I love you, Trent. Trust that." He kissed the slope of Trent's shoulder.

The tenseness in his back eased. William's hand swept over his pectorals, teasing his nipples into hard nubs. He tilted his head against William's golden hair, his heart overflowing with contentment. "I love you too, William Hall."

A moment of peace settled between them and then William nudged him forward. "Your bride awaits."

* * * * *

Will didn't think he could be any happier and he hadn't yet savored Trent's sweet ass. Strange how Anna's presence added to rather than detracted from his arousal. Her breasts still didn't excite him but her mouth, her plush buttocks, the things she could do with her hands... Oh yes, loving Anna had possibilities.

Trent knelt between Anna's split thighs and braced one hand by her shoulder. She cooed as he slowly guided his long cock into her sopping cunt. Once the cock head slipped in, he dropped his free hand to the mattress and leaned down low.

While he idly pumped his own shaft, Will watched Trent's cock slide in and out in short strokes, easing it in deeper and deeper. The juices from Anna's cunt made it shine. Well, he was going to make Trent's ass shine.

He crawled up onto the bed behind Trent and admired the puckered hole lifted high for easy penetration. He popped the lid off the ointment tin and threw it aside. The salve slid through his fingers slicker than he remembered. A dollop plopped onto the bed linen. Trent wouldn't like that but he didn't care. Quickly he smeared the gel on his fingers over Trent's buttocks, pushing the bulk of the substance inside him with a single finger. Trent didn't make a sound but his sphincter contracted around Will's finger.

Holding the digit knuckle-deep, Will swiped the excess ointment off on Trent's hanging sac. "Concentrate on Anna, Trent. It will help you relax."

With a grunt, Trent lunged forward, his thrusts shallow but hard. Will shimmied closer, following Trent's urgent strokes. His cock bumped against Trent's firm cheeks, hard and erect.

"Ooo, that's good," Anna cried. "This pregnancy...mmm..." she pushed her breasts together and covered them with her hands, "makes me crave your passion...like never before."

With one broad hand, Will spread Trent's ass cheeks wide. "So much for your minimal sex during pregnancy plan, Trent." He added another finger to Trent's hole, scissoring them to open Trent wider.

"Maybe she will allow you to slake your lust for anal penetration on *her*," Trent spat back.

Anna tilted her head to the side to look at Will. A wary invitation shone in her eyes.

Will chuckled. He'd make converts out of them both. Determined to show them how erotic ass fucking could be, Will thrust his fingers as far as they would go and stroked the inner area that always made him want to scream at the top of his lungs.

Trent gasped and tightened his muscles. *Oh, yeah, Trent was going to be so fucking tight.*

Anna caressed her husband's arms. "William might teach me—" Trent's sharp staccato breaths cut Anna off. She cut her glance to Will and back to Trent with a question in her eyes. "To like it."

Trent moaned through Will's slow withdrawal. It sounded like an endorsement to him.

As if he wanted to hide from his reaction, Trent rocked fast and hard against Anna, emitting low grunts with each thrust.

Stirred by Trent's reaction, Will swirled his fingers inside the slick entrance until he relaxed and the opening widened on its own. "That's it, lover. Open up for me. Fuck Anna with your ass high in the air, ready for my hard cock to slide deep inside."

"Just do it, William." Trent's raspy tone sounded desperate yet tinged with hot anticipation.

Will eagerly complied. He held Trent's buttocks and nudged his thick shaft in, inch by inch, sliding in and out of the gooey lubricant. Trent had stopped moving against Anna, so Will stopped his gentle lunges. He looked past Trent's shoulder and saw Anna staring up at him, her face flushed, her lips parted in awe.

Unfortunately, he couldn't see Trent's face.

"Are you all right, Trent?"

He grunted in response.

Ever so slowly, Anna lifted her hips, forcing Trent's rod deeper and deeper. Whether instinctively or deliberately, Will wasn't sure, Trent pulled back, seating Will's cock more firmly into him. Anna pushed forward again, this time with quick thrusts that lodged Trent tightly between them.

"Oh God," Trent exclaimed in a rush of expelled breath. He drove into Anna and then pushed back against Will. "Ohmigod, oh, oooh." He pistoned faster and faster. "I never thought...I'd love you...both— aah! — at the same time."

Unable to hold still any longer, Will followed Trent's rhythm, pushing forward when he thrust back. Anna held steady for Trent, her breasts bouncing with each forward drive. For a long time, only grunts and sighs split the silence reigning over them as Trent's hips slapped against Anna's thighs and Will's tightening balls slapped against Trent's ass.

It had been so long since Will had fucked a man and yet this experience was entirely new. Not simply because Anna lay beneath his lover but because he'd never felt so connected to another man. A part of him wanted to stop banging Trent's buttocks and lie beneath him like Anna, where he'd be able to kiss him and appreciate the

hungry glow in his eyes. The other part of him knew this joining was a rite of passage for Trent, for all of them. There'd be plenty of ass reaming in his future, he was certain.

Maybe next time, he could fuck Anna's ass while Trent fucked him. Hmm...

A deep tingle of pleasure rippled through his balls. He wouldn't be able to hold back much longer. Trent was so deliciously tight and Anna's breathless moans made his pulse race.

"That's it, my love," Anna sighed. "Pound me. Don't stop." She closed her eyes and bit her lip. Her face brightened to a deep rose. "Randolph. Oh...my lord...husband." Her voice sounded unnaturally high. "Fill me. Hard...and deep...and fast."

Will thrust harder as if she'd spoken to him. Trent followed suit.

"Let us come together," Trent shouted, driving in and out of Anna at a frantic pace. "Anna! Please!"

She arched up, her hips writhing against Trent. A squeak burst from her open mouth. Trent wrapped his arms around her waist while she climaxed and his butt cheeks pulled tight. His hips slowly glided forward and back.

"Aah!" The muscles in Will's chest tightened. Scorching desire flashed through his body, settling in his tingling groin. Trent's firm hold on his buried shaft milked the semen from his balls. "Jesus!" His cock throbbed, pulsating with heated lust—and exploded. He pummeled Trent and shot cum deep into his lover's ass.

"Fuck!" Trent yelled.

Limbs trembling, William slipped his slick red cock free a second before Trent clenched his buttocks muscles like a vise and a spasm shook his whole body.

"Aaaaargh!" Trent arched his back, pulling Anna's hips higher, holding her twitching pelvis against his crotch. The cords stood out in his neck.

Anna gripped his thighs, her eyes glazed over with pleasure.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Trent shouted, shoving against her. He moaned loud and long and then more muted as he slowly relaxed.

Will swept the perspiration from Trent's slumped back.

Anna shuddered and then lay limp in Trent's hold.

A long moment later, they collapsed in a pile on the bed, limbs entangled, careless of what body part lay on what. Harsh pants bounced off the ceiling.

The patter of rain on the windows lulled Will into closing his eyes.

"So much for our walk," Anna said.

"More time for making love," Trent said breathlessly.

Will stroked Trent's calf which draped over his hip. "Next time I get bottom."

"I want you to lick my pussy," Anna said almost at the same time.

Trent chuckled. "Do not be concerned." He shifted, groaning with the effort, until he lay between them. Carefully, he slipped an arm beneath each of their shoulders. A satisfied smile spread across his face. "I believe I can accommodate you both."

With a quick glance at Anna, Will rolled toward Trent at the same time she did and they shared a scandalous three-way kiss.

About the Author

There used to be a time when Elayne would start reading a book in the afternoon and stay up until the wee hours to finish it. Now those hours are spent researching, writing, re-writing, and occasionally making dinner. Multi-published, Elayne enjoys writing in several genres where the characters' passions hurl them together and love binds them throughout time.

Currently, she lives in the rural south with her wonderful, industrious husband, two teenagers, and a lovable golden retriever. In her spare time, she volunteers at the local historical society.

Elayne welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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